

A photograph of a campus protest. In the foreground, a police officer in a dark uniform with a badge and a radio is looking towards the camera. Behind him, another police officer is holding a young man with a light blue scarf and sunglasses. The young man has a determined expression. In the background, other people are visible, some wearing blue clothing, and there are trees and buildings. The scene is outdoors on a grassy area.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Managing Political Tensions

**Strategies to counter hate, extremism,
and violence on campus**

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During the pandemic, the nation's sparsely populated campuses got a reprieve from political tensions. But as colleges reopen, they must be alert not just to heated partisan rhetoric but also to potential violence.

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Extremism can't be ignored, and colleges have a role to play.

About the Author



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On the cover: Police officers take away a protester during an August 2018 rally aimed at removing Silent Sam, a Confederate statue, from the campus of the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Photo by Gerry Broome, AP

INTRODUCTION



RYAN M. KELLY, *THE DAILY PROGRESS* VIA AP

People are thrown into the air as a driver plows into a group of protesters in Charlottesville, Va., in August 2017. The crowd was protesting a gathering of white supremacists whose stated goal was to protect a statue of Gen. Robert E. Lee.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has been a nightmare for higher education, but during the 2020-21 academic year it largely spared the nation's sparsely populated campuses from rising political tensions. That reprieve is likely to end as colleges open back up, forcing them to be alert not just to heated partisan rhetoric but also to potential violence.

Experts point to the 2017 "Unite the Right" march in Charlottesville, Va., as a stark warning. They note that colleges and their personnel have long been targets for propaganda and harassment. Given the combustibility of political tempers in recent years, they say, academe would be unwise to shrug off the possibility of something worse.

"The pandemic has been awful," says Robert Futrell, a sociologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas who studies extremism. But, he says, because of remote learning, colleges "dodged a really contentious fall through the election cycle."

College leaders aren't doing their jobs if they aren't monitoring and preparing to counter threats from beyond the campus gates, says Mark A. Goode, the managing director of the North America public-entity and education practice at Willis Towers Watson, a multinational risk-management, insurance brokerage, and advisory company. That means, among other things, updating facilities' lockdown capabilities, evacuation routes, human and vehicular traffic patterns, and generally considering "how to keep the threat out and the students in."

For this special report, *The Chronicle* interviewed several dozen experts on politics, extremism, hate groups, psychology, media and civic literacy, campus security and policing, and risk management. They predicted that campus political conflict could accelerate

amid a worrisomely volatile mix of societal ingredients to which colleges should pay close attention. Those elements include:

- political polarization.
- hostility toward higher education, intellectualism, and societal sectors perceived as elite.
- the 2022 midterm elections.
- white-nationalist and antigovernment extremism and grievance politics on the right.
- identity politics, hierarchies of victimhood, and distrust of the police on the left.
- a far-reaching Biden-administration agenda that riles up right-wing groups.
- the mainstreaming of fringe views and election-fraud lies.
- a pandemic-jarred economy with growing wealth gaps.
- Covid-era disorientation, isolation, and emotional trauma.
- conspiracy theories.
- bubbled social-media environments.
- gun culture.

This report examines why experts predict escalating political conflict in higher education and how the mainstreaming of fringe views heightens the peril of campus violence. It offers advice on how colleges can better monitor such threats, and discusses why communication with law-enforcement agencies and hate-group watchdogs is crucial. Finally, it presents curricular and other strategies to help protect students from radicalization.

This tense historical moment presents clear challenges to colleges. But it could also help clarify how their missions both advance and depend upon essential democratic values that they may have taken for granted.

SECTION 1



GERRY BROOME, AP

Police officers confront a man holding a Confederate flag during a 2018 rally at the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The toppling of Silent Sam, a commemorative statue of a Confederate soldier that had stood at the entrance to the campus, led to protests.

Why Higher Ed Is a Potential Target

FOR W. JOSEPH KING, president of Lyon College, in Batesville, Ark., ideological clashes are not an abstract concept.

Previously, he was senior adviser to the president of Emory & Henry College, in Emory, Va. That college was deep in Appalachia. Lyon is in the foothills of the Ozarks. Both, he says, are “bubbles of inclusion and of diversity surrounded by a sea of angry, disenfranchised populations and a large white-supremacist population. Both colleges have had to deal with active Klan chapters in the area.”

Potential Emory & Henry students and faculty and staff members driving to campus from Tri-Cities Airport in Tennessee would pass a huge Confederate flag, a machine-gun store called Tommy Guns, and a 100-foot cross on their way up Interstate 81. That didn't help with recruiting, he says.

While in Emory, King did a scripture reading at the marriage of two men. The next night, his wife's car, parked outside

TAKEAWAYS

In an increasingly polarized nation, colleges can no longer afford to duck difficult political issues.

To right-wing extremists, colleges are perceived as citadels of “privilege and elitism.”

The rise of cancel culture on the left and watchdog-group monitoring on the right has led to faculty fears about being unfairly labeled.

College public-safety officials must coordinate with local police to keep campuses safe.

their college-owned house, was fire-bombed. In case he missed the point, a couple nights later the car was fire-bombed again to destroy the section that the fire department's quick response had left intact the first time.

Luckily, no one was injured. The state police prosecuted the case as domestic terrorism. The arsonist, who had been out on parole, had connections to white-supremacist groups, and the car-bombings added three years to his combined sentences.

“Presidents are going to have to take hard positions. It’s going to get them on the wrong side of their trustees and donors sometimes, and their political leaders.”

When King started his job at Lyon, Donald J. Trump had just won the presidency and there was “a lot of division.” King met with students and told them that the Lyon community could have a broad range of political ideas and that students shouldn’t be surprised to encounter challenges to their views.

The next morning, he found his front door spray-painted with an expletive directed to “Mr. Prez.” (Capitalizing on the teaching moment, he sent a missive to the student body that explained that “It’s Dr. Prez.”)

Trump rallies in Arkansas during the fall of 2020, says King, brought crowds not just with Trump banners but also Confederate flags and neo-Nazi symbols. “Think Capitol mob minus the ‘QAnon Shaman,’” King says. The

HOW ONLINE RADICALIZATION CAN OCCUR

Content ‘rabbit holes’: Gradual encounters with increasingly extreme content can transform healthy skepticism toward government, for instance, into belief in conspiracy theories.

Filter bubbles: People are more likely to adopt extreme views when exposed only to like-minded people who don’t challenge each other’s ideologies.

Peer sharing: “Edgy” humor, animations, and memes from acquaintances can prime someone for increasingly radical content. They can also dehumanize groups, leading to rationalization of violence.

Direct contact with extremists: This can take place on social media, but also through gaming platforms and encrypted apps.

Some drivers of radicalization include:

- trauma, disruption, loss.
- confusion and uncertainty.
- feelings of anger and betrayal.
- rebellion and status-seeking.

SOURCE: *Building Resilience & Confronting Risk in the Covid-19 Era: A Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization*, Southern Poverty Law Center and American University’s Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab, at the Center for University Excellence

Lyon campus basically went into lockdown. Keeping the college safe “is a dance of your own safety operations with the local police and the state police.”

In an increasingly polarized nation, says King, who is also a founder of the consulting firm Academic Innovators, colleges can no longer afford to issue milquetoast proclamations and duck difficult political issues. “Presidents are going to have to take hard



MARK PETERSON, REDUX

Trump supporters rally in Orlando, Fla., in February 2021, led by Enrique Torrio, leader of the Proud Boys (front right, wearing black T-shirt).



BEN MARGOT, AP

Police officers at the U. of California at Berkeley guard the building where the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos was to speak in February 2017. The event was canceled out of safety concerns after protesters hurled smoke bombs, broke windows, and started a bonfire.

positions. It's going to get them on the wrong side of their trustees and donors sometimes, and their political leaders."

Concern about political volatility on campus "is definitely in the air," says Peter F. Lake, a higher-education law expert at Stetson University. "I know schools are talking about this."

State governments in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, and elsewhere are upping the ante by passing laws to [monitor colleges'](#) social-justice, [diversity](#), and other ostensibly progressive teachings. Lake calls such efforts "a deliberate attempt to change the polarity of institutions."

That, he says, "turns the campus not just into a marketplace of ideas but a politically charged marketplace of ideas," and "that stuff has a natural instinct to turn ugly."

In the aftermath of numerous political melees, including the rally in Charlottesville and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, the prevalence of weapons increases the risk of incidents turning deadly, say Lake and others.

Mark A. Goode is the managing director of the North America public-entity and education practice at Willis Towers Watson, a multinational risk-management, insurance brokerage, and advisory company. "Political extremists and hate groups," he says, "control the rhetoric through intimidation and silencing opposing voices. They promote their extremist positions by creating fear fueled by a mob mentality."

Sometimes, says Goode, "our youth, eager to exhibit their newfound freedoms away from home, fall prey to the rhetoric."

Physically, he says, most college campuses are open, easily accessed environments. That permeability is amplified by the prevalence of smartphone recordings, he says. Instructors are constantly at risk of being recorded. "Teaching is no longer about challenging the student to be wiser and more socially aware."

Instead, with the rise of cancel culture on the left and watchdog-group monitoring on the right, "instructors are guarded for fear of being negatively labeled, fired, or even criminally prosecuted. Radical influencers

ONLINE GROUPS AND TOOLS OFTEN USED BY EXTREMISTS

Toxic Online Communities

These sites are among those known to foster cultures of hate and intolerance, and to perpetuate campaigns of disinformation and harassment. Use of these sites by students or others in college communities should be viewed as cause for concern.

