

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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CAMPUS ACTIVISM

## Campus Protests Are Coming Back. Students and Administrators Are Digging In.

By *Kate Hidalgo Bellows*

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M. SCOTT BRAUER FOR THE CHRONICLE

## Student groups lead a pro-Palestinian protest in April on the U. of Washington's campus in Seattle.

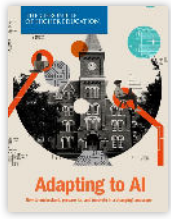
As some student activists see it, encampments are so last spring.

In July, the Young Democratic Socialists of America — a section of the progressive organization for youth and students — [passed a resolution](#) encouraging campus chapters to change their tactics. The ultimate goal, the resolution said, should be a national student strike over the Israel-Hamas war.

While the pro-Palestinian encampments of the spring were momentous, the resolution stated, few achieved their main objective of getting colleges to break financial and academic ties with Israel, whose war in Gaza has [killed about 40,000 people](#), according to the territory's Health Ministry. It was time to take things up a notch.

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Erin Lawson, a recent New York University graduate, told *The Chronicle* that a strike would call attention to student power in a way an encampment, isolated to one corner of campus, cannot.

“A university’s primary function is education,” Lawson told *The Chronicle*. “And if students do not attend class, a university can’t function.”

Before her term on the YDSA’s national coordinating committee ended in July, Lawson wrote a [piece](#) on the organization’s website in support of the resolution.

Elsewhere, student activists have endorsed “[armed struggle](#)” as an organizing tactic and promised to resist “[by any means necessary](#).” On social media, they’ve doubled down on rhetoric that refers to Israel as a “Zionist entity” that American institutions of higher education must not support.

The willingness to embrace new strategies this fall reflects not only doubts in the utility of encampments, but also a sense that activists need to meet colleges’ enhanced restrictions on free expression with an equal and opposite force. In recent months, institutions have tightened their time, place, and manner policies in an effort to avoid the headaches of the spring.

As colleges and protesters both dig in, higher-ed experts say institutions should do some soul-searching about how they want to manage the tensions.

## More Discipline?

The 2023-24 academic year ended with a jagged edge. Some encampments were disbanded by the police, while others ended voluntarily after students reached agreements with administrators. At a few campuses, students took down tents after deciding they had outlived their usefulness, or [in response to campus policy changes](#).

While scores of protesters were arrested for trespassing, many local prosecutors' offices have dropped charges against student demonstrators. But this summer, colleges pressed on with their proceedings. Some have withheld diplomas for spring graduates, placed holds on transcripts, and asked for apology letters. In some cases, colleges expelled students or banned them from campus for years.

New protest policies at a slew of campuses could lead to even more students getting punished.

Indiana University at Bloomington now [requires](#) protests to be at least 25 feet away from the entrance to campus buildings, demands “structures” get prior approval, and restricts when demonstrations can be held. The University of Pennsylvania has temporarily [banned](#) encampments and other overnight protests. The University of South Florida has [proposed](#) forbidding protests during the last two weeks of the semester and requiring fliers circulated on campus to name who created them.

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While supporters of the new measures see them as necessary to protect campus safety and avoid Title VI complaints alleging hostile environments for Jewish students, opponents say they chill free speech.

“These policies, which go beyond reasonable time, place, and manner restrictions, impose severe limits on speech and assembly that discourage or shut down freedom of expression,” the American Association of University Professors said in a [public statement](#) on Wednesday. “For example, these policies often require registration for demonstrations or protests, which, because they take place spontaneously or with little planning time, is tantamount to forbidding them.”

Laila Farah, an associate professor in women’s and gender studies at DePaul University, said the recently revised [demonstration guidelines](#) at her institution point

to the administration's fear of another encampment.

"I don't think that's going to happen," Farah said. "I think that was a moment and a tactic that was very powerful and very useful. But it also had its time."

DePaul's spring encampment lasted for more than two weeks before it was torn down by Chicago police officers and campus public-safety officers.

