Amid increased student activism, college officials have been forced to grapple with whether -- and for what reasons -- they should cancel contentious speeches.

About one year, almost to the day, after Christina H. Paxson was inaugurated as the 19th president of Brown University, the institution became the latest site in a string of battles on campuses nationwide that boiled down to two questions: Should a college disinvite a controversial speaker, and if so, when?

At Brown in the fall of 2013, the speaker was the commissioner of the New York Police Department, Raymond W. Kelly, who oversaw its controversial "stop and frisk" policy, which was widely viewed as racial profiling. Students pushed for Mr. Kelly to be disinvited, but when the university and its relatively new leader refused to do so, shouting protesters disrupted the event, to the point it had to be canceled.

Now, more than two years later, Ms. Paxson stands by the decision to not cancel Mr. Kelly's lecture beforehand. Out of the headline-making incident, she says, came a campuswide teaching moment.

"These controversial talks can really move students forward in how they think about issues," Ms. Paxson says. "You can't really learn and grow if you can't hear things you don't agree with."

But campus climates have changed. Colleges nowadays are seeing increased student activism, while also being pressured to respect the importance of free speech in higher education. At the intersection of those forces is the controversial speaker.

A Failed Cancellation
There are few more controversial speakers in the United States today than Donald J. Trump, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, who planned to speak at a rally last Friday night at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Mr. Trump had not been invited to speak on the campus; rather, his campaign had rented out the UIC Pavilion, a large arena at the university.

But the prospect that Mr. Trump, whose campaign has featured rhetoric attacking immigrants, Muslims, and other minority groups, would speak at Illinois-Chicago drew sharp criticism across the diverse campus, which has large black and Latino enrollments. University officials allowed the rally to proceed, but protesters showed up in large numbers and clashes between them and Trump supporters led the Trump organization to cancel the event before the candidate could speak.

Since university officials were not involved in canceling the rally, they have not been criticized for violating Mr. Trump's First Amendment right to free speech. But last month alone, a couple of speaker controversies on campuses from southern California to northern Massachusetts ignited a backlash. When such controversies bubble up, they can trigger tough choices for administrators that are likely to result in close scrutiny, regardless of their decision.

"You can't really learn and grow if you can't hear things you don't agree with." No leader has had to grapple with the issue more prominently than the president of California State University at Los Angeles, William A. Covino. The campus grabbed nationwide attention late last month, when Mr. Covino announced, after pushback from people on the campus, that the conservative commentator Ben Shapiro would not be allowed to speak at an event organized by the university's Young America's Foundation chapter, a conservative student group.
Mr. Covino proposed that Mr. Shapiro, who is on a speaking tour, postpone his appearance and return to the
campus at a later date as part of a diverse panel of speakers. In the heated back and forth, Mr. Shapiro vowed
repeatedly to show up, with or without university approval, and eventually Mr. Covino conceded, stating just hours
before the planned speech that "if Mr. Shapiro does appear, the university will allow him to speak." The speech
went ahead as planned.

But the divide between Shapiro supporters inside a campus auditorium and protesters out front wasn't the end for
Mr. Covino. Earlier this month the student government called for his resignation, citing "mismanagement and
safety concerns" tied to the Shapiro episode, according to the campus newspaper.

Mr. Covino's initial decision to cancel Mr. Shapiro's appearance "was made in the interest of safety and security," he said in a written statement, which cited "a number of emails and social-media posts that caused concern for the campus community" as his reason for disinviting the speaker.

'The Best Interest' of Students
Safety concerns are among the most prominent reasons campus leaders rescind speaker invitations. But the
rationale can be more complicated.

Just days before Mr. Covino's original announcement, the president of Williams College, Adam F. Falk, banned
the conservative writer John Derbyshire from speaking on the institution's campus, in Williamstown, Mass.

In a written statement explaining his decision to cancel the event, Mr. Falk said many of Mr. Derbyshire's views
"constitute hate speech, and we will not promote such speech on this campus."

"We have said we wouldn't cancel speakers or prevent the expression of views except in the most extreme
circumstances," the statement reads. "At times it's our role as educators and administrators to step in and make
decisions that are in the best interest of our students. This is one of those times."

"We try very hard to maintain a posture that says we are content-neutral." In his tenure at the University of
California at Irvine, Thomas A. Parham has found himself in the same position as Mr. Covino and Mr. Falk. As
vice chancellor for student affairs, Mr. Parham says it is part of his job to contribute to co-curricular aspects of the
student experience, which includes public lectures.

"There is rarely a speaker that you can find that everyone is going to agree with," he says. "What we try to do,
however, is make people really aware that our goal in the administration is in fact to promote the free exchange of
ideas, and we try very hard to maintain a posture that says we are content-neutral. We aren't into screening or
censoring speech; we're into promoting free speech."

The Irvine campus made headlines in 2010, when a group of students disrupted a speech by the Israeli
ambassador at the time, Michael Oren. They were later ordered to perform community service and serve
probation for their roles in the incident.

Mr. Parham says it's important for administrators to not turn a blind eye to any group and to engage with students
who may be upset about a speaker's presence.

'Part of Learning'
Stops remain on Mr. Shapiro's speaking tour, in which he intends to "invade safe spaces" and organizers say the
events will go on as planned. At the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he is scheduled to speak in early
April, university officials say they are aware Mr. Shapiro has been invited but they feel strongly about following a
policy that states, "expression of diverse points of view is of the highest importance."

Grant Strobl, chair of the campus's chapter of the Young America's Foundation, praised the university's recent
support for a variety of speakers, but said Mr. Shapiro would speak "no matter what."
Margaret Dunning, managing partner at Widmeyer Communications, said that, should a situation arise when campus leaders have a legitimate reason to cancel an event, it is important that they communicate with the students who organized it before announcing their decision.

If cancellation is warranted, "then the organization should be brought into the process before it is announced -- engage students about your decision," she said.

Ms. Dunning said she worries about the ripple effects of what she describes as a recent rise in the number of campus speakers seen by students as controversial.

"What if advocates for women's right to vote weren't allowed on campus?" she said. "What if antislavery spokespeople weren't allowed to go around and speak? This is a part of learning."