HARVARD Kennedy School
Program on Crisis Leadership

The 2020 Election Season and Aftermath:
Preparation in Higher Education Communities

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There is widespread uncertainty and heightened anxiety on higher education campuses and elsewhere about what might happen during the 2020 election season in the United States. At every turn, we see elevated emotions and anxieties generated by the election process and related events, together with the potential for disruption of various kinds in the election process itself – before, during, and/or after the end of voting on November 3. This is compounded by the possibility of uncertainty, perhaps over many days or even weeks, about who has won various contests and about who will take office.

A wide range of scenarios related to the election process and possible election outcomes have been described in mainstream media, in social media, and in other forums. Given the considerable (and, generally speaking, desirable) involvement and energy invested in these events within higher education communities among faculty, staff, students, and alumni, a number of these scenarios might well result in situations on campuses, in higher education communities, or in the surrounding communities where they reside that would call for institutional response. Many campus leaders and management groups are now thinking through what might be necessary or desirable and figuring out what they might usefully do in advance to prepare to provide the best response possible. Obviously, the difficulties of planning for the many possible circumstances that might confront us are compounded by the fact that all of this is taking place during an ongoing (and, indeed, now intensifying) pandemic accompanied by calls for racial justice and police reform. In this brief note, we suggest some ideas that might be helpful for higher education communities organizing themselves in the face of these uncertainties.

It may seem tempting to organize ourselves and our institutions by first imagining specific scenarios of what might happen in the election, and then trying to optimize preparation and responses for those specific possibilities. This may not, however, be either necessary or very helpful. For one thing, there is

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a very wide range of possible events that could arise before the election outcome is determined, so trying to enumerate them may be difficult and incompletely clarifying. For another, discussions of alternative *election* scenarios could easily feel (or become) fraught, contentious, and partisan — all of which it would be best to avoid.

More useful is recognition that it is the *impacts* of potential election developments that are most important. Higher education institutions will have to manage and respond to the *consequences*, on their campuses and in their communities, of what happens in the election — *not*, at least in the first instance, to the election scenarios themselves.

Importantly, and notwithstanding the variety of educational institutions in the United States, many of the situations that might arise on campuses, in higher education communities, and in the broader communities that surround them[4] may be similar across a range of underlying election scenarios and outcomes. It may thus be simpler to identify different *situational complexes* and think through (1) what actions or preparations might be taken in advance that would help either to *avoid* or to *cope effectively* with potentially negative circumstances that could plausibly arise; and (2) should they actually arise, how best they might be handled. In this discussion, therefore, we focus on a range of possible campus and higher education community situations and suggest lines of thought, analysis, and preparation that could help to address them.

Situations presenting and/or requiring operational or policy choices, decisions, and actions

It is easily imaginable that our campuses and communities will witness and/or be host to significant outpourings of energetic expression about the electoral developments. Some of these will likely be jubilant and some angry, and they may occur over an extended time. These expressions could take place either in the form of physical gatherings (in our own spaces, in spaces proximate to our campuses, or in remote locations but still involving our community members) or in the virtual sphere. The prospects of physical gatherings are reduced for some campuses by the fact that, as a result of the pandemic, many students are currently attending remotely (and many faculty and staff are working remotely), but the stakes in such gatherings if they do take place are also elevated by the dangers posed by the pandemic.

Actions by members of our communities potentially face us with two types of choices (sometimes in combination). First, we may have to manage *physical* circumstances. For example, we may have to decide how to manage crowds, possibly requiring (or making desirable or advisable) an *operational* response. Second, we may be called upon to make a *policy* response, managing issues raised by the election and/or by stakeholders in our community. For example, we may be asked to reschedule classes or exams or to operate courses on a pass/fail basis because of disruptions incident to the election, or we may as an institution be asked by faculty, students, or alumni to articulate policy positions related to the election process, aftermath, or outcomes.

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[4] Because of the prevalence of remote learning during the pandemic, we mean to distinguish three different groups or locations of impact: (1) impacts that are physically located on higher education campuses; (2) impacts on the direct community of a higher education institution (its faculty, staff, students, and alumni); and (3) impacts on the broader community of people in the location where the institution's campus is located. When we say "on campuses," we are referring to the first. When we say "higher education community" or "our community," we have in mind the second. To distinguish, we will generally say "broader community" to indicate the third.

