



Responding to Turning Point USA (TPUSA) and Other Provocative Student Groups on Campus

There has been a growing concern about the prevalence of externally funded and networked right-wing student groups on college campuses. Turning Point USA (TPUSA) is one of the largest, most provocative and controversial. While these resources focus on TPUSA, many of the strategies discussed here pertain to responding to other well-funded student groups that specialize in staging campus disruptions and provocations for partisan gain.

Background

TPUSA was created as a partisan political student organization, which promotes many far-right political positions. Members affiliated with TPUSA have regularly engaged in [racist](#), [homophobic](#) and [transphobic](#) speech while on campus. TPUSA chartered buses to bring students to the [January 6th riot](#) at the Capitol.

TPUSA was founded in 2012 by Charlie Kirk, with a starting donation from Republican mega-donor Foster Friess. According to the most recently available tax documents, in 2022 TPUSA had [revenue of \\$80.6 million](#). Headquartered in Phoenix, AZ, TPUSA claims a [presence on 3,500 campuses](#), with a field program comprised of 350 paid organizers. TPUSA hosts annual conferences, which journalist Kyle Spencer described as a high-production event with the reputation of an “out-of-control party venue with flowing booze and easy hook-ups.” In recent years, TPUSA has expanded its efforts to include high schools, churches, and college alumni.

TPUSA has also built itself into a media empire, funding and promoting right-wing personalities, “journalists,” social media influencers, podcasters, and other content producers. TPUSA also runs the [Professor Watchlist](#), a website profiling so-called “radical professors” and [known to drive harassment](#).

TPUSA also produces campus tours that bring Kirk and other personalities to campus. Chapters can request speakers through the [speakers bureau](#), including TPUSA founder Charlie Kirk, Pizzagate conspiracist Jack Posobiec, Libs of TikTok founder Chaya Raichik, a number of MAGA Republicans, election denier Mike Lindell, Project Veritas founder James O’Keefe, anti-trans activist Riley Gaines, and dozens of other far right politicians, media personalities, and online influencers. During spring 2024, TPUSA brought Kyle Rittenhouse—who killed two protestors during a 2020 protest in Kenosha, WI—to several university campuses.

TPUSA chapters have been known to stage and then film controversies with students, faculty, and administrators, releasing edited videos of these interactions. A film team for the TPUSA online show “Frontlines,” for example, have confronted faculty on campus.



In one case, at Arizona State University (ASU), they engaged in a [violent altercation](#) leaving a [faculty member bloodied](#). Students affiliated with TPUSA have also been known to record classes without the knowledge or consent of their faculty.

Guidelines for Responding to TPUSA on Campus

It is important to remember that the speakers TPUSA brings to campus are professional provocateurs, with large social media followings and well-integrated into the right-wing media ecosystem. Kirk, for example, is a thirty-year old who has built a career perfecting how to provoke college students. TPUSA specializes in creating viral moments and has demonstrated little interest in having good faith scholarly discussions about, say, feminism, migration, or trans rights. Speakers are often actively hostile to higher education, seeing universities as little more than bastions of liberal indoctrination to be conquered, as reflected in the title of Kirk's book, *Campus Battlefield*.

As such, when thinking about how to respond to TPUSA on your campus, remember that they have the infrastructure in place to shape the narrative around efforts to disrupt their events. This warning is not meant to dissuade students and faculty from protesting TPUSA on campus. Protest speech is, after all, also free speech. However, it is important to engage with TPUSA in a manner that does not fall into their well-funded trap.

Educating and organizing

Educating the campus about TPUSA is a good first step towards developing a campus response. Who is TPUSA? Who funds them? What are their political objectives? Hosting teach-ins and other events can lay the foundation for a successful campus response. The [AAUP has resources](#) about how to talk with colleagues and organize informational sessions.

It is also helpful to have existing organizing infrastructure in place—such as AAUP chapters, faculty unions, student government organizations, or cultural centers—which can help organize and message a successful campus response.

Counter-programing

Several campuses have responded to TPUSA events with counter programing that affirms campus diversity and LGBTQ+ rights. Doing so provides a counter-narrative to the rage, anger, and vitriol that underlies much of TPUSA's rhetoric. In contrast, directing ire at TPUSA might only serve to reproduce a narrative of antagonism. Rather, use their presence on campus as an opportunity to highlight and celebrate inclusive values. These events can happen in proximity to the TPUSA event, but not engage in disruption per se.



Publicly ignore, privately push back

When Proud Boy founder Gavin McInnes was first invited to Pennsylvania State by a TPUSA-like group, the event was protested and eventually canceled. When McInnes returned, he was largely ignored. Really good reporting of this event chronicles [just how pathetic](#) the event was. This reporting also includes extensive commentary about the political infrastructure and funding that made the event possible.

Successfully ignoring an event oftentimes also requires active organizing, including providing context for why students should not engage. On one campus, for example, organizers released PSA-style communications, which included examples of how students who attempted to respond to TPUSA provocations ended up in outrage videos resulting in targeted harassment. The PSA materials provided information about the impact of appearing in these videos.

Attend and be seen

TPUSA campus events are open to the public and anyone can register for tickets. At one Georgia campus, for example, protestors attended the event, wearing identifiable dress. They stood with their fists raised, [then walked out in mass](#). When TPUSA brought Kyle Rittenhouse—the killer of two people at a Black Lives Matter protest in Kenosha, WI—to the University of Memphis, students protested by asking pointed questions [causing him to flee the stage](#).

Upholding accountability

At ASU, the T.W. Lewis Center for Personal Development at the Barrett Honors College was funded by the T.W. Lewis Foundation, which gives money to several right-wing MAGA think tanks, including the Conservative Partnership Institute and the America First Policy Institute. The Lewis Center hosted an event which featured Charlie Kirk and Dennis Prager. Faculty petitioned the college [condemning the event](#). Rather than shutting the event down, however, faculty then successfully called for a vote of no confidence in the Center's director, who had organized the event. The director ended up being fired, and the [donor withdrew his money](#). At each point the faculty insisted that they were not canceling speech but rather holding those who planned the event accountable for their poor judgment in deciding that Kirk and Prager constituted programming suitable for a college campus.

Note on classroom recording

Consider including [language](#) in your [syllabi](#) making clear what permissions are needed to record classes or for sharing any course materials not intended to be public (slides, syllabi, discussion posts, etc.). It can be useful to lean into existing campus policies (such as honor codes), even if they are not designed explicitly to respond to these threats. Likewise, colleges and universities should consider developing clear [campus-wide policies](#), and explain the ways in which unwanted recording threatens to undermine the integrity of intellectual exchange within the classroom.



Acknowledgments

These resources were compiled based on a group discussion on May 1, 2024 with faculty members who have extensive experience with TPUSA chapters on their campus.

References

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