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Leading The Next Paradigm for Transformative Diversity Leadership.

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Article Title: **Prepping for Trumped-Up Students: Proactive Steps for College Presidents**

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Because timing is of the essence, I am writing to offer fair and hard-hitting advice to university presidents. Nothing provided here is foolproof; however, after 25 years as a higher education diversity officer, I have witnessed the wrath caused by a lack of ongoing engagement, as well as what happens when institutions wait for something to happen before considering potential responses.

For a proactive approach to “Trumped-up” students, consider these ongoing and responsive options.

Ongoing — Take seriously the possibility that a student demonstration could happen on your campus.

Students today have far more information and methodologies for expressing themselves than ever before. A group can assemble over night or even in a few minutes. Indeed, in a 2016 report, most college presidents surveyed said they thought student protests would persist in 2017. Still, many of these individuals are naïve enough to think that such incidents won’t occur on their own campuses.

Responsive — If you are still addressing unresolved demands from a previous protest, be proactive about posting ongoing updates regarding your progress.

Expecting old demands to give way to new ones can be a catalyst for increased loss of confidence and trust in the administration by the student body. Students need to know their original concerns were not forgotten and that requisite action is underway, as opposed to still being considered. If you have overlooked certain demands, then a new list will be combined with old concerns, representing time when nothing was done.

Ongoing — Be a campus resident first and a president second.

Underrepresented students need assurance that you truly understand their lived campus experiences. Seek to champion what is salient to them, what “safe” means to them, and find where misconception might develop when it comes to perceptions of their personal care away from home. Don’t send anyone on your behalf to have these types of conversations and be sure to demonstrate that *you* consider the campus as home while engaged. Sharing your own lived experience on campus will serve well to connect you to students and provide them hope through *your* personal desire to improve your campus experience. Give students hope that they too can share their lived experiences, and that some of these experiences are also shared by you. be the essence of things students can hope for, until they are seen.

Responsive — Establish a campus model for engaging in salient conversations before they are needed.

Taking this step will speak volumes to the university community. If your campus already has a framework in place for having these discussions that allow for emotional release, educational and cultural context, and collaborative resolutions, you may be able to avoid protests. Utilize best practices rooted in conflict resolution and difficult dialogues. Seek to master the stories of your students and develop a path to action as quickly as possible.

Ongoing — Respect students’ ability to distinguish appeasement from genuine action and accountability.

Proactively develop a team that can think on its feet, has authority to commit the university to minute and goodwill concessions, is trained in cross-cultural constructs and difficult dialogues, and has been accepted as a trusted source among student leaders. They will know if you send someone who is unsympathetic and unprepared to deal with them.

Responsive — Don't spend money without knowing if and how it will deliver measurable results to those protesting.

Expanding a program frequented by ethnic groups in response to protest is a common mistake. This resounds loudly as an appeasement measure and simply uses more money to get the same results. Put money where data show students gaining intentional and purposeful education through engagement and services. If a program serves 10 percent or less of a targeted population, chances are it is nugatory, with ineffective staff, and money is better spent on students' demands.

Ongoing — Dedicate a pool of discretionary resources for the chief diversity officer (CDO), if you have one, and his or her response team.

Having the latitude to act quickly will confirm a willingness to care for students as family and help build new levels of trust between them and the administration. Use a previous list of demands or word-of-mouth news about potential concerns to inform how much you set aside to serve this purpose.

Responsive — Ensure that your CDO is surrounded by caring and competent professionals.

If you have a CDO, he or she needs protection from situational biases, perceptions that he or she is acting as your buffer, and from others who want to run the diversity show. No one person or even a select few individuals, regardless of how competent they may be, can defend a university while navigating internal interference. Protections must shield your CDO from tokenism and otherwise unqualified personnel who think they can "calm the storm" because they share the ethnicity or orientation of those protesting.

Remember, there is nothing that will help you recover from a pretentious approach to student concerns. Unfortunately, the 2016 report I previously mentioned, also found that presidents tilt toward being more unsympathetic than sympathetic to protesters' demands and actions. Don't be part of that charade. Be there for your students and transform your institution on their behalf.