- 4chan
- Gab
- 8Kun
- Kiwi Farms
- incels.co

Apps and Sites With Limited Moderation

Extremists seek to exploit these sites to prey on the young and vulnerable.

- Minds
- BitChute
- Riot
- Rocket Chat
- Parler
- MeWe
- DLive
- Rumble

Highly Encrypted and Anonymizing Apps and Services

These sites and apps use privacy technologies to keep their activities secret.

- Telegram
- Signal
- Wickr
- Wire
- Jitsi Meet
- PIA VPN
- NordVPN
- ProtonVPN
- Unseen.is email
- Tutanota email
- Tor/Onion browsers
- Brave browser
- Threema
- Keybase

SOURCE: *Building Resilience & Confronting Risk in the Covid-19 Era: A Parents & Caregivers Guide to Online Radicalization*, by the Southern Poverty Law Center and American University's Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab, at the Center for University Excellence

are often able to control the dialogue by influencing what is considered acceptable teaching material.”

The boundary between rhetorical intimidation and physical threat is blurry at best. Consider a closer look at the watchdog phenomenon that Goode mentions. It comes in the form of a recent [data snapshot](#) from the American Association of University Professors.

Campus Reform is a self-proclaimed “conservative watchdog to the nation’s higher-education system.” The AAUP study examined more than 1,570 *Campus Reform* stories in 2020 and the 338 individuals who were the subjects of those stories. AAUP also received survey responses from 213 of those subjects.

“Forty percent of respondents reported receiving threats of harm,” the AAUP found, “including physical violence or death, following *Campus Reform* stories about them. ... An additional 10.7 percent of respondents reported that, even though they had not received threats of harm, they had received other types of unwanted, hateful, or harassing emails, direct messages, or mail.”

The study shows that, at least to some degree, intimidation in the form of such “articles” works. The study also shows that *Campus Reform* disproportionately targets tenured faculty members at prestigious research institutions, suggesting “that an apparent goal of the website’s coverage is to delegitimize not just higher education generally but specifically those institutions that make the largest share of contributions to research production in the United States.” The report’s authors compare the tactic to similar targeting of academics during the McCarthy era.

Could colleges be targets not just of stepped-up rhetoric but also of increased violence? Absolutely, say a number of criminologists, consultants, and scholars who study extremism.

“I look at everything that’s going on today with enormous concern,” says Bruce Hoffman, who has been studying terrorism and insurgency for 46 years and is director of the Center for Jewish Civilization at Georgetown University.

Hoffman and other experts see eerie parallels to the 1920s and the resurgence and expansion of the Ku Klux Klan following that earlier period of pandemic, political upheaval, and economic shock. The Klan began more systematically targeting not just Black people but Jews, Catholics, and immigrants. It became a nationwide network, and increasingly established itself not just in rural but in metropolitan areas. And it became less clandestine, pushing itself into the public sphere and gaining adherents among politicians.

COLLEGES AS ‘CITADELS OF ELITISM’

Then, and now, Hoffman says, a preponderant theme was the denigration of expertise and science, and the targeting of the liberal elite. That, Hoffman says, makes colleges, like state capitols, “targets as citadels of privilege and elitism.” And, “when you attack a lot of people in one place, you can get recognition because of shock and horror.”

Colleges “have always been a priority for the far right, especially since the rise of the alt-right” during the 2010s, says Vegas Tenold, a correspondent and producer at *Vice* and the author of *Everything You Love Will Burn: Inside the Rebirth of White Nationalism in America* (Bold Type Books, 2018).

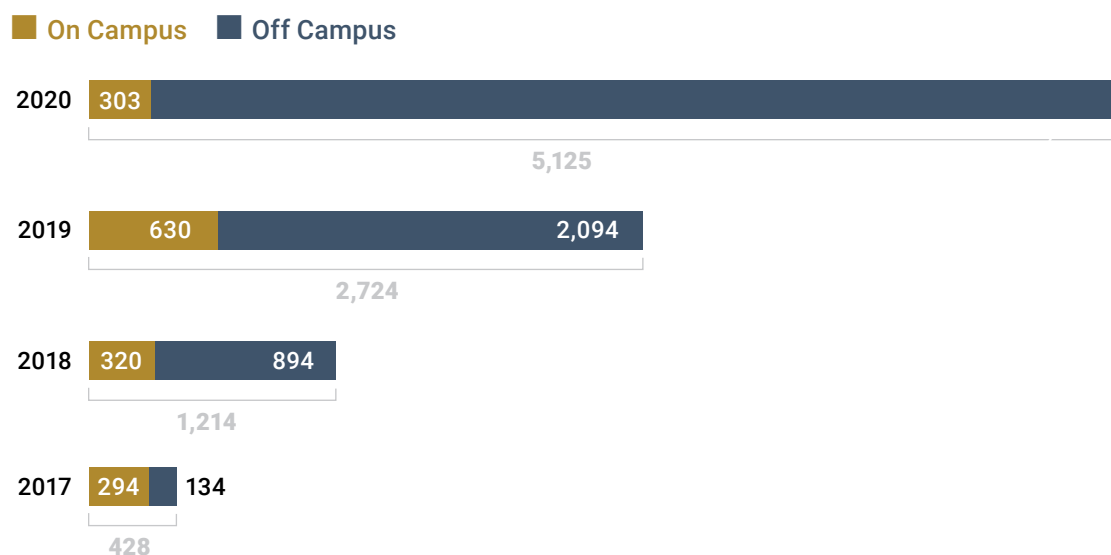
Those groups have heavily pamphleteered at colleges, too.

“In 2019, U.S. white supremacists employed paper canvassing of neighborhoods and college campuses more than at any time in recent memory, with an unprecedented number of flyers, banners, stickers and posters appearing across the country,” wrote Carla Hill, associate director at the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism, shortly before the pandemic lockdown began. In updated figures, the ADL cited 2,724 propaganda distributions across the United States in 2019 — up from 1,214 incidents in 2018. “Dozens of white-supremacist groups,” Hill wrote, “participated in this barrage of offensive propaganda.”

The pandemic slowed campus propaganda incidents, Hill tells *The Chronicle*, but they might resume and even accelerate. While college pamphleteering decreased

White-Supremacist Propaganda Incidents in the U.S., 2017-20

Such incidents include the distribution of racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-LGBTQ fliers, stickers, banners, and posters.



Source: Anti-Defamation League

in 2020 when most students were remote, white-supremacist propaganda over all nearly doubled, with a total of 5,125 cases reported (averaging more than 14 incidents per day). That, the Center on Extremism reports, “is the highest number of white-supremacist propaganda incidents ADL has ever recorded.”

With Trump in office, building “the wall,” pushing back on immigration and against Black Lives Matter, “all of that felt good for the white-supremacist movement,” Hill says. Antigovernment groups, too, were happy with Trump, and directed much of their sentiment at governors and local leaders trying to enact Covid-control measures, she says.

She predicts that Biden’s efforts to reverse Trump’s policies will inflame the white-supremacist movement in the next few years. “It’s a heated time in our history.”

The journalist and author Tenold thinks far-right groups will return to campus with new wedge issues around Covid-19 — vaccination mandates, masking, and the like.

To right-wing extremists, colleges are “perceived as places of liberal hegemony, the bogymen, the enemy framed as indoctrinating

the young,” says Stephanie Lake, director of the Criminal Justice Program at Adelphi University. She teaches courses on the sociology of terrorism and on criminology.

Socioeconomic and cultural shifts have alienated some people who believed in the idea that they would do better than their parents, but in many cases haven’t. Instead of examining the societal and global trends that have thwarted those dreams, Lake says, those who feel disenfranchised look for scapegoats — immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, and people with different sexual orientations and gender identities. Groups on the far right argue that the liberal establishment in the ivory tower has enabled what they see as this new, politically correct culture, and are “canceling” them.

People who feel excluded from wealth and power look for “ostensibly intellectual explanations” in the rhetorical hothouse of the internet, Lake says, and have done so all the more during the pandemic lockdown. It is unsettling to imagine what they’ll do when they emerge.

“It is almost,” she says, “like a perfect storm of alienation, isolation, and information silos.”

SECTION 2



PAUL SANCYA, AP

Armed protesters gather at the Michigan State Capitol in April 2020 to object to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-at-home order during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Hope for the Best, Plan for the Worst

AS IF THE CAULDRON of today's political tensions and psychological traumas were not nerve-racking enough, America's astonishing gun culture continues to add potentially lethal risks. A campus attack by a lone perpetrator motivated by extremist rhetoric is a nightmare scenario that college leaders contemplate with dread.

"The obvious problem is that a lot of these attacks are done by small cells or lone actors," says Todd C. Helmus, a senior behavioral scientist at the Rand Corporation and the author of *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews With Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization* (Rand, 2021).

Terrorism and security experts certainly don't rule out attacks from international foes. But consider group-targeting incidents like the 2015 Charleston Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal

TAKEAWAYS

Experts believe a lone wolf with a gun is the most likely campus threat, but they don't rule out explosives or other lethal weapons.

Lone wolves may be acting alone, "but they aren't radicalized alone."

Colleges are increasingly inquiring about risk-management coverage for riots, civil commotion, and political violence.

