CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
President's Leadership Development Program

Administrative Responses to the 2024 Gaza War Campus Protests

Amadosi Ologunja

Leadership Action Project Executive Summary

Submitted to the President's Leadership Development Program
at Case Western Reserve University

Robert Solomon
Vice President, Office of Enrichment and Engagement
Mentor

Andrea M. Hauser, PhD
Executive Director, President's Leadership Development Program

Project Overview & The Social Issue

This project examines how university leaders responded to the Spring 2024 Gaza War campus protests, one of the largest waves of student activism in recent history. The central social issue addressed is how institutions of higher education balance student voice, free expression, and campus safety during moments of intense political conflict.

At the individual level, students were navigating identity, morality, and global awareness as the events occurred, sometimes without platforms to feel heard or seen. With the community, universities struggled with competing needs, particularly between groups who felt marginalized, unsafe, or ignored. From a broader perspective, universities operated under immense external pressure from Congress, donors, media, and public opinion, which played a role in decision-making across many campuses.

This combination created a situation where leadership decisions had both short and long-term consequences that affected protest outcomes, institutional trust, and credibility. Project Type & Approach

This was a research-based Leadership Action Project grounded in a qualitative comparative case study. The project analyzed six universities—Columbia, UCLA, Northwestern, Brown, Rutgers, and Vanderbilt—to understand how different leadership approaches influenced different outcomes. This project looked at different official university statements, media coverage, congressional testimony, and existing research on crisis leadership theory and negotiation.

The goal of this project was not to just state what happened with the campus protests, but to identify patterns. This project looked into what methods worked, what methods did not work, and why. With this framework, practical recommendations were developed for university leaders and how the lessons learned can be applied to similar scenarios in the future.

Deliverables & Impact

The primary deliverable was a full research paper and executive briefing presented to senior university leadership, notably Vice President of Student Affairs, Travis Apgar. The success of this project was measured through its real-world application. I was able to facilitate a meaningful, extended conversation with VP Apgar where we discussed my findings and explored how they connect to current CWRU policies and practices. In our conversation, we were able to discuss how the university can strengthen its approach to student activism through clearer policies, stronger relationships, and more proactive decision-making.

There is already evidence of impact from this project contributing towards positive social change. From my discussion and VP Apgar's insights, CWRU is actively working to refine its policies on freedom of expression, incorporate student input, and build stronger relationships across campus communities. My project contributed to that ongoing process by providing a research-based framework to help guide those improvements. The project supports positive social change by helping shape how institutions respond to student voices in a way that is more thoughtful, transparent, and effective.

Leadership Reflection

This project is deeply connected to a personal value of mine, impact, and how the belief that leadership should create meaningful change in the lives of others. I did not want this work to sit on paper. I wanted it to influence real conversation and real decisions, and I was able to see that happen. It also pushed me to think seriously about transparency. One of the biggest lessons from my leadership project is that trust is built when leaders are honest, clear, and willing to engage openly even in difficult moments. That idea shaped both my analysis and how I approached conversations with university leadership.

The four leadership assumptions from the program showed in practice throughout the many concepts in this project. The institutions that handled the protests best were the ones that communicated clearly and followed through on their commitments. Having credibility was the foundation those leaders set. Also, having relationships was quite important. Universities that had strong relationships with students before the crisis were able to de-escalate quickly. This directly connects to what I learned in my conversations with VP Apgar and how relationships at CWRU are a key area of growth and opportunity. Leadership is also non-positional. I am not a university administrator, but I was still able to contribute to institutional conversations and influence thinking. Leadership showed up through initiative, not title. The most effective leaders in my research made decisions grounded in their institutional values, not just external pressure. That reinforced my own belief that values like impact and transparency have to guide action, especially in difficult moments.