

Free



Staying mission-
and admission-
centered during the
rise of controversial
language and
events on campus

Speech

When a professor at Trinity College (CT) sent out a racially charged tweet in the wake of last year's shooting at a congressional baseball practice, it thrust the institution into the media spotlight over how it responded. It also had a direct impact on university admission.

Angle B. Perez, vice president for enrollment and student success at Trinity, said the families of 18 students decided to withdraw their students from the college as a result of the controversy.

"For us that's pretty significant because we had an incoming class of about 570 students," Perez said. He added that most of the students who withdrew would have paid full tuition, listed on the college's website as \$52,280 for the 2017–2018 academic year.

"So that was a multimillion-dollar hit to our revenue stream," Perez said.

Trinity is by no means alone. Administrators warn that colleges will have to pay more and more attention to how issues of academic and free speech might impact enrollment.

"It's kind of a precarious situation," said Adrian K. Haugabrook, senior vice president and university chief of staff at Southern New Hampshire University.

"That's good you can call it freedom of speech, but I maybe consider it a hostile environment or campus climate not conducive to my growth, so I may not select you as an institution," Haugabrook said in explaining how some families and students may view controversial statements that are protected under academic freedom or freedom of speech.

"It presents an interesting set of challenges for those in admission and enrollment, not just getting students to come but keeping students at the institution," Haugabrook said.

Indeed, Kevin McDonald, vice chancellor for inclusion, diversity and equity at the University of Missouri and chief diversity officer for the University of Missouri System, says MU has struggled with enrollment loss ever since the 2015 student protest against racism that led to the ousting of the president of the University of Missouri System and the chancellor at the University of Missouri at Columbia.

Subsequent to the protest, enrollment dropped by 2,200 students—a drop McDonald called a \$38.9 million hit—and 1,400 of the students were white.

"We automatically thought they would be students of color," McDonald said. He says the university projects continued losses in revenue in the coming years due to drops in enrollment.

"There are families viewing higher education as this failed proposition," McDonald said. The concerns transcend racial and ethnic lines, he said.

For instance, McDonald notes how the NAACP has previously issued a "travel advisory" warning African Americans that they need to "exercise extreme caution" when traveling to Missouri due to racist incidents, such as being more likely to be pulled over by the police.

"We're dealing with all these things at the same time which causes, understandably so, this dip in enrollment," McDonald said.

Lost revenue doesn't begin to capture the toll that incidents such as the one at Trinity or that the protest at Missouri can have on an institution.

Perez said it also took several weeks to speak with all the other families on the verge of withdrawing their students and who wanted answers about why the institution didn't take stronger action against Trinity associate professor of sociology Johnny Eric Williams. Williams had sent out a tweet with the hashtag "LetThemF-----Die" in the wake of the June 14, 2017 shooting in Alexandria, Virginia, in which a gunman opened fire at a practice for annual

congressional charity baseball game, wounding US Rep. Steve Scalise, a Republican from Louisiana, and several others.

The tweet stated it was "past time for the racially oppressed to do what people who believe themselves to be 'white' will not do, put end to the vectors of their destructive mythology of whiteness and their white supremacy system."

The tweet was portrayed in some media outlets as a racial remark against white people in general, although Williams has stated he meant it to be directed against systemic racism.

The controversy surrounding the tweet intensified when Tucker Carlson, a Fox News political commentator and Trinity alumnus, did a segment about the case in which he claimed liberals had "wrecked" his alma mater.

Although Williams was initially put on leave, he was ultimately cleared of wrongdoing after it was determined that his tweet was protected under principles of academic freedom.

After the tweet went out, Perez said, admission staff at Trinity were subjected to death threats, prompting at least one threatened staffer to take off a week from work to deal with the crisis.

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Perez and other admission veterans said the episode offers important lessons about how admission departments cannot simply stay on the sidelines when their institution becomes engulfed in a controversy that involves academic freedom or free speech on campus.

Haugabrook, the administrator at Southern New Hampshire, said university administrators must walk a fine line between doing what's in the financial best interest of their institution and upholding democratic values that have been the bedrock of liberal education.

"You have to balance what is the mission of an institution of higher learning, what are the goals and aims of higher education, and then you have to think of it from a bottom line perspective," Haugabrook said. "Sometimes if you provide a strategic intervention, it could be seen as you only worrying about the numbers."

"Well, we should be worried about the numbers," Haugabrook said, noting that colleges are financed based on how many students they enroll.

