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United States | New term, same balancing act

# America's college heads revise rules for handling campus protests

University leaders have learnt some lessons, but face a tough test this autumn



From the river to the degree PHOTOGRAPH: AP

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**A**S SOME STUDENTS shopped for Columbia hoodies and Taylor Swift crochet sets in the university bookshop, and others bought apple-cider doughnuts at a farmers' market, it almost felt like a normal back-to-school September. But as classes resumed last week at Columbia University, the heart of last spring's campus unrest over the war in Gaza, it was impossible to avoid renewed pro-Palestinian protests or the changes they have brought.

Access to the campus is restricted to those with university ID. Near the main entrances, a conservative outfit set up two digital billboards that flashed the names and faces of people they considered to be "Columbia's Leading Antisemites". Long queues blocked the gates periodically. On the first day back, a few dozen protesters shouted pro-Palestinian slogans and two were arrested. Inside the gates someone threw red paint on Alma Mater, a statue outside Low Library.

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College leaders used the summer to develop plans that might prevent disruptions, tackle antisemitism and minimise resort to police forces. The difficulty of that balancing act can be measured by the number of college presidents who have resigned while attempting to carry it out, including Minouche Shafik at Columbia, who stepped down in August. Despite much reflection and preparation, the autumn may offer her successor and other university leaders little respite. The anniversary on October 7th of the attack on Israel by Hamas is one likely flashpoint.

The problem remains how to combine a commitment to free speech with effective policies to prevent antisemitism, while also enabling all students to learn free of disruption. The First Amendment's speech protections apply only to state action, notes Lee Bollinger, a former president of Columbia and a free-speech scholar. So whereas public universities funded by the state must allow unfettered speech, private ones are under no specific obligation.

Fully adopting a First Amendment standard on private campuses would mean protecting "hate speech or

speech that advocates illegal action, or speech that advocates deeply offensive ideas”, Mr Bollinger says. Many universities believe that would be inconsistent with their mission.

Tom Stritikus, the president of Occidental College, a liberal-arts college in Los Angeles, has implemented restrictions on the permissible “time, place and manner” of demonstrations. Protests can take place only between 6am and midnight. Demonstrations cannot be mounted in buildings or block access, and no permanent or semi-permanent structures such as tents are allowed. Amplified speech (from bullhorns, for example) is also forbidden. Many other colleges have applied similar restrictions.

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In an effort to limit the resort to police, Columbia University has hired more security guards and trained them in de-escalation techniques. In a written statement Katrina Armstrong, Columbia’s interim president, said that she supports “the right to free expression...but those rights cannot come at the expense of the rights of others to live, work, and learn here, free from discrimination and harassment”. Last month the university’s task-force on antisemitism concluded after conducting interviews with hundreds of Jewish and Israeli students that the university “had not treated them with the standards of civility, respect and fairness it promises to all its students”.

College leaders have realised that they must prevent harassment and discrimination while also teaching students to handle some speech they do not like—another tricky balancing act. How they do this varies. Occidental College is requiring incoming students to attend sessions on antisemitism and anti-Arab bias. Macalester College, a liberal-arts institution in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is joining the University of Northwestern, a private Christian college nearby, to provide students with opportunities to mix respectfully. Discussions can get heated and people can disagree,” says Ravi Rajan, the president of the California Institute of the Arts, which specialises in arts education. “But ostensibly one of the things that we’re doing as educational institutions is teaching students how to have those arguments.”

Some university leaders have also learned another lesson: keep quiet. “A very curious phenomenon” developed whereby college presidents were expected to speak up about world events, ranging from George Floyd’s murder to the war in Gaza, says Suzanne Rivera, the president of Macalester College. This was not expected of leaders in other sectors, she says, and it got some chiefs into trouble.

### **Occidentalism**

Dr Rivera encourages college leaders to issue public statements only for events that directly affect their community and are aligned with the university’s mission. She points to the recent Supreme Court decisions on abortion, which had an impact on health services on campus, and affirmative action, which influenced

admissions, as appropriate times to speak up.

For those students brought up in a culture that still cancels people for views that run counter to left-wing orthodoxy, learning on a campus with a free-speech philosophy can be difficult. Combine that with a contentious war and a presidential election, and university presidents can expect plenty of hard days. "I expect there'll be protests on a number of issues this year," says Dr Stritikus, citing Occidental's history of civil disobedience. "I have no illusion that it won't be complicated." ■

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This article appeared in the United States section of the print edition under the headline "New term, same balancing act"

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