Old-fashioned community policing can be colleges' best tool.

Church shooting that killed nine people, the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting that killed 49, the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue shooting that killed 11, and the 2021 Atlanta-area shootings that killed eight. In light of those incidents, and many more, experts see the greater threat, currently, as coming from within the United States.

Such fears are furthered by the steady drumbeat of mass shootings in the spring of 2021 as America has begun emerging from Covid lockdowns. NPR reported in May 2021 that there had been an average of 10 mass shootings in the United States per week since the year began. (It defined a mass shooting as four or more people shot or killed, not including the perpetrator.)

There are turbulent political elements

Lone wolves “may be acting alone, but they aren’t radicalized alone.”

across the ideological spectrum, and renewed conflict between Israel and Palestinians has reignited an overlapping set of combustible passions. Most analysts interviewed by *The Chronicle*, however, see right-wing extremists — especially white supremacists and antigovernment militias, sometimes including or overlapping with misogynistic “incel” (involuntary celibate) groups — as the forces most likely to inspire or carry out violence in the United States in the near term. They think guns are the likely means, though these observers don’t rule out explosives or other lethal weapons.

Violence on a college campus, or anywhere else, would not necessarily be carried out by an integral member of an extremist group, says Lawrence Rosenthal, chair and lead researcher of the Berkeley Center for

Right-Wing Studies and the author of *Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism* (The New Press, 2020). He and other specialists say that an act could be carried out by someone with a mind-set akin to that of the 1995 Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh. McVeigh was loosely affiliated with extremist groups but something of a loner and largely inspired by *The Turner Diaries*, a racist, anti-Semitic novel about a violent revolutionary movement. In what the FBI calls “the worst act of homegrown terrorism in the nation’s history,” McVeigh killed 168 people — including 19 children — and injured several hundred more.

Lone wolves, says the journalist and author Vegas Tenold, “may be acting alone, but they aren’t radicalized alone.” Because of the way far-right extremist groups operate, he says, the lone-perpetrator scenario is almost more likely than group violence.

Burned by post-Charlottesville lawsuits, far-right extremists are careful and savvy in their rhetoric, says Jack McDevitt, a criminologist at Northeastern University who has written two books on hate crimes. The groups will start a meeting saying that they don’t advocate violence and then spend an hour, indirectly, doing just that, hoping that “someone sitting in the room is going to see themselves as a hero and they’re going to go out and commit the violence.” As representatives of the elite, urging limits on access to guns, colleges could well be a target of that violence, McDevitt says.

Donald Trump excelled at lobbying explosive thoughts while still giving himself plausible deniability, says Andrew L. Whitehead, a sociologist at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and author of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2020). Leaders of far-right groups reflect and emulate that skill.

A seemingly uncontroversial message can take on a sinister cast when filtered through a mind steeped in extremist teachings, Whitehead points out. Think of the Capitol rioters who were members of churchgoing communities. Combine white-supremacist

influences with a pastor insisting that “we are a Christian nation,” Whitehead says, and the disconnect between intent and interpretation can be dangerous.

Colleges have been especially attuned to the active-shooter threat since the 2007 Virginia Tech rampage that left 33 people dead and 23 injured, says Mark A. Goode, of Willis Towers Watson, the multinational risk-management company.

The risk of a lone shooter — including the risk of a politically motivated shooter — is a topic of concern, agrees Tarique Nageer, the terrorism placement advisory leader for Marsh, a global insurance broker and risk-management firm. Along with federal and state agencies, companies like Moonshot, Control Risks, and GardaWorld are among those that offer clients cutting-edge data-scouring services that analyze internet search-engine queries and other content for early warnings of extremist activity by geographic area, Nageer says.

Colleges, especially if they are in metropolitan areas, are increasingly inquiring not just about standard property and bodily injury insurance and risk management, but about more-expansive packages, he says. That includes coverage for strikes, riots, civil commotion, malicious damage, and vandalism, and even political-violence packages that cover war, civil war, insurrection, and coups. There is coverage, too, for demolition of buildings where something awful has happened and that people are too traumatized or scared to use.

Cash-strapped colleges mostly can’t afford these far-reaching coverage options, given pandemic losses and other priorities, but the inquiries are further evidence that administrators are palpably worried about political violence.

When your town has Klan chapters and huge Trump rallies, of course, you don’t necessarily need high tech to understand that you have a problem, says Lyon College’s president, W. Joseph King.

Old-fashioned community policing can be colleges’ best tool. “When neighbors come to trust you,” says Ronal Serpas, a criminal-justice

professor of practice at Loyola University New Orleans, “that’s where you’re going to get your best intelligence.”

ARE FEARS OVERBLOWN?

Mark Bauerlein, a contributing editor of the magazine *First Things* and a professor emeritus of English at Emory University, thinks fears about political violence reflect a measure of left-leaning hysteria.

“The necessity of going all the way back to McVeigh, and to stretch things far from the campus, and to speak of future possibilities rather than actual and systemic threats such as those the left is inflicting on individual freedoms daily, is a sign of factual weakness on this issue,” he says. “I am also suspicious of risk and terrorism ‘experts,’ given the degree of political correctness that now suffuses those areas.”

“The degree of distortion in the media and among Democrats on this is extraordinary, and it calls for a diagnostic eye,” Bauerlein says. “For instance, the framing of January 6 in the ridiculous terms ‘insurrection’ and ‘overthrow the election’ can only have a displacement motive: the need of liberal politicians and commentators to deny their fecklessness in the face of more than 200 cities last summer rocked by leftist mobs, looting, assaults, etc.”

In September 2020, the news website Axios reported that “the vandalism and looting following the death of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police will cost the insurance industry more than any other violent demonstrations in recent history.” The protests “were mostly peaceful, but the arson, vandalism and looting that did occur will result in at least \$1 billion to \$2 billion of paid insurance claims — eclipsing the record set in Los Angeles in 1992 after the acquittal of the police officers who brutalized Rodney King.”

Robert Futrell, a sociologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas who studies extremism, says that violence coming from the American left during the last 50 years has been more about strategic property destruction, meant to avoid human casualties. He



IDAHO FREEDOM TV, THE YOUTUBE CHANNEL OF THE IDAHO FREEDOM FOUNDATION

Idaho's Lt. Gov. Janice McGeachin appears in a 2020 video arguing against Covid-19 restrictions.

emphasizes that he is in no way defending the destruction of property, only pointing out that “if you look at the deaths and injuries of human beings from violent acts, it far, far, far skews to the right.” It is “a false equivalency to talk about violence on both the left and the right,” he says.

In April 2021, a *Washington Post* [analysis](#) of data from the Center for Strategic and International Studies showed that “domestic terrorism incidents have soared to new highs in the United States, driven chiefly by white-supremacist, anti-Muslim, and antigovernment extremists on the far right.”

“The surge reflects a growing threat from homegrown terrorism not seen in a quarter-century,” the *Post* article says, “with right-wing extremist attacks and plots greatly eclipsing those from the far left and causing more deaths, the analysis shows. ... Since 2015, right-wing extremists have been involved in 267 plots or attacks and 91 fatalities, the data shows. At the same time, attacks and plots ascribed to far-left views accounted for 66 incidents leading to 19 deaths.”

A 2020 report by the gun-safety organization Everytown “found that the perpetrators of one-third of the 20 deadliest shootings in the past decade were motivated by or

previously expressed support for white-supremacist extremism.” The report traces a longtime symbiosis between the gun lobby and the extreme right, which it defines as the “two large, slightly overlapping spheres” of “white-supremacist and antigovernment extremist movements.”

Whether the threat comes from the right or the left, criminologists and experts in policing and security urge colleges to take the peril seriously.

“Active-shooter incidents are not going to go away,” says John Bernhards, executive director of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. He urges college leaders to include those scenarios along with other interagency tabletop-planning exercises for violence, natural disasters, and other emergencies.

W. M. (Marty) Kotis III, a Greensboro, N.C., businessman and member of the University of North Carolina Board of Governors, fears that the 2022 midterm elections will add fuel to the partisan flames. There are “underlying elements that want to use spectacle or groups to draw media attention to their cause,” he says, “and that could be anyone on the far right or the far left doing that.”

Kotis is a “big believer in free speech,” he

ARE GUN LAWS THE PROBLEM?

America's gun culture is striking by any measure. Consider:

- U.S. civilians own more than 390 million guns.
- There were 14,400 gun homicides in 2019.
- There were more than 23,900 suicides by gun that year.
- The eight mass shootings with the highest death tolls have occurred in the last decade.
- Only eight states and Washington, D.C., ban assault weapons.

"The vast majority of states either prohibit guns on campus or allow colleges to decide for themselves," Everytown, a gun-safety organization, reported in December 2020. "Only two states force colleges to allow all [concealed-carry permit](#) holders to carry guns everywhere on campus: Colorado and Utah. Ten other states force colleges to allow guns on campus in some circumstances."

Would more restrictive gun laws curb the threat of violence — more particularly, violence by extremists — on campus?

Everytown writes that, "for decades, the gun lobby has not only enabled access to guns by antigovernment and white-supremacist extremists through its advocacy against common-sense gun laws, but has also worked to harness their fixation on guns to shore up its own political power."