Managing physical / operational challenges

The specific physical circumstances that could present themselves on a given campus will vary with the norms and habits of that community and with the geography of its physical locations. (For example, if students and others choose to gather in jubilation or to protest, how and where are they likely to do so?) It may also vary with how many students and other community members the institution has in residence (or nearby) as a result of its form of operations during the pandemic. For many institutions, though, any or all of the following situations seem sufficiently plausible to warrant prior thought (and, possibly, more or less detailed planning or other preparation):

1) An elevated and significant number of agitated, anxious, distressed, or depressed members of the community need and/or seek help and support;
2) A large *jubilant* and high-energy crowd physically gathers, with the potential to become unruly (or which does become unruly) and which threatens to be a super-spreader event;
3) A large *distressed*, agitated, high-energy crowd physically gathers, with the potential to become unruly (or which does become unruly) and which threatens to be a super-spreader event;
4) Two large crowds gather, one jubilant and one distressed, with the potential for (or reality of) conflict between them;
5) A group or groups *not* associated with our community decide(s) to use our institution as an object or target in their celebration or protest, and try to gather physically in our space;
6) Civil unrest *near* our campus (in which members of our higher education community or members of our broader surrounding community may be involved) threatens our campus or community;
7) Members of our community (students living remotely, alumni, or others) are in locations where there are significant disruptions and/or concerns for their safety and well-being.

Operational response to many of these circumstances would, of course, involve policy choices by the institution as well as mobilization of any physical component of the response. Among the embedded policy choices that are likely to arise:

1) Does the institution try to enforce current public health guidelines about gatherings? For example, if a crowd gathers, does the institution seek to get the group to comply with face mask rules or recommendations? Does it push for social distancing? Does it try to disperse the crowd if guidelines are not followed?
2) To the extent to which the institution chooses to intervene in the behavior (mask-wearing, distancing, …) during gatherings, who, exactly, carries this out? In the current heightened sensitivity in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement and in the wake of protests over the summer concerning police behavior and the deployment of police, choices about invoking law enforcement (campus or outside police) or using others (security guards rather than police officers, administrators, community "public health and safety volunteers," …) are matters of potentially great consequence.
3) Does the institution close its campus and facilities to people other than its students, faculty, and staff — and, if so, how does it do this and who does it deploy to enforce this?

Managing policy challenges

Some challenges we may face concern our institutional positions, policies, rules, regulations, and guidelines. These policy choices may have a modest operational component (that is, they may require

implementation in some form), but the principal issue is the policy itself. For example, if we decide to change the academic schedule for the semester, we would have to promulgate and implement that … but the main concern will be the choice of the policy and its implications, not the tactical matter of carrying it out. Policy challenges flowing from events surrounding the election seem likely to arise in two distinct forms:

> First, questions might be raised about our institution's *internal policies* — for example, academic policies about teaching, scheduling or cancellation of classes, assignments, or exams, alterations of the academic calendar to permit students, faculty, or staff to participate in election-or post-election-related activities, or policies about community norms and disciplinary processes related to individual behavior.

> Second, our institution may face demands (from students, faculty, staff, people outside our community, or some combination of these) to take explicit *policy positions* on disputed issues about the election or post-election process or outcome(s).

Internal policy deliberations

One form of policy challenge we might face is from members of our community demanding changes in policies about matters that are central to our identity as higher education institutions (for example, policies about diversity of thought and tolerance). As examples of possible situations,

1) Members of our community attack one another and/or one another's views, in the virtual or physical space. (For example, members of our community argue that some other members are professing intolerable views and should not be allowed to speak, should be "cancelled," or should be removed from our community);
2) Members of our community seek to limit on-campus appearances (or participation in our virtual spaces) by people whose views they see as anathema;

Given these possibilities (and others), it may be useful to reaffirm in advance some of our core and guiding institutional principles. But there are many other forms of seemingly benign policies — for example, administrative policies about course scheduling — that may also come under pressure from members of the academic community who want to engage in election-related actions (either within our beyond our community).

