



Planning for Demonstrations, Protests, and Civil Unrest on Higher Ed Campuses

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

Institutions of higher education (IHEs) encourage freedom of expression, critical thinking, and the dynamic exchange of ideas as a part of the educational experience to nurture informed, engaged, and socially responsible citizens. They have also historically been the setting for social and political demonstrations that bring together not only students but also members of the whole campus community and sometimes those outside of the campus community. It is important for university leaders to collaborate closely with safety, security, and emergency management partners as they strive to balance efforts to safeguard students' right to protest while at the same time maintaining community safety and continuity of research, teaching, and campus operations.

Types of Protests and Demonstrations

Protest and demonstration activity is not in itself problematic. Campus protests and demonstrations are part of some of the common activities that have historically played out on college campuses and fall into a number of categories. Campuses must determine when protest activity becomes unsafe or disruptive and distinguish between a demonstration or protest and civil unrest.

A demonstration or protest shifts to civil unrest when it becomes unsafe for participants, breaches laws or campus policies, or poses significant disruption for critical campus functions. Typically held in a large public or communal space, a basic protest involves gathering together with signs and often chanting or listening to speakers. The illustrative list below details types of demonstrations and protests. These are not mutually exclusive, and one type may progress into another.

- **Walkouts**—Protesters walk out of class or workplaces and join a protest, usually outside in a common area.
- **Picket**—Protesters march in front of a building, often blocking entry.
- **Event Disruption**—Protesters target an event and disrupt it. Common tactics are protesters picketing in front of an event to block guests from entering, or protesters attending the event and disrupting it midway through.
- **Sit-in**—Demonstrators occupy an area by sitting and refusing to leave. Sit-ins are usually near leadership offices or in building lobbies. The sit-in usually blocks traffic in the area or causes disruption.
- **Teach-in**—These are typically faculty-led sessions instructing attendees on a particular cause or situation. They may be scheduled and advertised or held as part of a sit-in.
- **Encampment**—A variation on the sit-in, these protests involve creating a more longstanding presence, usually with tents, although some encampments may be indoors. Encampments pose the greatest safety risk as fire safety, food safety, and general physical safety concerns arise.
- **Building Takeover**—Groups may attempt to occupy and rename a campus building.

Protecting Student Voices While Maintaining Safety

Universities often encourage civic engagement and learning opportunities in the form of special lectures, invited speakers, panel discussions, vigils, art exhibits, sign making, or other protest expressions that remain within the guidelines for space use to communicate their views within the boundaries of campus policies. Approved events are grounded in the values of inclusion, diversity, and respect. These events do not pose safety risks and do not cause significant disruption to university operations or academic functions.

Considerations for Campus Safety Leaders and Partners

There are many elements to consider as campus safety leaders and partners create plans to prepare for, respond to, and recovery from protests and demonstrations, including those that shift into the civil unrest phase.

Announced/Unannounced—The time and place of a protest may be known ahead of time, or the protest may appear without any warning.



Campus Tip: Identify staff tasked with social media monitoring to be aware of protests that are announced ahead of time. Recognize that some external protests may march through a city and have the potential to impact a campus.

Building Access—Leadership may restrict building access completely or partially depending on the situation. Public Safety Operations may call for a Lockdown.



Campus Tip: Communicate access restrictions clearly. Review the Continuity of Operations Annex and be aware of vendors or partners that require access for continuity of operations who may need facilitated access or a schedule change. Also be aware that the term “Lockdown” may suggest an active threat scenario for some. Clarify communications.

Public/Private Spaces—Private campuses have more control over access to their spaces. Space use policies are critical.



Campus Tip: Make sure to communicate space use policies and prohibitions on specific activities (e.g., amplified sound).

Student-Led/External—Students have an interest in remaining enrolled. Individuals with no relationship to a university may feel more empowered to cause disruption but are less likely to focus on a university.



Campus Tip: Be aware that a campus-affiliated group may receive support from external groups. Small protests or encampments may grow quickly.

Indoor/Outdoor—An indoor protest may cause significant disruption to functions in the building. Outdoor protests are subject to weather impacts.