Max Bromley, a criminologist at the University of South Florida, says that guns and the heavy drinking on many campuses are a worrisome combination. Vegas Tenold, a journalist and author who has written about extremism, says that "adding guns to universities with hormone-laden youths is a scary prospect." And Robert Futrell, a terrorism expert at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, emphasizes the frighteningly easy accessibility of guns — both legal and illegal — especially through private sales at gun shows and elsewhere.

Futrell also says, however, that proposed gun restrictions actually help extremist groups recruit new members and prompt gun- and ammo-buying sprees.

Lax gun laws, then, both reflect and aggravate the country's gun culture. But in the short run at least, new restrictions can, in themselves, exacerbate America's gun addiction.

says — until it heats up into something else. "That's the tipping point for me — when something goes from speech to violence."

"It seems," he says, "like we've lost the ability to have reasoned discussions with each other."

GET TO KNOW YOUR POLICE

Kotis sees the need for more campus

policing and says that it's difficult to recruit qualified candidates into a demoralized profession.

"All police are being painted with the same brush," he says. "I personally don't think that's fair. What it results in is it's very difficult to recruit and retain police officers when it's not real popular to be a police officer right now."

For decades Max L. Bromley has done pioneering analyses of campus violence



Police hold back demonstrators during a 2017 rally for the removal of Silent Sam, a Confederate statue on the campus of the U. of North Carolina. The statue was toppled in 2018.

and campus security. The director of the master's-degree program in criminal-justice administration at the University of South Florida, he also served with the institution's police department for 24 years, including as assistant chief. Since the January 6 insurrection in Washington, he says, intelligence sharing among local, state, and federal law-enforcement agencies has stepped up considerably. On the left and the right, there's

been activity — “even during Covid,” he says. “More than you'd think.”

He believes that in the fall “there's going to be more outside activity where one group or another is going to be doing their speech, and that could be the target, I hate to say it, of the super-far-right wing.”

“You don't want anybody to be surprised,” he says. “I think some of that happened at the Capitol, some intelligence was ignored.



SARA D. DAVIS, GETTY

It's timely to think about these things now."

Bromley emphasizes the vulnerability of campuses, particularly large, public metropolitan ones — cities within cities, with tens of thousands of students, faculty, and staff members, and vendors streaming in and out of numerous entrances. Many campuses have labs with biological and chemical substances that could also be targets for violence. Beyond that, he says, more than half of states have

open-carry laws for guns. "You don't want weapons in the hands of people who have been drinking an hour before," he says.

Guns scare not only students and faculty members, says Bromley, but staff members working in buildings. And in a shooting situation, guns confuse responding police officers who can't distinguish the proverbial good guys from the bad guys.

To defend against campus violence, Brom-

CHECKLIST: PREPARING YOUR CAMPUS FOR VIOLENT PROTESTS

This list is condensed from [a guide](#) published by United Educators, an insurance and risk-management group.

SAFETY ISSUES

- Update your college's crisis-response plan. Clearly define when a protest becomes a safety threat, and have an action plan to protect the campus community.
- Conduct drills and tabletop exercises to probe for weaknesses in the crisis-response plan.
- Create protocols and update policies, including those dealing with use of public spaces, campus safety, protests, civil disobedience, campus policing, and student codes of conduct.
- Engage with your campus community before protests occur, and clearly communicate your college's position on free speech and violence.
- Designate a spokesperson and anticipate questions that community members may have.
- Draft and practice key messages and responses. Create a plan for monitoring and responding on social media.

LEGAL AND SECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

- Know the laws regarding use of your public spaces. Legal counsel can guide the institution about what limits may be imposed.
- Train campus-security forces to deal with potential violence. De-escalation training can be particularly effective.
- Take additional steps if your campus allows visitors to carry guns. Consult with legal counsel to understand whether it is possible to impose weapons restrictions at a potentially violent protest.
- Work with local police. If your college does not have a memorandum of understanding in place with local police, now is a good time to create one.

BEFORE AND DURING A PROTEST

- Recognize that your institution could be a target for extremists.
- Learn about the proposed speaker or protesters. Search through news reports and social media, check resources like the Southern Poverty Law Center, and gather information from peer colleges that previously have allowed the speaker or group on campus.
- Watch for intimidating or threatening activities from crowds of protesters and counterprotesters. Public institutions should remember that the First Amendment does not protect directly threatening or violent speech.

Source: United Educators

ley urges teamwork not just between police agencies, but between campus administrations, student groups, mental-health counselors, and resident assistants. Colleges also need open meetings and dialogue, especially to reach out to minority groups, he says, “because there’s a lot of hurt there. You really need to break down those barriers and make it kind of a team thing.”

David Taylor, a professor of sociology and criminal justice at Hampton University, a historically Black university in Virginia, says students in pandemic lockdown have a lot of pent-up resentment and anger from the murder of George Floyd and other high-profile incidents involving the police. It’s important that students have the opportunity to vent that anger and channel it into constructive discussion when they return to campus, he says.

As an African American man, Taylor says, he has had his own unpleasant experiences with the police, but as the former director of a probation office, he has also interacted with many good, honorable officers.

Colleges may be reluctant to bring students and police officers together because “emotions can flare up quickly,” he says. But it’s important to start that conversation, to “bring African American students and police officers together so that they can see each other as people, as human beings, who are just trying to work and survive and make it through life.”

BUILDING TRUST BETWEEN STUDENTS AND POLICE

Police and security experts are cognizant of “All Cops Are Bastards,” “Cops Off Campus,” and “Defund the Police” coalitions, and they aren’t expecting those tensions to be resolved in facile Officer Friendly-type conversations. They are, however, urging empathy and a broader perspective by everyone involved. When it comes to averting campus violence, the stakes are high.

One common and potentially fraught interaction is the student-welfare or -wellness check, in which a police officer or some

other authority checks to see if a student is OK. That might happen if no one has seen the student for a while, or if the student has shown signs of being unwell, depressed, or in peril of harming himself or others.

Serpas, the professor of practice who teaches criminology at Loyola University New Orleans, says that often, even if the police are called to do a welfare check, unless there is reason to expect physical danger, they could ask a student-affairs staffer to intervene instead.

Transparency — simply explaining to students how police officers do their jobs —

“It’s very difficult to recruit and retain police officers when it’s not real popular to be a police officer right now.”

is an important step in increasing trust, says Serpas, who has led police departments in New Orleans and Nashville and was chief of the Washington State Patrol.

As a parallel, he points to experiments in which some drivers at DWI checkpoints were given explanations for why the checks were important — including statistics on deaths and injuries resulting from drunken driving. Other drivers didn’t get those explanations. In subsequent surveys, those who received explanations reported a greater level of comfort with the stops.

During 34 years in law enforcement, Serpas has seen trends evolve from dragnet to community policing to de-escalation practices. He has also seen some of that progress reversed when budgets were cut — like after the 2008 recession. Those financial strains



were a factor in adding to police roles the kinds of mental-health crisis responses and other duties to which many critics now object. The police don't want those duties, either, Serpas says. Most people, including students, don't know or think about such organizational strains and institutional history, and he wants them to.

Serpas says that perpetrators of violence “represent every kind of ideology you can

imagine.” Communication is essential, Serpas says, not just between institutions and police agencies, but between police officers and students. From officers, that means attentiveness, sensitivity, and discretion. From students, it means making an effort to understand officers' roles, especially in delicate, pressured situations like protests.

Violence usually comes not from protesters themselves, Serpas says, but from



AMI VITALE, PANOS PICTURES, REDUX

Flags fly at half-staff at Virginia Tech in 2007, following the mass shooting on campus in which 33 people died.

pain and violence who layer themselves into a crowd.” The key, Serpas says, is constant communication by the police to explain their actions.

Provocateurs want to trigger overreaction, violence, and attention, he says. While it might feel counterintuitive, he says, student protesters would do well to coordinate and ally themselves with the police.

Better yet, when instigators come to campus to get a rise out of students, faculty, and staff members, one smart move is to ignore them, says UNLV’s Futrell.

“If they don’t draw a crowd,” he says, “they can’t instigate, they can’t recruit, and they aren’t meeting their aim.”

“That’s where student affairs’s work comes into play. We don’t create a response for students, but we help guide them to an appropriate response that does not conflict with institutional policies and laws,” says Daryl Lowe, Spelman College’s associate vice president for student affairs, who has served as an administrator at several other institutions. While Lowe says Spelman has not had these kinds of challenges, his general advice to students is to follow these principles in the face of provocative or offensive speakers:

people who “are unattached atoms that are bouncing around inside the crowd.” Picture the instigators as a small circle toward the center of a larger circle. The police are on the periphery looking at all of the participants. The protesters will often think the police are coming after them, and anger and tension ratchet up. But, says Serpas, often the police are really looking at, say, “a firebomber behind the protesters, individual purveyors of

- Don’t engage physically with anyone.
- Feel free to walk away. You don’t have to listen.
- Consider organizing an event to speak in opposition.
- Maintain decorum, because you don’t want to violate the student code of conduct. Just because a speaker may choose to provoke you, you can always choose not to be provoked.

SECTION 3



JASON ANDREW, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, REDUX

Rioters scale the walls of the U.S. Capitol during the insurrection on January 6, 2021.

Recognizing and Countering Extremism

IN HIS [TESTIMONY](#) before the Senate in 2019, FBI Director Christopher Wray called white-supremacist extremism “one of the most potent forces driving acts of domestic terrorism,” which he cited as “a persistent, evolving threat.” More recent testimony from Wray, Attorney General Merrick Garland, and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has only underscored the growing peril.

