

Don't Stop Inviting Controversial Speakers. Just Prepare Prudently.

By Ben Gose OCTOBER 07, 2018

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The College Republicans chapter at Susquehanna University was small when Jonah Winakor joined, so when he became the club's president last year, he tried to drum up interest by bringing in a big-name speaker. The group invited Ben Shapiro, a conservative commentator who regularly draws liberal protesters to his campus speeches. For some institutions, a speech by Shapiro or other outspoken conservatives has been a cause for worry. That's not how things played out at Susquehanna.

Winakor's first call after deciding to invite Shapiro was to Michael Kennedy — an acquaintance and the head of the College Democrats. They quickly agreed on a plan in which both groups would bring in political speakers, with Kennedy's group inviting Ed Rendell, a Democratic former governor of Pennsylvania.

The two student leaders pitched the plan to the university as a way to bring in provocative speakers representing opposing viewpoints. University officials liked the idea. It fit in well with Susquehanna's yearlong academic theme: conflict.

The university involved the two student leaders in planning sessions, held panel discussions with students about the importance of civil discourse, sent a public-safety official to another college for a Shapiro speech to see what security would be required, and even offered up free tickets and transportation to a movie for students who didn't want to be anywhere near campus during Shapiro's April lecture.

Both speeches last spring featured tough questions from the audience, but there were no attempts to block entrances or shout down the speakers. The only protest, if you

could call it that, was a bake sale held by the College Democrats at the Shapiro speech, with all proceeds going to Planned Parenthood.

"We may be coming from completely different sides of the spectrum, but Michael and I recognized the need to talk and endorse each other," says Winakor. "We knew that working together, in conjunction with the security effort put forth by the university, would make a good environment for discourse."

Start Early, Plan Carefully

The collaborative planning by the College Democrats and College Republicans may be unusual, but experts say all colleges and universities should take a page from Susquehanna's playbook: Start early and plan carefully to achieve a successful outcome.

Before a controversial speaker is on the calendar, sit down with local and state law-enforcement officials to identify who will be in charge if an event spirals out of control. As a controversial speech nears, consider a ticketing process that gives priority to students and faculty and staff members to make it less likely that an outside group will disrupt the speech. And as the speech begins, have a small group of decision-makers ready to quickly respond to unexpected events.

"These are very dynamic situations," says Rich Wilson, a senior consultant with Sigma Threat Management Associates. "The policies and procedures are a good starting point, but there comes a time when you have to improvise and adapt."

Some of the best thinking may come from institutions that have already endured unflattering headlines following clashes.

The University of Connecticut revamped its policies after a November 2017 speech in which the conservative speaker Lucian Wintrich was heckled by chants of "Go home, Nazi." A woman who took his speech from the lectern faced criminal charges, as did Wintrich for grabbing the woman while in pursuit of his speech (although the charges against him were later dropped).

The new UConn policy aims to standardize preparation for a controversial speaker. The university requires student groups inviting a speaker to submit an event-review form at least 15 business days in advance. If the speaker has been controversial elsewhere, the university gathers the heads of multiple departments in a room for a planning session to develop a strategy and make sure everyone is on the same page.

"The Lucian event absolutely prompted us to review how we're supporting events like this," says Eleanor JB Daugherty, associate vice president for student affairs and dean of students. "We don't want to turn speakers away, but we do want to make sure the campus is safe."

For controversial speakers, the university typically contracts with an unarmed private-security force. Those individuals, rather than the university's own armed police officers, make the first contact with disruptive individuals. If the situation escalates, UConn relies on a group that Daugherty calls "the huddle" to decide when it's time to remove an audience member or take other action. The huddle includes at least one senior police officer, a student-affairs administrator, and a student from the group that invited the speaker.

"We keep the huddle intentionally small," Daugherty says. "When things are going south like that, you don't have time for a full meeting."

During the initial planning meeting, UConn administrators suggest to student organizers that they read to the audience a paragraph-long statement in support of free speech, similar in tone to the one formulated by the University of Chicago, before the speaker is introduced. But the students decide whether they want to read the statement.

Other colleges, too, are beginning to incorporate discussions about free speech and respecting diverse opinions into campuswide events.

New Policies at Middlebury

In March 2017, a group of protesters at Middlebury College shut down a speech by the conservative speaker Charles Murray. A faculty member who was scheduled to interview him was injured by a protester as she and Murray fled to a car. Seventy-four students were later punished by the university.

During 2017-18, Middlebury faculty members started a yearlong series of events called "Critical Conversations," focused in part on free expression and inclusivity in higher education. A January panel discussion — "Whose Freedom, Whose Speech?" — was moderated by Suzanne Nossel, chief executive officer of PEN America, an organization of writers dedicated to free expression.

