The candidate’s name, scrawled on sidewalks, has left some students feeling threatened. Colleges are now grappling with how to respond to such concerns.

When messages of support for the Republican presidential front-runner Donald J. Trump appeared in chalk at Emory University, the University of Michigan, and other institutions late last month, many observers -- perhaps most -- saw a political endorsement and thought nothing of it. But a handful of students say they saw intimidation.

In their view, Mr. Trump's name has become synonymous with attacks on Muslims, Latin Americans, African-Americans, and other minority groups. They contend that the “Trump 2016” and “Vote Trump” messages -- which, on at least two campuses, appeared alongside phrases like "Stop Islam" and "Build the Wall" -- represent intolerant views that have no place on campuses that seek to promote inclusion and respect.

So some of those students demanded that administrators take action -- in Emory's case, they wanted whoever wrote them to face punishment. By doing so, they have forced colleges to reckon with the significance of the “Trump” name and weigh how, exactly, to respond to concerns over the name's resonance on campuses.

Debate over the chalkings has sparked a widespread backlash at the student protesters, much of it from right-leaning commentators. Critics see the students' reaction as yet another example of rampant oversensitivity on campuses and say that their calls for administrators to decry the messages amount to censorship.

A Twitter hashtag, #TheChalkening, has emerged as a way of encouraging students and others to chalk their own slogans supporting Mr. Trump on campuses and to share photos of their work, a sort of protest against the protesters. The University of Missouri and the University of Alabama are among at least a dozen institutions where Trump messages have appeared since last weekend.

Few would dispute that Mr. Trump is an unusual candidate whose campaign has, in many ways, turned the election upside down. But is a "Vote Trump" message on the sidewalk somehow different from "Feel the Bern" or "Vote Cruz"? If Mr. Trump wins the nomination, how might colleges handle pro-Trump campaigning on their campuses during the rest of the year?

If Mr. Trump's campaign persists through the fall, millions of people will have "Trump 2016" bumper stickers and lawn signs displayed prominently, says Gregory P. Magarian, a law professor at Washington University in St. Louis and a First Amendment scholar. "If we decide that 'Trump' is equal to hate speech, we run into a problem in determining what that means," he says.

On the other hand, he says, "there's certainly a context in which Trumpism takes the form of an aggressive attack on certain people."

Questions of Intent
At Emory a series of pro-Trump messages -- some say it was at least a few dozen -- appeared overnight last month, prompting about 40 students to stage a protest the following day. Eventually the students marched into the building where the office of Emory's president, James W. Wagner, is located and implored him to condemn the messages.

Within a few days, similar chalked messages appeared at Michigan, the University of Kansas, and a handful of other colleges.

Writing Mr. Trump's name on a sidewalk is unquestionably protected speech, says Ajay Nair, senior vice president and dean of campus life at Emory. He thinks most students there agree. The chalking spectacle, though, "is more nuanced and complicated than that," he says.
Given Mr. Trump's record of inflammatory comments involving racial, ethnic, and religious communities, Mr. Nair says, it's not surprising that some students have strong feelings about the messages. "They're using their free speech to speak out on what Trump symbolizes to them," he says.

Some aren't as understanding of the protesters' perspective. Harvey E. Klehr, a professor of politics and history at Emory, says a Trump presidency would be a disaster. However, chalking his name is not an act of aggression, nor does doing so target specific students, Mr. Klehr says.

"What do students propose for the next few months?" he asks. "That we don't say 'Trump' on campuses lest students become traumatized?"

In Mr. Klehr's view, administrators have been too deferential to the students protesting the messages. "What they should've said was, I understand that you're unhappy and angry and maybe even afraid of Trump, but you need to grow up," Mr. Klehr says. "You have the right to protest Donald Trump, but don't ask the university to shut down other students' speech."

But Mr. Nair takes issue with the claim that the students are promoting censorship. "In my conversations with students, not once did they say, This all needs to be erased," he says.

Instead, he says, their goal was to unpack the meaning of the chalked messages. "It was a very different kind of chalking than we've ever seen on campus," he says. "Some students wondered, Is this a threat?"

At the University of Florida, "Trump" was written last weekend on the doors into the building that houses the university's program in African-American studies. By Monday morning, the graffiti was gone, but Ibram X. Kendi, an assistant professor of African-American history at the university, says he thinks Florida officials should investigate the act, given where the name appeared.

"The Trump political brand has more or less become a symbol for bigotry in America," Mr. Kendi says, though he acknowledges that "on some level, it's just a name. I don't necessarily think the proliferation of his name in chalk creates a scenario where campuses aren't inclusive."

Another issue that has surfaced is the intent of the people writing the messages. From a free-speech perspective, it's still considered protected expression unless the message is a direct threat or aims to incite violence, says Timothy Zick, a professor at William and Mary Law School and a First Amendment scholar.

"I don't know that 'Trump' yet rises to the level of a swastika or a burning cross," he says.

Polarizing Issues
Responding to such incidents puts administrators in a tough spot, Mr. Zick says: They must balance the protection of free expression with at least some sensitivity to students' concerns.

The presidents of Emory and the University of Michigan have issued statements about the chalkings on their campuses. "After meeting with our students, I cannot dismiss their expression of feelings and concern as motivated only by political preference or oversensitivity," Mr. Wagner, of Emory, wrote in an email to the campus. "Instead, the students with whom I spoke heard a message, not about political process or candidate choice, but instead about values regarding diversity and respect that clash with Emory's own."

He also chalked his own message, writing "Emory stands for free expression!"

Mr. Wagner also told the protesters that officials would try to identify those who wrote the messages and that, if they were students, they would face the university's conduct-violation process, according to The Emory Wheel.

Morgan R. Ackley, an Emory student and member of the university's College Republicans, says proposing disciplinary action seems overly harsh. "If you look at what was in chalk, it was just 'Trump 2016,'" she says. "This was just someone expressing their political ideologies."
Mr. Nair, the dean of campus life, has met with some students who protested the messages, and a larger gathering involving students and faculty and staff members is planned for next week.

The logical next step for the Emory community is to try to make sense of the polarizing issues surrounding the messages, Mr. Nair says. "Right when it happens isn't the time to have dialogue," he adds. "People need to vent; they need to be angry." One way he hopes students and faculty members will grapple with the meaning of Mr. Trump's candidacy is through the university's Barkley Forum Center for Debate Education, where participants might debate the real-estate mogul's policy proposals.

Mr. Klehr isn't optimistic that colleges can foster a civil discussion about Mr. Trump. Say a college tried to have a debate about immigration in the context of the presidential election, he says. One side might call for a path to citizenship, a position supported by both Democratic candidates, and the other might argue for one of Mr. Trump's signature plans: the deportation of all immigrants who are in the country illegally. "My guess is that at many campuses, supporters of the latter position would be shouted down," he says.

But Mr. Kendi says it's critical for administrators to "get out ahead of this issue" now and create spaces for students and others to discuss Mr. Trump -- before further rifts grow. "They need to keep the conversation within the realm of intellectual debate," he says, "as opposed to defacing buildings and, potentially, violence."

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