The question is whether that threat will start to dissipate now that it has no Trump presidency around which to crystalize. Will Donald Trump’s comeback efforts and the mainstreaming of fringe views embed those beliefs in a more permanent way?

Lawrence Rosenthal, chair and lead researcher of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies and the author of *Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism*, says that when it comes to extremism, higher education is on a precipice. “What happens when the world reopens, at the university level, depends a great deal on what happens to the MAGA movement,

TAKEAWAYS

Information is a powerful weapon: When extremists come to campus, college leaders must explain what such groups want and how they work.

Extremists banished from mainstream social media have moved to less-visible sites that are harder to track.

Extremist groups appeal particularly to white males who feel disenfranchised.

Colleges should help make all students feel valued and watch out for those who lack social connections.

the Trump movement, the state of the right-wing populace in these months.”

As we’ve seen, the answer matters a great deal in terms of physical safety on college campuses. But it also has an impact on their intellectual missions of free inquiry and critical reasoning — crucial instruments in countering extremism.

MAINSTREAMING OF EXTREME VIEWS

Will the myth of the stolen election become a right-wing rallying cry, Rosenthal asks, or will arrests, prosecutions, and lawsuits subdue extremist activity?

Extremists, he says, “believe that the liberal world is fat and flabby and decadent, and that they’re the tough guys.” History suggests that “if the liberal world comes down strong on them, they scatter.” The effect of serious enforcement by the Department of Justice will help determine whether that movement stays together, he says.

Some Republicans condemn a figure like Marjorie Taylor Greene, a U.S. Republican congresswoman from Georgia who says the presidential election was stolen and

Will the myth of the stolen election become a right-wing rallying cry, or will arrests, prosecutions, and lawsuits subdue extremist activity?

who started, then scrapped, an “America First” caucus enshrining what she called Anglo-Saxon culture. (The *Washington Post* columnist Alexandra Petri cheekily [suggests](#) that Greene might not have been sufficiently briefed on Anglo-Saxon culture. Petri imagines a mead-hall caucus in medieval England reciting the “Dream of the Rood” and governed by the law of Æthelberht.) At any rate, Greene’s maverick behavior brought in \$3.2 million in campaign funds

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican who says the presidential election was stolen, speaks outside the U.S. Capitol in February 2021.



ANNA MONEYMAKER,
THE NEW YORK TIMES, REDUX



Black Lives Matter advocates rally in 2020 in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and are met by counterprotesters, some of whom are armed.

BILL BULEY, COEUR D'ALENE PRESS

from 100,000 supporters in the first quarter of 2021.

Over all, with its repudiation of Liz Cheney, Mitt Romney, and other legislators who have distanced themselves from Trump, the GOP has embraced the stolen-election Big Lie that has fired up the extreme right. Politicians like Sen. Josh Hawley are also capitalizing on Trumpism, as are ostensibly mainstream media figures like Tucker Carlson, who touts far-right “replacement” theories about liberals importing immigrants to dilute white culture.

“Tragically, the Republican Party has lost its way, perverted by fear, lies, and self-interest. What’s more, GOP attacks on the integrity of our elections and our institutions pose a continuing and material threat to the nation. ... Republican legislators are trying to impede voting rights across the country as a last-ditch effort to retain power.”

That’s not a progressive Democrat talking. That’s a group of prominent moderate Republicans — including a former RNC chairman and a governor — urging, in a *Washington Post* op-ed, a new breakaway conservative alliance. “If we cannot save the Republican Party from itself, we will help save America from extremist elements in the Republican Party.”

Fracturing of groups can lead to a hardening of more-fringe positions within them, say Dominic Packer and Jay Van Bavel, psychologists at Lehigh and New York Universities, respectively, and authors of an upcoming book, *The Power of Us: Harnessing Our Shared Identities to Improve Performance, Increase Cooperation, and Promote Social Harmony* (Little, Brown Spark, September 2021).

“Research on in-group criticism and a phenomenon known as the ‘black-sheep effect,’” the two write in an April 2020 news-



America First members attend the pro-Trump rally held in Washington on January 6, 2021, to protest the election results. Protesters then marched to the Capitol, where many of them stormed the building.

NINA BERMAN, NOOR, REDUX

letter, “suggests that as relations between groups grow more intensely competitive, their members find it more important to protect and enforce the boundaries between the groups. Anyone who dilutes the boundary — by criticizing their group or suggesting the other side might be right about something — is perceived as a threat and treated as such. ... Seeing this happen, members become more cautious about speaking up or challenging orthodoxy.”

In a March 2021 essay in *The Conversation*, Matthew Valasik, a sociologist at Louisiana State University, and Shannon Reid, a criminologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, [predict](#) that infighting and splintering will make far-right extremist groups even more reactionary.

That said, as any “canceled” moderate

liberal has learned, the phenomenon is hardly limited to the conservative end of the spectrum.

Rigidity, says Packer, the Lehigh psychologist, can be a defining characteristic of extremism. Another can be identity fusion, “a visceral feeling of oneness or unity with the leader,” and a willingness to sacrifice — even one’s life. An affront to the leader is taken as a personal affront. Referring to the January 6 Capitol riot, he says, “you could make a plausible case that there’s some identity fusion going on there.”

A follower in such a situation is not passive but active, Packer explains. “You think to yourself, ‘What does my leader want me to do?’” And then, by inference, you reach a conclusion and may well act on it.

It is in that sense that the lone-actor or

“lone wolf” scenario features prominently in terrorism experts’ thinking these days. Connect the dots — lone-actor impulses and colleges’ symbolism, status, and accessibility — and the implications are clear. And alarming.

“Colleges have been worried for a very long time about mass-shooting incidents,” says Packer, who has also served as an associate dean. “This raises the possibility of a more politically motivated incident. I think there is a concern.”

Having figures like Greene and Hawley in power allows extremists to feel like they have electoral representation that they haven’t had for a very long time, says Robert Futrell, a sociologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas and author of *American Swastika: Inside the U.S. White Power Movement’s Hidden Space of Hate* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015). “They see it as part of a conversation that moves the frame of acceptable politics further to the right and widens the window of acceptability.” (The phenomenon is known as shifting the “Overton window” — named after the late policy analyst Joseph P. Overton.)

To those on the extreme right, says Alexander Laban Hinton, a professor of anthropology and director of the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers University, the university is a “den of corruption” and “part of the deep state.” It is a locus of cultural Marxism and the Jewish conspiracy against white, Christian nationalism. Hinton details this mind-set in his new book, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the U.S.* (NYU Press, June 2021).

Prosecutions and lawsuits following the 2017 Charlottesville “Unite the Right” rally and the January 6 Capitol riot are, at one level, setbacks for extremists. At another level, though, those events become rallying and recruiting points, and demonstrate a broadening of far-right elements, Hinton says.

Extremist groups’ banishment from more mainstream social media is also a mixed bag, he says. It lowers the volume on their digital megaphone, but it also drives their re-

HATE GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES

■ In 2020, the Southern Poverty Law Center tracked 838 hate groups across the nation. Those groups can be filtered by ideology and state, with news updates, at: splcenter.org/hate-map

■ From the start of 2020 through early June 2021, the Anti-Defamation League chronicled 7,606 incidents of extremism or anti-Semitism in the United States. Those can be filtered by state or city, incident type, ideology, and year at: adl.org/education-and-resources/resource-knowledge-base/adl-heat-map

cruiting and propaganda efforts into a greater number of less-visible social and gaming sites that are harder to track. *The Washington Post*’s Marc Fisher recently [explained](#) how far-right groups increasingly use pop culture, edgy humor, and retail marketing to attract potential young acolytes.

Young extremists immersed in internet culture may have been partly turned away from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, but they find alternatives like Parler and Gab, or encrypted-messaging apps like Telegram, says Alex Newhouse, deputy director of the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies.

WANTED: YOUNG, DISGRUNTLED WHITE MEN

As colleges resume in-person life, Newhouse can imagine a far-right group like the racist, anti-Semitic Patriot Front marching onto a campus — especially that of a big state university — to intimidate and score propaganda points. “I think a lot of schools were caught flat-footed around 2017,” he says.

Newhouse and other scholars say that the

best defense, beyond common-sense security measures, is to explain to students and faculty and staff members, in a straightforward, low-key way, what extremist groups want and how they work. “The best weapon,” he says, “is context and information.”