The college has taken other steps, too. It held a planning session a year ago with local, county, and state law enforcement officials to identify what kind of security force the college could muster if a highly controversial speaker came to the campus. Middlebury is in a Vermont town with about 8,500 residents.

"We don't have the security resources available to us that larger universities in urban areas have," says Bill Burger, a college spokesman. "We would struggle to have 20 to 30 officers on our campus, and they would have to be drawn from multiple agencies."

Even so, the college's new speaker policy states that an event will be canceled "only in cases of imminent and credible threat to the community."

As evidence that the new approach to controversial speakers is working, Burger points to an April speech by Richard H. Sander, a law professor at the University of California at Los Angeles and the author of *Mismatch: How Affirmative Action Hurts Students It's Intended to Help, and Why Universities Won't Admit It*.

Like Murray, Sander was invited by Middlebury's College Republicans chapter. The college ran the proposed speech through a protocol that includes an initial evaluation by the threat-management team and a follow-up by the Department of Public Safety that identified actions that would help avoid risks to the speaker and to the community. The college took at least one unusual step: Audience members would be admitted to the Sander speech only if they possessed a Middlebury College ID.

Jigar Bhakta and David Rubinstein, copresidents of the College Republicans last year, say it took Middlebury administrators more than two months to vet and give final approval for the Sander speech. "It felt at times like we were about to be sacked," Bhakta says.

But Bhakta and Rubinstein, who graduated in May, now acknowledge that Middlebury's deliberate approach helped make the event a success. Some students and faculty and staff members asked Sander tough questions, but there were no disturbances.

"No one wanted a repeat of the Charles Murray incident — not us or the college administrators," Rubinstein says. "Ultimately what's most important was the outcome — we showed that we can get it right."

Revamping Crowd Control

Other institutions as well are looking to revamp crowd control at potentially controversial speeches. California State University at Los Angeles created a new ticketing process after a Shapiro speech on the campus was disrupted in February 2016. (The university's president had originally canceled the event but relented when Shapiro said he was coming anyway.) Protesters blocked an entrance to the student union where Shapiro was speaking, and someone pulled a fire alarm to interrupt his speech, which was titled "When Diversity Becomes a Problem."

The new process requires the use of tickets any time a speaker invited by a student organization is expected to draw a crowd of about 100 people or more, says Robert Lopez, a university spokesman. Student groups can designate VIPs who can get early admission and seating near the stage. Students and faculty and staff members get access to the remaining tickets before the event is opened to outsiders.

The university is also using stanchions to create entryways — a tactic that should make it more difficult for protesters to block entrances.

"The goal is to create a smooth and safe flow of people," Lopez says.

If a greater security presence is needed than the university can provide, it can call for help from the police forces on the four other Cal State campuses in Los Angeles County, he says.

But the university, like many others, prefers that police officers not be the first point of contact with disruptive protesters or audience members. It assigns as many as six staff members from the Division of Student Life to attend speeches that are expected to be controversial. The staff members, wearing Cal State-L.A. polo shirts, are ready to intervene if someone tries to shout down a speaker or another student.

Susquehanna uses a similar approach but relies on respected faculty and staff members, wearing school colors and a name tag, to serve as "community liaisons" at events like the recent Shapiro speech. "Our students know them very well, and their involvement makes it clear that the entire community wants the event to be successful," says Susan Lantz, vice president for student life.

Jeffrey Nolan, a lawyer who specializes in legal issues involving universities, calls the collaboration between College Democrats and College Republicans at Susquehanna a "terrific approach." Other universities, he says, should try to bring together student groups who are often at odds for brown-bag discussions about freedom of expression and cultural respect.

"You hope when a controversial event hits that there's a little muscle memory there," Nolan says. "You can say, 'Remember that abstract meeting over coffee and a bagel? It's more important now than ever to remember that.'"

College officials also say it's important not to overreact to a single event that goes badly. After protesters at Claremont McKenna College blocked access to a speech by Heather Mac Donald, forcing the conservative critic of Black Lives Matter to deliver her speech via live-streamed video, the college suspended three students for a year and two others for a semester.

But Priya Junnar, director of the Marian Miner Cook Athenaeum, the speakers program that hosted Mac Donald, says the college's long-term record remains strong. The Athenaeum brings in speakers four nights per week throughout most of the academic year — and the program has been around for nearly 50 years. The "whole DNA" of the program, she says, involves students' asking direct and provocative questions of speakers in a respectful way.

The Mac Donald controversy has not changed how Junnar selects the lineup of speakers, she says.

"I don't go into it thinking, 'Is this person going to be too provocative?' " she says. "I think about whether the person is going to add to a national conversation about an important issue. Is the person intellectually rigorous? Is he or she a good speaker? Those are the thoughts that go through my mind."

Correction (10/9/2018, 10:40 a.m.): The protest at Middlebury College took place in March 2017, not May 2017, and 74 students, not 67, were disciplined as a result. This article has been updated accordingly.