A key element of managing any of our internal policies is the question of who has authority over them and what mechanisms we will use to deliberate about them. For example, confusion about whether individual faculty or, by contrast, the faculty as a body, or, instead, some other governance mechanism of the institution, has authority over scheduling (or re-scheduling) assignments or classes or exams could result in students expecting uniformity but unhappily being confronted by an array of different policies. If the institution chooses to resolve such matters on a decentralized basis, students should be aware in advance that this will be the case; if it has (or chooses in this situation to use) a more centralized and uniform policy process, then faculty and students need to know and expect that.

An important goal, then, is to provide in advance clarity about the *governance process.* For any given set of internal policies, what mechanism will be used to review them if questions are raised over the next weeks? Describing and (re-)affirming the decision-making process in advance may go a long way toward reducing confusion about this in the moment.

Demands for policy stands by the institution

In some possible scenarios of how election events play out, institutions could face demands from important stakeholder groups to make evaluative statements about the election process or outcome. As a general matter, most higher education institutions eschew taking policy positions, and may be able to re-articulate (and hold to) this general presumption in most plausible election scenarios. If some of the more extreme possible scenarios arise, however, institutions may come under considerable pressure to make the unusual move of publicly articulating an institutional position. Given foreseeable circumstances in which institutions would at least have to decide whether to do so, and, if they choose to, would have to figure out how to develop their position, it may be useful in advance to consider what *authority* they would need to convene and what *process* they would use to make such decisions in the event that they find themselves forced to confront choices of this kind.

Policies and actions before the election outcome is known

Some policies and actions may be better received — and work better — if they are articulated or carried out before the outcome of the election is known (because they may appear less partisan when the outcome has not yet been determined). Here are some possible actions or policy decisions and statements that institutions might consider in advance of the final day of voting:

(1) (Re-)affirm core institutional values (free speech and academic inquiry, diversity of thought, tolerance for alternative views, …). Post-election, this will allow us to reference documents and statements made in the absence of knowledge about the outcome, rather than to be seen as responding in a partisan way based on our (assumed or alleged) feelings about the outcome;

(2) (Re-)affirm key institutional policies about who has authority over what issues (for example, the scheduling or cancellation of classes or scheduling of assignments or grading policies, in case questions are subsequently raised by students or others about making changes in any of these). This could include a description of the governance mechanisms (for example, a faculty senate or a designated administrative policy group) through which policies on these questions would be deliberated about and decided;

(3) (Re-)affirm and promulgate key institutional policies about community norms, values, and expected behaviors, about what constitutes a disciplinary issue, and about disciplinary processes;

(4) Distribute reminders about the availability of counseling and support services for people experiencing anxiety, depression, or distress (and, possibly, expand the availability of such services);

(5) Provide training sessions for resident advisors and/or other direct service "front line providers" like peer counselors and operators of student hotlines about how to respond to outpourings of emotion from community members;

(6) (Re-)articulate institutional rules or guidance about public health and safety during the pandemic (size of gatherings, recommended or required precautions, …);

(7) Consider organizing and announcing a group of "public health and safety volunteers" in your community — with, for example, modest training, recognizable vests to identify them, boxes of masks to distribute, … — to be utilized as necessary to promulgate public health safety advice if significant gatherings develop;

(8) Consider activating a standing "watch" — a designated group of administrators and/or faculty (rotating so as not to exhaust them) who are continuously monitoring what is happening in the world and its implications for your campus and community. Thus, at any given moment there

would be an officer of the watch and a group of people responsible for maintaining general "situational awareness." Such a group would act as an early warning system to identify and raise emerging issues, and would have authority to activate emergency response processes or strategic decision-making groups when issues arise that merit deliberation.

Dealing with the unforeseeable (or unforeseen)

Much of the foregoing discussion is in the spirit of anticipating — if not the election scenarios themselves, then at least the implications for the foreseeable consequences that might appear on higher education campuses and in higher education communities. To be sure, however, not all significant possible consequences that we might have to deal with are fully foreseeable — no matter how we might try to imagine and enumerate them. We can't foresee everything — nor do we have time or resources to plan against all of the things that we can foresee. This is especially true because different sets of circumstances will interact with one another, resulting in possible combinations that are too numerous to detail in advance.