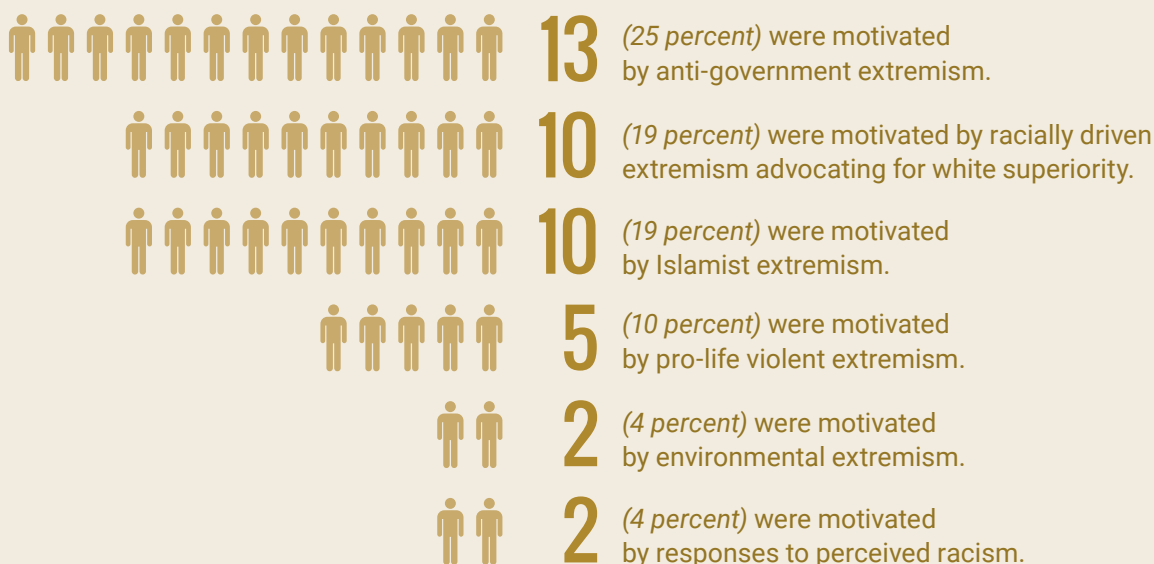
America First, for instance, has not been overtly violent, Newhouse says. But the “paleoconservative” group is anti-Semitic, conspiracy minded, anti-immigrant, and anti-LGBTQ. It has a history of appealing to college students and has congressional allies. Rep. Paul Gosar, an Arizona Republican, skipped a vote on a Covid-19 relief package to speak at an America First Political Action

Conference in February, as did former Iowa Rep. Steve King. If America First or similar groups are coming to your campus, Newhouse urges, tell students about them.

On campus, extreme-right groups appeal particularly to white, male students who feel like they’ve already been put through the ringer — disadvantaged in admissions by affirmative action, ostracized through social-justice initiatives, and demonized in diversity-training sessions. America First’s leader, Nick Fuentes, “has been very successful,” Newhouse says, “in targeting those young, college white men who feel dislocated from their community.”

IDEOLOGIES OF LONE OFFENDERS

A 2019 FBI study [examined](#) 52 incidents of terrorism by lone offenders between 1972 and 2015. All offenders in the study were male, and ranged in age from 15 to 88. Sixty-five percent were white. Of the incidents:



Note: The remaining 10 offenders were placed in the category of “other.”

Source: Lone Offender Terrorism Report, by the FBI’s Behavioral Threat Assessment Center

To be clear, Newhouse doesn't blame affirmative action or diversity training for the phenomenon — he says that both are crucial. But, he says, "hateful, negative messages are stickier, and they appeal to that primal fear of being shoved out of the society that you are immersed in." The antidote is ensuring that people feel that they are valued, part of a social fabric and of worthwhile, fun pursuits. To that end, colleges need to invest in student services and student life, and stay alert to signs of social dislocation, he says.

"Universities need to be attentive to people who have been starved of connection and belonging," says Lehigh's Packer. And it's not always the economically disadvantaged who become disgruntled and disillusioned. Research shows that sometimes it is the affluent and advantaged who are drawn to extremist rhetoric because they feel insecure, he says. "I may have privilege today," they think to themselves, "but it's going to be lost. It's precarious privilege. People are going to take it away from me."

Todd C. Helmus, the Rand extremism expert, says that small numbers of students might be susceptible to violent fringe thinking. "I don't think you need to go overboard on the interventions," he says, unless you see indications or higher risk activity in a particular student group. It's a balancing act, because research suggests that overemphasizing the threat can "harden the very attitudes you're trying to change."

White women are too often left out of the conversation on countering right-wing extremism, says Jessie Daniels, a sociolo-

"Universities need to be attentive to people who have been starved of connection and belonging."

gist at Hunter College with affiliations at Harvard and Oxford, and the author of the forthcoming *Nice White Ladies: The Truth About White Supremacy, Our Role in It, and How We Can Help Dismantle It* (Seal Press, October 2021).

The way academic feminism plays out, Daniels says, women often see themselves as victims only, neglecting a history of racial barriers, brutality, and hierarchy of which they are also part. "White women students often don't see racism or systemic white supremacy as part of their struggle, and that's really what I want to see shift," she says.

So-called allyship is insufficient, says Daniels. The word implies standing encouragingly on the sidelines. "I want young women to shift from being allies to putting themselves in that struggle, seeing it as their own struggle." The same holds true, she says, for white women faculty members who need to consider the ways they may be contributing to the barriers that their minority colleagues face.

SECTION 4



JULIA WALL, RALEIGH NEWS & OBSERVER VIA GETTY IMAGES

Demonstrators and spectators gather around a toppled Confederate statue known as Silent Sam at the U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in August 2018.

Fighting Back: The Power of the Classroom

TAKEAWAYS

To counter a lack of shared values, colleges should emphasize the teaching of civic engagement. But they are divided over how to do so.

To improve students' evaluation skills, colleges should weave critical thinking across the curriculum.

The classroom should be an empathetic space for discussions, but on some issues there is no middle ground.

IF, AT BOTH PRACTICAL and intellectual levels, colleges have to defend themselves against extremism, are they also complicit in its growth? In their curricular and extracurricular activities, what can they do to combat it?

Nancy Thomas, the director of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education at Tufts University, reminds us that the question of how to handle controversial groups coming to campus is hardly new. Depending on the decade, administrators have struggled with how best to handle Klan rallies, cults, antiwar protesters, animal-rights activists, and other groups.

The pendulum has swung in recent years toward a free-speech absolutism, Thomas says. “Meet bad speech with good speech,” is the standard prescription. But if an outside group is disruptive, dangerous, discriminatory, or spreading clear misinformation, she says, “then educators may exercise their academic freedom and say no to that group using campus property.”

“We want to shine a light on disinformation and extremism,



ANNA MONEYMAKER, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, REDUX

From left, Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Christian Picciolini, and Sharon Nazarian appear at a congressional hearing on white-nationalist terrorism in September 2019. Miller-Idriss is director of an extremism-research lab at American U., Picciolini is a reformed hate-group member, and Nazarian is a senior official at the Anti-Defamation League.

not allow it to hide,” says Thomas. “But the assumption that a public institution has no choice is, in my view, incorrect.”

In his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, the political scientist Robert D. Putnam bemoaned the deterioration of civic life. In response to such critiques, Thomas says, colleges stepped up service-learning, spring-break volunteerism, and study-abroad programs.

“Really it was quite stunning what higher education did,” she says. “The problem is, it was largely apolitical.”

Since then, the resurgence of authoritarianism has made that model “grossly inadequate,” Thomas says. Democracy is under attack, voting rights are under siege, and extremist groups “are growing exponentially.”

Choosing to be a student on a campus where people of all backgrounds belong, Thomas says, is in itself political, “and I think that’s good.” The ramifications, as students learn about the world and form their identities, have to be embedded throughout the curriculum. “There is more acceptance of active democratic education,” she says, “but more confusion about how to do it.”

Spencer Critchley, a writer and former communication adviser to Barack Obama’s campaigns, says colleges have largely abandoned moral education because they consider it too unscientific and subjective. In his book *Patriots of Two Nations: Why Trump Was Inevitable and What Happens Next* (McDavid Media, 2020), Critchley writes

about the chasm between an Enlightenment America and a faith- and feeling-based Counter-Enlightenment America. Academe is so centered in the former that if it recognizes the latter at all, it is with incredulity and scorn, he tells *The Chronicle*.

“We conducted an experiment without realizing what we were playing with,” he says. A free but technocratic society designated ethics and aesthetics as matters of private concern and, in the process, “cast humanity loose with no coherent moral system.”

“The average American head is just a junkyard of moral philosophy,” he says — we mix up religion, pop culture, catch phrases, advertising, self-help. “People are adrift, and that creates a lot of the vulnerability.”

While college administrators “talk in soulless bullet points,” Critchley says, “demagogues like Trump waded into that void because they promise meaning, they promise people a moral mission for their lives. So do white nationalists.”

Critchley has urged care in condemning Trump supporters — and to be curious rather than judgmental. “Find out what the story is really about,” he recommends. It’s often about feelings of disrespect, fear, and humiliation.

“However, at a certain point, there’s a loss of moral clarity if you don’t say certain things are just wrong.” Things like undermining democracy.

Colleges, Critchley says, need to stand for democracy and bring passion back to that defense. “We talk about democracy too much like it’s only the social contract,” he says. “It’s more than that. Values like freedom and equality are its soul.”

Civic engagement was, for decades, something of a second-class citizen in political science — considered too basic, too dull, too unscientific. But that began to shift about 15 years ago, says John Forren, a political scientist at Miami University and executive director of the university’s Menard Family Center for Democracy. Recently, the American Political Science Association started a formal section devoted to civic engagement. Its activities include pairing mentors and

mentees for civic-engagement projects, and there’s a lot of interest in that, he says, from institutions ranging from community colleges to the Ivy League.

Civic engagement is also getting considerable play in the APSA’s journals, Forren says. A special issue in early 2022 of the *eJournal of Public Affairs* plans to focus on the January 6 Capitol insurrection, and an upcoming spotlight feature in the teaching-focused journal *PS* plans to examine increasing political polarization.