In Virginia, the secretary of education, Aimee R. Guidera, requested last week that state institutions update conduct codes before students return to classes, according to a memo first [reported](#) by the *Washington Free Beacon*. Guidera cited the "challenges" faced on college campuses last year and reports that the fall term could be hectic.

She outlined five areas in which public colleges must update their policies: disruptions of campus functions, violations of the law, masking, encampments, and facility usage. A spokesman for Virginia's governor, Glenn Youngkin, said the Republican leader "appreciates the commitment of our college presidents and governing boards to prioritizing student safety on campus."

A spokeswoman for George Mason University said in a statement that the institution had been "proactive" in revising its policies for public gatherings, and hadn't had any encampments. In response to the secretary's request, the spokeswoman wrote, GMU was "reviewing these policies to ensure they remain robust."

## Students' Next Steps

Student activism is traditionally hard to predict and hard to entrench. Student leaders come and go, circumstances change, priorities shift. But the signs this fall point to more protests, as the war in the Middle East rages on and a presidential election approaches.

Campus groups say they have continued to host online and in-person programming over the summer and deepened relationships with local and national progressive organizations. The national umbrella organization of Students for Justice in Palestine held a “[summer school](#)” for students, with “the aim of entrenching the frameworks necessary to sustain and grow the Student Intifada in the coming academic year.”

The social-media component of students’ information diet can’t be understated, said Maha Nassar, an associate professor in the School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Arizona and adviser for its SJP chapter.

“There are a number of Palestinian journalists who speak English, who have millions of followers on Instagram, who are able to report directly ... what Palestinian experiences are,” Nassar said. “And so these students are seeing the effects of the war directly on the lives of Palestinians.”

Next week, students plan to join protests against the Biden administration’s support for Israel at the [Democratic National Convention](#) in Chicago.

Charles H.F. Davis III, an assistant professor in the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan who studies student activism, said protesters are likely to engage in many of the same forms of protest as last year, including showing up to governing-board meetings and other events where senior leaders can be found. Davis said welcome events may also draw protesters — including new students themselves — and that he would not rule encampments out.

“We’re also getting waves of younger folks who have also been radicalized by this moment who were not on campus previously,” Davis said. “And so I think we also have to think about the ways that they may take up very similar strategies that were already employed, given that they themselves may not be subject to particular types of surveillance because they’re not necessarily known.”

As they write their welcome-back emails, college leaders should be as clear as possible in setting the tone for the semester, experts on risk management and compliance in higher education said. That's especially important for institutions that have rolled out new protest policies, said Jody Shipper, managing director of Grand River Solutions.

After last year's flurry of Title VI investigations, those welcome-back messages might also key in on campus being a hate-free environment and advise community members on where to get help.

"In Title IX, we all know what office you go to," Shipper said. "In Title VI or Title VII ... you see campuses where many offices are responding, which is good, but if it's all being handled in different offices without clarity, you sometimes have one hand [that] doesn't know what the other is doing."

Brett Sokolow, board chair for the higher-education consulting firm TNG, said administrators should also reconnect with authority figures from the most recent protests who can help deescalate potentially dangerous situations. One of the challenges colleges faced in their emergency response this spring was not knowing who was in charge; many progressive student groups opt for consensus decision-making instead of a top-down leadership structure.

"Because as much as they can be a bit of a frustration when they speak out, they're also very important allies when they're the ones who call in and say, 'Alright, now things are bubbling out of control, we need your help,'" Sokolow said. "So we need to know whose voice to listen to."