Lorelle Espinosa, assistant vice president of research and strategy at the American Council on Education, said free speech issues require an “all-hands-on-deck” approach.

“In order to really address something that is this tense and controversial and subjective, such as the tension between campus inclusion and free expression, that issue is not the kind of issue that only needs to reside in student affairs and the president’s office or general counsel, because it has so much of an effect on the whole of the student body,” Espinosa said. “Every senior administrator, every office needs to be aware of the where the leadership stands.

“They also need to know where the legal lines are drawn,” Espinosa continued. “The reason they need to know these things is because they’re going to get questions on the road talking to students and families. They may vet calls where students and families see something and they are their point of contact.”

Indeed, Perez said it is important to prepare admission officers for questions they may get about issues of free speech and academic freedom when they go out to recruit students.

“I have staff who travel all over the world,” Perez said. He explained a top concern is: “How do I make sure that they are equipped to handle these issues?”

Perez noted how the Tucker Carlson segment, which remains on the internet this day, has a lingering effect.

“Sure, one angle is financial and enrollment,” Perez said of the impact that free speech and academic freedom issues can have on admission. “But the other angle is the way the institution is now perceived.

“Forever, you can google Trinity College and find that piece on Tucker Carlson,” Perez lamented. “I travel all over the country and the world recruiting students and this comes up and I have to explain it and it’s complicated.”

Perez said part of the challenge is that while it may be understood in academe why professors might be able to say something that in the business sector you cannot, that the concept of academic freedom is “not understood” outside of academics.

“So we have to do a lot more explaining about these issues,” Perez said.

Students also have a need to better understand issues of free speech versus hate speech, said Traevana Byrd, who was vice president and general counsel at Towson University (MD) at the time this article was written and was set to take a post at American University (DC).

Byrd said at Towson, black students would regularly come to her with impassioned pleas for zero tolerance speech codes for racial epithets and the like.

She spoke of one instance where black students complained that a group of student supporters of Trump planned to wear camouflage with red armbands with a circle around the letter “T” for Trump.

“Black students came and said this is hate speech, this is Nazi symbolism, this has got to be illegal and I think you should tell somebody to restrict that,” Byrd said. “Forget about *Tinker vs. Des Moines* and all the other legal things I could discuss with them,” the attorney said of the landmark Supreme Court ruling on behalf of student expression.

“I just pointed back to the previous year when they had all worn black arm bands for the Black Lives Matter rally they had the previous spring,” Byrd said. “So it was real interesting to talk through with students about that and how they might think (a restrictive measure) is going to be helpful to you but it may be a problem later.”

Perez, Haugabrook, and others offer the following advice for admission officers and administrators who may be confronted with a crisis that stems from academic freedom or free speech on campus:

- **Keep your board and president informed** on the potential impact that a crisis may have on admission and enrollment. “I made sure that the president, board, all my constituents knew there was a possibility we may lose millions of dollars in revenue and how are we gonna deal with that?” Perez said. “So the admission office has to become a leader in these conversations.”
- **Focus on admission staff** before you worry about losing prospective students. “Do not underestimate the impact that this is going to have on your staff,” Perez said. He noted how individuals who disagreed with Trinity’s decision to support Williams’ right to academic freedom began to “troll” them by emailing threats after looking up their email addresses on the university website. “If your staff is falling apart, none of this is going to work, because these are the people who are actually going to make sure all of your admission goals are met,” Perez said.
- **Don’t hesitate to consult with crisis management teams.** “If your institution can do it, bring in a crisis management team because they will think of things that you never thought off,” Perez said. He also said the crisis management team that worked with his staff “put us on message and made sure that all of us had the same message and sort of helped us differentiate between our own feelings and what the message of the institution should be.”
- **Respond to each and every call from families of incoming and current students.** “So, for example, when all this happened, I probably had 100 parents reach out at the same time. It took me a long time but I had to respond to every single one of those individuals, current and incoming, particularly the incoming because this is going to impact admission tremendously,” said Perez.
- **Don’t hide prior incidents** from prospective or incoming students. Haugabrook said institutions should find ways to engage current students to inform new or prospective students about recent controversies on campus. He suggested having current students speak about prior incidents during open house events and the like. “Look at your admission programming both in terms of recruitment as well as other admissions events to see where, if needed, you could provide more information,” he said. “One thing you should probably not do is not be prepared for a question or for someone to come up and say this is what you’re telling me about your university but I saw on the news where one of your professors used the N-word. So if you’re an admission counselor and you’re doing public facing for the university in terms of recruitment or admission, they need to be prepared for those.”

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