Those and similar efforts, Forren says, are “a means of elevating the stature of such work within the discipline.”

Needless to say, the nature of an education in civics is itself political. In schools, progressives are pushing toward a project-based “action civics” in which students write and publish opinion pieces, petition, meet with legislators, and work toward change in matters important to them — “gang violence, public transit, teen jobs, etc.” as one action-civics group puts it.

The National Association of Scholars — an organization that says it “fosters intellectual freedom, searches for the truth, and promotes virtuous citizenship” — criticizes action civics’ emphasis on activism and opinion without a firm base of civic knowledge. In response, the association is orga-



COURTESY OF PETER WOOD

Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars: “Opinions don’t belong in a civics curriculum at all.”

nizing a coalition called the Civics Alliance, which will stress the fundamental workings of government.

“Our view,” says NAS President Peter Wood, “is that traditional civics, or some form thereof, is indispensable, and one doesn’t learn how to change the government ... without first learning the functions and structures of government.”

“We fully understand,” he says, “that civics as it used to be taught was regarded by most people as one of the most boring subjects in the curriculum.” But moving students toward forms of extracurricular volunteerism during class time — writing letters and petitions based on social doctrines, or engaging in social action for various causes without understanding what lies behind those causes, “strikes me, and strikes NAS, as a dim way to approach these matters.”

“Opinions don’t belong in a civics curriculum at all,” he says — but should be reserved for debate club or argument in a high-school history class.

Miami University’s Forren says political scientists are acutely aware of the tussle over civics education, which is entwined in an ideological [scrap](#) over a proposed \$1 billion in federal support. In programs like a nine-speaker series called Dialogues on Democracy that his center organized, the key, Forren says, is to “focus on issues rather than positions” in choosing those speakers, which include both liberal and conservative voices. The moderator for the events, he says, sometimes needs to play devil’s advocate to help reflect a spectrum of viewpoints in those discussions.

A CRITICAL LOOK AT CRITICAL THINKING

Whether or not American students understand government — and [data](#) on eighth-graders’ competence in civics suggest most do not — the more fundamental question is whether they arrive at and leave college knowing how to think.

Howard Burton is founding director of the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics and hosts an online interview, database,

and book series called Ideas Roadshow. In his new book *Exceptionally Upsetting: How Americans Are Increasingly Confusing Knowledge With Opinion and What Can Be Done About It* (Open Agenda Publishing, 2021), he argues, as he explains to *The Chronicle*, that America “is in the ever-tightening grip of a sort of intellectual disease where all perceived understanding is increasingly associated with exceptionally strong personal sentiment and tribalism.” One antidote, he says, “is to begin to seek pleasure in the joys of intellectual stimulation and understanding for its own sake.”

“Critical thinking” — that most frequently bandied about of educational bromides — is an obvious tool with which to counter opinion-itis. And many conscientious teachers and professors believe that they are inculcating it.

Most aren’t, says Steven J. Pearlman, author of the 2020 book *America’s Critical Thinking Crisis: The Failure and Promise of Education*. He is an academic consultant who trained faculty at the University of Saint Joseph on teaching critical thinking. He argues that while rigorous class discussion and active learning might be worthy practices, they don’t teach critical thinking.

That needs to be done explicitly and directly, and it should be woven throughout the curriculum, he says. Students are taught to the test from early childhood. Facts are facts, and no one’s advocating that two plus two can equal five, he says, but students need to be able to reason beyond binary understanding, which fuels extremism: “If I’m right, you must be wrong.” They need to be able to contend with evidence and complexity, to value being smart more than being right.

But there’s no way to assess that kind of “smartness,” is there?

Sure there is, says Pearlman.

Colleges need to build a contiguous critical-thinking skill set across all disciplines, first year through fourth, instead of offering competing versions of critical thinking in different subjects. Measure the degree to which students develop evidence-based ideas versus willfully asserted opinions,



JAY JANNER, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN VIA AP

In November 2016, Ronald Elliott, then 18, protests at Texas State U., in San Marcos, opposing Donald Trump's election victory.

and whether they gauge the worthiness of others' opinions the same way. Too often, Pearlman says, today's students simply summarize other material and then voice opinions about it without any methodical evaluation. Those evaluation skills can be taught and assessed.

When it comes to political topics, particularly in a heated classroom discussion, the tendency is to look for the "middle ground." Don't, says Pearlman: "Middleness is not always better."

There is, for instance, no middle ground on the neo-Nazi movement, Pearlman says, but there is lots of middle ground and nuance in discussing how someone gets pulled into that movement.

Extreme views are irrational. Our brains are wired to let emotions hijack critical thinking when our amygdalas turn off our prefrontal cortexes and prevent higher-order reasoning, Pearlman says. Survivor instincts kick in — fight or flight. "That's OK.

**"Critical thinking"
— that most frequently
bandied about of
educational bromides
— is an obvious tool
with which to counter
opinion-itis.**

None of us would be here today if our brains didn't evolve that way. We would have been eaten by bears instead."

But whether the topic is racism or vaccinations, bombarding people with more information often fails because it drives them into that survival corner of their minds.

To open their thinking, try to remove the threat. Let them give voice to their fears. That empathetic space, says Pearlman, is a precursor to a more rational mind-set.

PREVENTING AND REVERSING RADICALIZATION

That was the case for Christian Picciolini, the author of *Breaking Hate: Confronting the New Culture of Extremism* (Hachette, 2020). He was a violent member of hate groups in the 1980s and 1990s before leaving them, rebuilding his life, getting a degree in international relations from DePaul University, and launching anti-extremism enterprises. Those include Free Radicals, which helps current hate-group members disengage from extremist influences and deradicalize.

College, Picciolini tells *The Chronicle*, "had a profound effect on me." He attended as an adult while working at IBM.

He had left the hate movement years before — spurred in part, he explained in an [interview](#) with the BBC, by interactions with "people of color, people who were gay, people who were Jewish," who sought him out in the record store he had opened. "These people would come in to challenge me, but they chose to do so through compassion instead of aggression. I'm very grateful for that because it allowed me for the first time to meaningfully interact with the people that I thought I hated."

But college opened his eyes further. "Everything was represented on the college campus" — different gender and sexual identities, races, faiths. "It was the first time in my life I was immersed in the world, allowed to explore."

It was also, he says, "the first time I publicly talked about my past experience, not exploiting it but exploring it." College "gave me that safe space."

In one of his first courses, an introduction to faith and spirituality, students summarized their lives so far. In that roomful of 40 or so people, "I exposed myself to the world," talked about "the awful things I had

COULD BRITAIN'S MODEL FOR DERADICALIZATION WORK IN THE U.S.?

Terrorism experts say that the United States lags behind Britain in trying to prevent and counteract radicalization. That includes referrals of vulnerable youth through educational institutions, including schools and colleges.

The British model, known as Contest, includes four components: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, and Prepare. Prevent is intended “to safeguard vulnerable people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism, by engaging with people who are vulnerable to radicalization and protecting those who are being targeted by terrorist recruiters.” In tandem are Pursue, designed to stop terrorist attacks from happening in the U.K. and elsewhere; Protect, meant to bolster defenses against a terrorist attack in the U.K. or elsewhere; and Prepare, to “mitigate the impact of a terrorist incident if it occurs.”

In the United Kingdom, preventing and reporting radicalization is considered a statutory responsibility of schools, universities, hospitals, and other public-sector officials — the “Prevent duty,” it is called — much the way teachers and other authorities in many countries are required to report the suspected abuse of minors. According to a U.K.-government fact sheet, in 2018-19, 203 community-based Prevent projects reached more than 142,000 participants. Almost half of those projects were through schools.

Since 2010, more than 310,000 pieces of illegal terrorist material have been removed from the internet, the fact sheet states. Since its beginning in 2011, Prevent training for teachers and other “frontline practitioners” had been conducted more than 1.1 million times. And since 2012, Prevent’s voluntary and confidential reporting system “helped

more than 1,500 people who were considered to be vulnerable to exploitation from terrorist influences.” Of the 394 people who received such support in 2017-18, “179 (45 percent) were referred for concerns related to Islamist extremism and 174 (44 percent) were referred for concerns related to ... right-wing extremism.”

Skeptics question the effectiveness of Prevent, and worry that it leads to increased government surveillance and constrains free speech. Other voices, however, see a clear danger in what one master’s-degree student in 2015 **called** “the entrenched nature of Islamic extremism on campus.”

Could elements of the British model work in the United States?

Robert Futrell, a sociologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas who studies extremism, says that programs like Britain’s rely on community leaders to identify people “at risk” of becoming violent extremists, but research pointing toward predictive risk factors remains tenuous. Programs like Britain’s can flag potentially innocent and rational behavior like low trust in law enforcement and expressing alienation. “This turns normal human experiences into suspicious behavior.”

Stephanie Lake, the director of the Criminal Justice Program at Adelphi University who teaches courses on the sociology of terrorism and on criminology, cites three major reasons why the British model is not well suited to the United States.

In the United States, intervention programs that single out students have had mixed results at best, she says. Being labeled as an extremist, a truant, a delinquent, or some such — especially if it involves what the sociologist Harold Garfinkel called “a degra-

dation ceremony” like an appearance before a principal or a juvenile-court judge, can reinforce the worrisome identity instead of deterring it. In other words, the approach can have the exact opposite of the intended outcome, Lake says.

