



Addressing Demonstrations on Campus

Activism-fueled demonstrations by campus community members at colleges and universities are a perennial risk. Use the following tips to help your institution respect demonstrators' rights of expression while safeguarding the community and protecting facilities and property.

Prepare in Advance

Advance preparation for campus demonstrations is critical and should include the following actions:

Widely publicize your campus policies. Regularly publicize to your campus all policies (and if applicable, relevant laws or regulations) governing demonstrations or protests. Although public institutions are bound by the [constitutional right to free speech](#), that [right has limits](#), which you should spell out plainly. If your institution is private, disseminate your rules addressing [free speech or expression](#). State laws also may apply, so consult your legal counsel.

If you have a [separate policy](#) governing demonstrations and protests or offer participant [guidelines](#), highlight them. Define [key terms](#) and note requirements for advance [approval](#) or [registration](#) by organizers.

For both public and private institutions, make clear that policy violations are [subject to discipline](#) under the applicable (student, faculty, or staff) conduct code.

Rehearse your response plan. Conduct periodic drills or [tabletop exercises](#) of your emergency or crisis response plan relating to a campus demonstration. Invite representatives from the administration, public safety and [local police](#) (especially if you have a memorandum of understanding or mutual aid agreement), risk management, facilities, legal counsel, communications, student affairs, the diversity/equity/inclusion office, and other relevant areas. Include student event organizers if appropriate. Always incorporate discussion of the scope of your institution's ability to respond to demonstrators and activists.

Learn from the past. If your campus recently experienced a demonstration that went badly — perhaps because the community blamed actions of your campus safety or police force — [study the experience](#) carefully and look for ways to improve.

Manage the Demonstration

On the day of a demonstration, focus on effective communication (with participants and among responders) and taking actions to keep everybody on campus safe.

Step 1: Remind the community of your policies. Just before a scheduled demonstration, remind your community members — by campus-wide text or email with appropriate links — about your applicable policies and potential disciplinary actions for violators. Give [specific examples](#) of prohibited actions, but also offer constructive [safety tips](#) for demonstrators.

Step 2: Ensure public safety is prepared. Public safety, which typically has the most visible institutional role during a campus demonstration, should be fully staffed, properly equipped, and ready to handle crowds without being overly aggressive. Officers need a basic understanding of your obligations under the constitution or institutional policy to protect freedom of speech and expression — and how those principles may translate when interacting with demonstrators.

Actions your public safety officers should be prepared for include:

- Separating demonstrators and counter-demonstrators
- Scanning for firearms and other potential weapons, including improvised items like trash cans, chairs, traffic cones/ barricades, and fire extinguishers
- Applying de-escalation training techniques to defuse tense situations
- Dealing with media representatives who attend the demonstration
- Watching for (and intervening in) overtly intimidating, threatening, or violent behavior
- Issuing crowd warnings that are sufficiently audible and frequent (before escalating their response by using tear gas, for example)
- Physically restraining demonstrators only when necessary

- Providing or obtaining emergency first aid for injuries
- Creating a record of public safety and participant action during the demonstration; this could include accounts from neutral observers, video recordings, or officers' post-event written reports

Depending on the expected size of the crowd, consider having additional trained staff help officers monitor developments, especially if your public safety department is small.

Step 3: Have a comprehensive communications plan. Determine how public safety and others involved in managing a demonstration will communicate with each other. Prepare a back-up plan (such as a calling tree) in case the primary method fails. Decide who will monitor social media before and during the event and how (and with whom) they'll share pertinent information. Designate one or more spokespersons with sole authority to answer questions and address campus constituents and parents, the surrounding community, and the media on your institution's behalf.

Step 4: Recommend safety steps. Post or distribute (by campus-wide text or email) a [list of actions](#) campus community members not involved in the demonstration should take to protect themselves.

Step 5: Deal with unplanned demonstrations. Spontaneous or "unplanned" (from your institution's perspective) demonstrations may make for a more difficult response, but some advance preparation is still necessary — and can mitigate the element of surprise. For example, training your public safety department in [crowd management](#) practices can be especially important for spontaneous events, but officers might decide to let this kind of demonstration in particular [continue without interfering](#), as long as participants remain peaceful.

Visit www.ue.org/campus-demonstrations to view more UE materials as well as additional resources with sample demonstration policies, guidelines, and tabletop exercises.



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