Campus Tip: Be sure to include weather forecasts as part of your situational awareness monitoring.

Conduct Policies—Conduct policies should be reviewed, revised if necessary, and communicated clearly with the community.



Campus Tip: Response to protest groups should not fall solely on security officers. Include Student Affairs in the response to a campus protest. Human Resources (HR) and/or the Central Administration or Designee should be included if faculty or staff are involved.

Encampments—Leadership should clarify ahead of time campus tolerance for encampments and triggers for removal.



Campus Tip: If an encampment is allowed to take root, determine how health, safety, and security concerns will be addressed. Seek advice from General Counsel regarding what liability the campus might have for such risks.

Emergency Management Planning

Review your higher ed emergency operations plan (EOP) and Protest/Civil Unrest Annex. Ensure that your annex includes sections covering scope, purpose, and concept of operations before, during, and after civil unrest.



- **On and Off Campus Partners.** Your campus core planning team and response team representing core Emergency Support Functions are all potentially impacted by civil unrest. (Listen to [Episode 22 of the REMS on the Air Podcast](#) for more information on Emergency Support Functions and Incident Command System for Institutions of Higher Education.) Work with this group to determine appropriate goals, objectives, and courses of action for inclusion in the Protest/Civil Unrest Annex.
- **Public Safety Operations**—Enforces campus policies relating to safety and security, [site assessments](#), security technology, and connections to federal and local intelligence sources.
- **Student Affairs**—Interacts with students directing allowable protest expressions and addressing conduct infractions.
- **Health Services**—Provides wellness for students impacted by world events and local disruptions. Possibly addresses any injuries or illnesses that arise as a result of a protest or encampment.
- **Academic Affairs**—Supports Emergency Operations Center activation and the needs of the scene, as necessary.
- **Events**—Develops plans for event disruption.
- **Public Information Office**—Develops plans for communications and warning in the case of an event disruption.
- **Legal Counsel**—Guides leadership on the development of a legal framework and a protest policy.
- **Facilities and Operations**—Repairs damage caused by protests, typically fixing broken windows and graffiti removal.
- **Information Technology**—Guards against actions taken by protesters or affiliates attacking university systems.
- **Environmental Health and Safety**—Addresses unsafe conditions at the protest site including overcrowding and fire code violations.
- **HR**—Addresses employee concerns about protests affecting their ability to feel safe at work. Also, addresses the issue of employees taking part in disruptive behavior.
- **Central Administration or Designee**—Addresses faculty engaged in violation of university policies.
- **Residential Life**—Supports students' well-being.

Consider the community partners your campus would engage as you consider supports that may be needed before a demonstration takes place.

- **Campus Policies and Procedures.** Establish a core planning team that includes representation from the partners above to review, revise, and then communicate campus policies relating to civil unrest. These may include but are not limited to
 - Protest—Freedom of Speech
 - Academic Freedom
 - Space Use
 - Lockdown
 - Alerts
 - Student Conduct
 - Emergency Response
- **Communications and Outreach.** Communications and outreach efforts may include
 - Disseminating a culture and climate assessment to gain situational awareness.
 - Engaging student groups and campus ministry to help mitigate safety risks and quell tensions that may erupt.
 - Engaging student leaders and faculty to develop ideas for protest that conform to campus policies.
 - Creating messaging that helps campus community members discern the difference between protest and civil unrest.
 - Creating platforms for students to discuss controversial topics in a safe and respectful environment.

DURING



Activate your higher ed EOP and follow the [Concept of Operations](#) within the Basic Plan section. Considerations include but are not limited to

- Initial notifications
- Alerts
- Triggers for building lockdown
- Triggers for arrest
- Response team composition
- Community messaging
- Damage assessment
- Activation of Continuity of Operations Annex for displaced functions



Actions to take following a protest include but are not limited to

- Debriefing and after-action report
- Community messaging
- Parent messaging
- Follow up regarding conduct/HR violations
- Ongoing vigilance
- Community healing events

Resources

[Addressing Adversarial and Human-Caused Threats That May Impact Students, Staff, and Visitors](#), Web Page (REMS TA Center)