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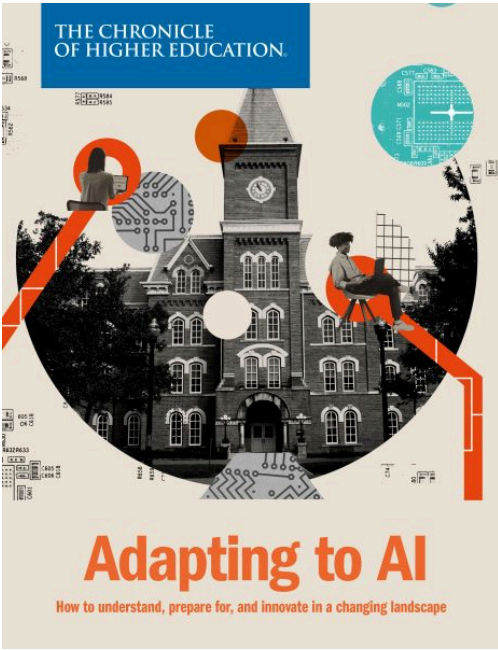


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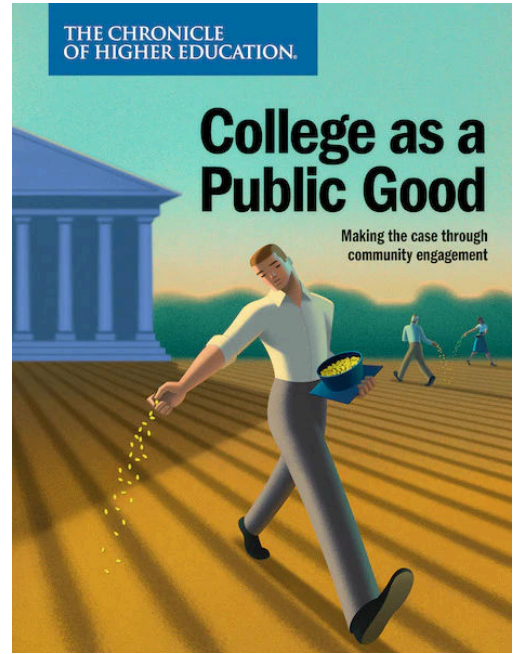


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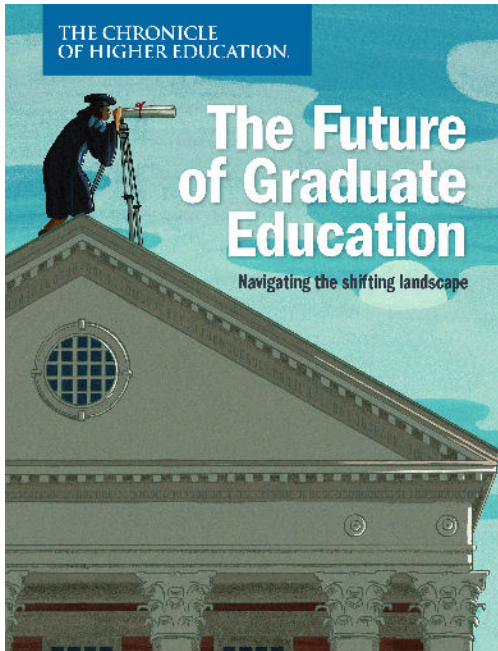
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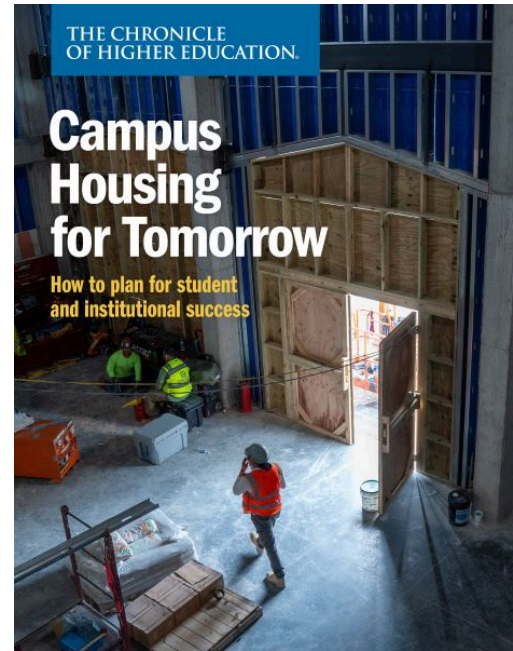
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