Accordingly, higher education institutions also need to have a mechanism for dealing with emerging and surprising issues for which we do not already have an answer. An immediate implication of not being able to know in advance is that we have to be able to figure out, in real time and under stress, how to cope. We need a nimble mechanism for identifying novel issues as they arise, convening a group with relevant authority that can creatively develop and decide among possible options for response and then oversee the implementation of the chosen approach. The membership of this group may need to change as the situation evolves (because different parts of the institution may become relevant or different expertise may be discovered to be needed). The issues for which this kind of deliberation and response are likely to be necessary are those that raise matters of central importance for the institution as a whole — which means that the group working on them will likely need to be the most senior strategic policy leadership group of the organization.

Institutions can and should define and organize this "mechanism" in advance of the moment when such challenges may arise and such a group needs to undertake this work. Who will be the members of the core working group? How will they be notified, activated, and convened? How will they be informed about the situation and about how it is evolving? Who will facilitate their discussions? How will their agenda be developed (and evolved, as the situation changes)? How will the decisions that need to be taken be identified? How will the decisions that have been taken be conveyed to others? How will they track how effectively the decisions they took are being implemented?

These "design" issues for the group that will have to grapple with the most novel and important issues can be put into three categories:

1) What is the **structure**? The idea is to form an umbrella group that can identify and oversee work on any and all key issues that arise. Often referred to as something like the "Critical Incident Management Team," it can also be thought of as the strategic policy group for the organization.
2) Who are the **people**? A critical design feature is that this group must have or be able to assemble the relevant authority (over resources and policies) to deal with the circumstances and must have reach across all relevant components of the institution.
3) What is the **process**? The group will need processes for maintaining situational awareness, for creative option development and problem-solving, for delegating operational instructions, and for communication.

Institutions always face the possibility of high-stakes, urgent events, so they should always have a working version of such a mechanism. Indeed, most have been actively working such a process continuously for many months now to deal with the pandemic, and so probably have one already set up and operating. The level of uncertainty institutions are now facing as a result of the ongoing election events would make this a good time to review the design, features, membership, and operating processes of whatever mechanism they may be forced to turn to in the coming weeks – and a good time to make any changes that might be necessary to enable them to better address the current and prospective circumstances.

A general approach for coping with highly uncertain circumstances

Much of what we have discussed here is directly related to the particular challenges that may be presented as a result of events related to the ongoing U.S. election. The approach we have been describing, however, is much more general — and it is drawn from what we have seen work for a range of organizations in a wide array of high-stakes, urgent, rapidly-evolving circumstances. We have found these principles to be keys to being as effective as is reasonably possible in such situations:

(0) **Remember your core values.** Articulate, remember, and remind others of what your core institutional values are, and return to this frequently for reference as you proceed. In every instance and decision, seek a connection between your values and the choices you are making. If you can't see a direct connection then you probably haven't made the right decisions. When you do make the connection, articulate that to others as the basis of your decisions. (This is numbered "0" because it is logically prior to everything else; you can't make sense of any of the other steps if you haven't done this first.);

(1) **Be who *you* are.** Remember what are distinctively your institution's comparative purposes, expertise, and skills, and see where that is relevant and helpful in whatever circumstances you find yourself in.

(2) **Foresee the circumstances that you reasonably can.** Identify, in advance, the sets of circumstances that you may find yourself in that you can reasonably foresee, and place them in categories of likelihood: >75%, 25-75%, <25%;

(3) **Plan (i) for what is most likely and (ii) for what is possible that would be most problematic.** Plan with an appropriate degree of specificity for the things that you can foresee. For things with likelihood above 75%, just plan as if they are going to happen. For events in the range of 25-75% likelihood *and* things with less than 25% likelihood but that have especially large consequences, do some contingency planning and be ready to surge a response as necessary;

(4) **Adopt a nimble stance for what you can't foresee.** Remember that you can't anticipate everything, so have a mechanism in place to help identify and grapple with novel emerging issues in real time. Such a mechanism needs to be capable of (a) assembling the people with the requisite level of authority; (b) coordinating across all relevant units of the organization; and (c) communicating internally and externally (i) about the *facts and circumstances*, so everyone is on the same page / shares the same "situational awareness," and (ii) about *decisions and actions*, so that people know what to do.

(5) **Communicate with internal and external stakeholders.** Apply the "Stockdale Principles:" in difficult circumstances, be honest about the reality you confront, but find a rational basis for hope for improvement and success.