

IDHE REPORT

## A Dizzying Three Weeks of Teachable Moments

*How can educators seize the teachable moments of a new presidency?*

BY ADAM GISMONDI & NANCY THOMAS

The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education is dedicated to shifting institutional priorities, practices, and culture to increase student political learning, equity, and engagement in democracy. The Institute's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) is both a service to colleges and universities—providing more than 900 colleges and universities nationwide with tailored reports containing their students' voter registration and voting rates—and a database of 8.5 million student records, which is used for research on college student political learning and engagement. The Institute also conducts other research, including studies of institutions with unpredicted levels of political engagement. These reports stem from that research to bridge theory and practice.

IDHE is a part of Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, a national leader in civic education whose model and research are setting the standard for higher education's role in civic engagement.

**T**HE RAPID-FIRE SUCCESSION OF EXECUTIVE orders, public statements, policy proposals, nominations, and swift confirmation hearings in the first three weeks of the Trump administration have been dizzying for many, including educators. It is up for debate whether the “24-hour news cycle” style of major media outlets has sufficiently kept pace with these events and with the public, legal, and expert responses to them. How can faculty (who set syllabi months in advance) and administrators (who may be restrained by plans completed at the outset of the fiscal year) seize these teachable moments in ways that are timely, accurate, and fair?

Even in times of more moderately paced public events, academics may have avoided controversial political discussions, citing a lack of relevance to the discipline or the assignment of the day, insecurities over knowing enough to present informed and diverse perspectives, and even fear of being accused of bias. While understandable, these barriers do a disservice to the mission of higher education and the students we serve. Now is the time to speak out about issues in this national moment. Their relevance to student learning is clear, from foundational civic knowledge, to critical thinking, to media literacy, to applied subject matter across disciplines.

As tempting as it may be to relegate political learning opportunities to the-usual-suspect disciplines (political science and social sciences more broadly, history and the humanities more broadly, law and pre-law, and journalism), faculty members of other disciplines (particularly the sciences, math, engineering,

technology, the health professions) can also discuss these issues, even on short notice.

Below are sample framings for a few issues that developed over the past several weeks, with some possible readings, sources, and discussion questions. Think of these as starting points for purposeful, educational classroom and co-curricular discussions.

### “ALTERNATIVE FACTS”

**I**N HIS FIRST PRESS BRIEFING, Press Secretary Sean Spicer [declared the crowd at January’s inauguration the largest in recent history](#) and challenged photographic evidence to the contrary. Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway subsequently [backed that claim as supported by “alternative facts.”](#) Several days later, President Trump insisted that [more than three million illegal votes](#) were cast in the 2016 election; despite a lack of evidence, [he called for an investigation](#). Questions to consider:

- How do students, and all Americans, separate fact from fiction, fiction from opinion, and opinion from politically motivated distortions?
- Where can students find reliable sources of information?
- What role does (and should) higher education play in fact-checking and in the educational processes around media literacy?
- Will media literacy work in today’s cultural context (see, for example, [questions raised by danah boyd](#))?

### THE ROLE OF FREE PRESS

**R**ECENT DECLARATIONS OF THE MEDIA as the “opposition party” by both [chief strategist Steve Bannon](#) and [President Trump himself](#), along with various [other conflicts between the administration and journalists](#), raise a number of questions for educators:

- Is the press politically biased against the Trump administration?
- What is the role of professional media outlets in a democracy?
- Is there ever a time when the press should not have the right to know or report on government meetings, decision-making processes, or decisions?
- What are the legal and political implications of an administration and press in conflict with one another?
- At times in American history, free press has been challenged. When, why, and to what end?
- What are the daily conditions for citizens in countries that lack fair and free press?
- Media blackouts (some temporary) were issued [at the Environmental Protection Agency](#), the [National Parks Service](#), and the [USDA](#). On the White House website, information on topics including [climate change](#) and [LGBT rights](#), along with [the Spanish language version of the site](#), were also removed during the first week. Are these significant signals of policy positions or simply the right of every incoming administration?

“WHERE CAN STUDENTS FIND RELIABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION?”