“The second issue that might thwart such efforts here,” she says, “involves the uniquely robust free speech and expression rights we have in the U.S., which include protections for students, although the First Amendment applies somewhat differently in schools than in many other public institutions.”

A third major problem, says Lake, is that surveillance of students would involve groups, conspiracy theories, and platforms “that are shared by a wide swath of the adult electorate.”

“With the British program,” she says, “there is a broad consensus concerning what has been labeled ‘Islamic terrorism,’ however misguided and Islamophobic that term is. Few parents in the U.K. have the will or ability to mount significant opposition to a program that denounces what many view as ‘radical’ recruitment by groups perceived to be antidemocratic, foreign, violent, and nihilistic.”

In the United States, on the other hand, there is significant debate over who and what constitute dangerous elements. While even Donald Trump’s FBI director, Christopher Wray, referred to the January 6 Capitol riot as “domestic terrorism,” Lake says, tens of millions of Americans don’t see the rioters in that light, at least not to the point of warranting their universal condemnation.

done.” It was “the first time I publicly asked for forgiveness,” Picciolini says.

Hate organizations, when he was in them, were small, easily identified groups of tattooed skinheads who wanted anything but to blend in. That changed, he says, around 9/11. Since then, those groups have gotten more buttoned-down and conventional looking. They don’t want to scare people. They want to seduce them to their cause.

When Trump came into office, extremists were thrilled. “They never thought they would have a president that said the exact same things we said.”

Free Radicals uses the same deradicalization methods that worked on him, Picciolini explains. They look at the identity, community, and purpose the groups gave them, and the abuse, poverty, isolation, and mental-health challenges they wanted to flee. “All the potholes in their life,” he calls them. Describing his approach to deradicalization, he says, “I fix potholes.”

Scholars and watchdog groups are trying to help young people avoid those potholes. Cynthia Miller-Idriss is a sociologist, author of *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (Princeton University Press, 2020), and director of the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab, or Peril, at American University. The lab does primary research and works on projects to counter misinformation and radicalization.

The plan was to offer in-person training for educators, youth-group leaders, therapists, and coaches. Then Covid-19 struck, so, in partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center, Peril instead is offering tools, guides, and, soon, e-learning modules online for parents and caregivers. Those materials are designed for high-school and middle-school students, but Peril is designing similar educational materials for college students.

Alice Huguet, a policy researcher at the Rand Corporation, has been leading a media-literacy effort as part of a Rand project called “Countering Truth Decay,” an “initiative to restore the role of facts and

analysis in public life.” Huguet’s group has published materials to help secondary students learn core media competencies like recognizing gaps in logic, spotting gaps in one’s own knowledge, and learning how to find reliable sources of information.

Huguet urges colleges not to assume any common base or level of media savvy among students. While emphasizing the importance of discussing current events, she says, professors should try not to politicize media-literacy education itself. “More important than being right,” she says, “is trying to help everybody to be critical consumers and producers of information.”

AN ANTAGONISTIC LEFT

The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and Rod Dreher, a senior editor at *The American Conservative*, recently had a print dialogue regarding the arguable overreaches of wokeness.

Brooks cites, for instance, “fringe absurdities like ‘ethnomathematics,’ which proponents say seeks to challenge the ways that, [as one guide for teachers puts it](#), ‘math is used to uphold capitalist, imperialist, and racist views’ by dismissing old standards like ‘getting the “right” answer.’”

Dreher despairs that “we are living in a country whose elites are teaching us to see each other primarily on the basis of race, and to hate each other for it.”

Brooks, on the other hand, sees wokeness as “an honest and good-faith effort to grapple with the legacies of racism. In 2021, this element of wokeness has produced more understanding, inclusion, and racial progress than we’ve seen in over 50 years.” Ultimately, Brooks decides he’s not too worried about overreaches because as wokeness becomes corporatized, it will get watered down, its excesses eroded, the way the market, over the decades, watered down the bohemian values of hippies.

In academe, the more caricaturable aspects of wokeness sometimes outrage or amuse people who are already doubtful about the value and purpose of college.

“We are living in a country whose elites are teaching us to see each other primarily on the basis of race, and to hate each other for it.”

Consider these recent situations:

- A University of Virginia medical student is [suspended](#) for asking skeptical questions about the definition of “microaggressions.”
- A business professor at the University of Southern California is [replaced](#) because he used a Chinese word that sounded similar to a racial slur in English.
- A UCLA accounting professor is [placed on leave](#) because he declined to alter grading policies for Black students after the death of George Floyd.
- White employees at [Smith College](#) and the [University of Vermont](#) object to being vilified by race in mandatory diversity training.

The American Conservative’s Dreher writes: “I hear all the time from college students telling me about how afraid they are to say what’s on their mind in their classes, for fear of being failed by their professors, or attacked by a mob of students. ... This is all happening in an America that is formally liberal and democratic, but there’s nothing liberal and democratic about any of it.”

Maybe antiracism practices are necessarily divisive. Maybe a zero-tolerance stance

toward questioning them is a component of the work. Maybe hurt feelings, even a touch of self-loathing, are inevitable parts of social progress.

As Christian Picciolini, the reformed hate-group member, puts it: “There is a bit of a reckoning. After thousands of years of white males dominating ... other folks have agency, finally, and they’re calling them out for that.”

But bear in mind, say experts on extremism: No one is enjoying the spectacle of factionism on the left more than the far right.

“One thing I’ve learned from three decades of hate-crime research is that offenders don’t specialize,” says Jack McDevitt, the criminologist and hate-group expert who runs Northeastern University’s Institute on Race and Justice. “They attack people they see as different. It really behooves all of the groups to band together, build a coalition, and include as many sympathetic white students, faculty, and staff as they can to send a unified message.”

WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Is there a better, less embittered — and embittering — approach to racial literacy?

Ernest Morrell has been exploring that question as a professor of English and Africana studies and as the director of the Center for Literacy Education at the Uni-

“One thing I’ve learned from three decades of hate-crime research is that offenders don’t specialize. They attack people they see as different.”



COURTESY OF ERNEST MORRELL

Ernest Morrell, professor of English and Africana studies at the U. of Notre Dame: “Someone has to repudiate, and someone has to forgive.”

versity of Notre Dame. He also directs the National Council of Teachers of English Squire Office of Policy Research, which has long invested in research and policy in these areas in K-12 as well as higher education.

“Where does love fit?” is the question he has been contemplating as a teacher of undergraduates in English and Africana studies — “love of self, love of others, love of the world. ... how to do some of this work while also healing ourselves.”

If media literacy, civic knowledge, and critical thinking are learned skills, so, too, are speaking thoughtfully and respectfully, being humble in presenting one’s ideas, becoming an interlocutor, he says. Part of teaching those skills is modeling them in the classroom: Don’t preach. Don’t tear down. Instead, examine.

“Look in the mirror before you look out the window,” is the metaphor he and his students work with and build on. What are your blind spots? How can you be more generous with other people’s ideas — and with your own?

“Look in the mirror before you look out the window.” What are your blind spots?

His courses include difficult books with some harrowing content, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. In discussing them, he looks for “the rhetoric of reconciliation.”

“Someone has to repudiate, and someone has to forgive. We don’t talk a lot about that in the academy because they seem like soft

terms, but they’re important. ... It’s not soft to allow space for humanity. When you give permission and try to model that, it calms tensions.”

When discussing race, Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, an associate professor of English education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, advocates encouraging self-examination rather than self-criticism or self-blame.

In her [policy brief](#), [commissioned](#) by the National Council of Teachers of English, there is a pyramid that ascends toward racial literacy. It includes historical literacy and structural racism. But among its other layers are “critical reflection,” “critical humility,” “archeology of self,” and — at its base — “a profound ethical commitment to caring for the communities we work in.”

That base layer is called “critical love.”

IT IS UNFAIR that amid the mother of all distractions — Covid-19 — colleges have to add the prospect of political violence to their heaping plate of problems: tight budgets, projected enrollment drops, cybersecurity, abuse and assault cases, and on and on.

But extremism is an issue that can't be ignored. "These threats have to be taken more seriously," says Georgetown University's Bruce Hoffman. He has four and a half decades of antiterrorism scholarship under his belt. If he's worried, colleges should be, too.

Society's problems are colleges' problems, but colleges' solutions can become societal solutions. "Higher education is the nation's think tank," says Tuft University's Nancy Thomas.

Extremism is born from fear, from threats to identity. David Theo Goldberg, director of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, calls his forthcoming book, to be published by Polity, *Dread: Facing Futureless Futures*. For extremists, Goldberg says, those bleak futures reflect not just loss of white privilege, but wage stagnation, neoliberalism, and the financialization of everything coupled with the shredding of social safety nets.

In confronting extremism beyond the cam-

**Protect your students.
And, without hesitation
or apology, protect
your democracy.**

pus gates and working to curtail it within them, colleges have a major role to play in lessening that dread. They can, says Lehigh University's Dominic Packer, help people envision better futures and form healthier new identities. A raised awareness of the extremist threat, Packer says, is scary, but it can also be "almost like a fresh start," with a more inclusive and supportive community.

Protect your students. And, without hesitation or apology, protect your democracy.

But in your classrooms and boardrooms and neighborhoods, confront hateful beliefs with respect, and even love. As Notre Dame's Ernest Morrell puts it, go after the "ism" and not the "ist."

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