## EXECUTIVE ORDER BARRING TRAVEL FROM MUSLIM-MAJORITY NATIONS

**S**HORTLY BEFORE 5 PM ON Friday, January 28, President Trump issued an [executive order barring people](#) (excluding American citizens) traveling from seven predominantly Muslim countries admission to the U.S. for 90 days. Refugees were barred for admission for 120 days, and Syrian refugees, indefinitely. After the waiting period, [Christians would be given priority admission](#) under this order. President Trump argues that the order [“is about terror and keeping our country safe,” not religion](#). Legal battles continue, but the [courts have at this moment halted the new policy](#).

- Is religious freedom relevant to this executive order?
- Do non-citizens have rights (constitutional, legal, or moral) under US law?
- What does the First Amendment say about religious freedom in the U.S.?
- Can ethnic profiling be justified by concerns over public safety?
- What is the evidence that Muslim immigrants and visitors present a threat to the American people?
- How will this ban affect academic institutions, which educate and employ many foreign nationals?

## THE WALL ALONG THE MEXICAN BORDER

**O**N JANUARY 25, 2017, PRESIDENT Trump [issued an executive order](#) instructing departments and agencies to “deploy all lawful means” to secure the Mexican border by constructing a [physical, “contiguous and unpassable” wall](#) to prevent unlawful border crossings. Funding for the wall is up in the air, but proposals include [deflecting funding from other projects](#), getting Mexico to pay for it, which Mexican President [Enrique Peña Nieto says will never happen](#), and an import tax. The tax has raised further questions, [with some noting](#) that even if the U.S. could place a tax on Mexican imports to cover the cost of the wall, those costs would simply be passed back to American consumers of Mexican products. At this time, it is difficult to determine how much the wall will cost but [estimates range from \\$5 to \\$25 billion](#). Engineers say the cost will depend on the wall’s length, height, and materials used. Also, the government does not own all of the land along the border, raising questions about permissions and government seizure of land through eminent domain.

- Who controls Congressional budget expenditures, and how much influence do everyday citizens have on \$5 billion to \$25 billion allocations?
- How might the wall affect the cost of Mexican products and, eventually, the price tag for American consumers? Who is most likely to be affected?
- What are the engineering options for the wall? How effective will the wall be in preventing unlawful entry into the U.S.?

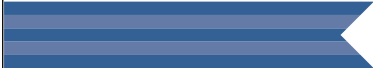
There are many other issues we could have selected: proposals for a large fiscal stimulus bill targeted at [rebuilding infrastructure](#); [efforts to bring jobs to the US](#); promises to [increase defense spending](#); the [rollback of the Affordable Care Act](#), the declaration of Inauguration Day a [“National Day of Patriotic Devotion”](#); the [hiring of son-in-law Jared Kushner as an advisor](#), the [management of President Trump’s financial holdings](#), and

“WHAT DOES THE FIRST AMENDMENT SAY ABOUT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE U.S.?”

other concerns over nepotism and conflict of interest; an order [withdrawing the U.S. from an Asia-Pacific trade deal](#); [overturning the ban](#) on constructing the North Dakota pipeline; the implications of [federal employees resisting action](#); and the [nomination of Neil Gorsuch to the U.S. Supreme Court](#). We could also have reviewed public reaction to many of President Trump's actions, with questions about the effectiveness of protest movements and other forms of citizen action. And one that we're watching is the evolving story about the use of [personal information to target media messaging to voters](#).

We can imagine academics responding to this with concerns about their expertise on each issue and their fear of discussing things outside of the syllabus. We think that stance does a disservice to students and overlooks an important feature of postsecondary learning. The role of faculty members is not to treat students as empty vessels into which to pour expert knowledge. Students come to college and courses with knowledge, life experiences, and wisdom that, when shared in a learning community, can be enriching for faculty and students alike. Yes, professors need to ensure that "alternative facts" do not shape student learning, but they can share with students the responsibility for co-creating, through identifying inaccurate, politically motivated, or unethical statements. This is, after all, the meaning of college – sharing responsibility, among colleagues, for learning.

Above all else, we must remember that the cultivation of student cognitive development is a vital part of our responsibilities, and the shifting political landscape presents an undeniably rich series of learning opportunities. There are no safe enclaves in which to avoid politics, because civic and political actions affect us all.



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