When a college or university hosts a debate or a presidential speech, that brief but shining spotlight can bring numerous benefits—and a few challenges.
On the evening of June 17, 2015, a young white man with a handgun and hate in heart joined a prayer meeting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. He murdered nine black church members, including the church’s senior pastor Clementa C. Pinckney, who was also a state senator.

The College of Charleston, two blocks from Mother Emanuel, as the church is known, hosted a community reconciliation event the week after the shooting. The city’s municipal auditorium is in the middle of a two-year renovation, so city officials asked to use college’s TD Arena.

During the community event, Paul Patrick, vice president for administration and planning at the College of Charleston, was asked if the college could also host Sen. Pinckney’s funeral, which was sure to be well-attended.

“We were very happy and honored to do it,” Patrick says. However, there was some initial debate. “What happened at Mother Emanuel was so tragic and unthinkable that there was some thought by some at first about how close did the college want to get to that narrative? But then we decided that this campus should be a place of reconciliation. We could be that space of reconciliation and rationality for what was an irrational act.”

When the campus agreed to host the funeral, no one yet knew that the president, along with the first lady, vice president, speaker of the house, and a host of other national and state VIPs, would be attending. However, unlike other presidential events, the White House advance team, or any other advance team, would not be running this show. Church officials stepped in quickly to let everyone know that this funeral would be organized by the Pickney family and the church.

Patrick notes that the president coming to the college for Sen. Pickney’s funeral was different than if he had come for any other reason. “Had it been a policy speech or a debate, my gut was that by sheer numbers there would be people opposed because of ideological standing on the policy, whatever it was,” he says. “There would be anxiety to host that event. We didn’t have any of that because it was a community service to host the funeral, which the president attended.”

That funeral produced a special moment. “The president singing Amazing Grace will be remembered for a long time as a part of his legacy to connect with folks who are grieving, which has happened all too much during his presidency.”

On October 4, U.S. Senator Tim Kaine from Virginia and Governor Mike Pence from Indiana will square off in the one and only vice presidential debate of the 2016 elections, which will be held at Longwood University in Farmville, Virginia.

This will mark Longwood’s first time hosting a national election debate, and the institution did not make this decision lightly. In fact, colleges and universities interested in being debate hosts must complete a rather arduous application.

“Once we started to dig into the application and talk about what was required, it really started to become clear that Longwood fit into this really well—from our mission to where our school is located to the way our campus is physically situated—it all seemed to fall into place,” says Matthew McWilliams, director of communications and media relations at Longwood.

The application process is thorough because hosting a debate is a big undertaking: security is intense and logistics are planned to the nth detail. But even just a one-hour presidential visit to a college campus requires an intense level of planning and coordination.

The extra work is worth it, say college and university hosts of debates and presidential speeches. Such events offer a unique opportunity to publicize the institution regionally, nationally and even internationally, and the event becomes an important piece of the institution’s history.

Taking Advantage of the Attention

Hosting a debate or a presidential visit creates a spotlight that is brief but bright. Institutions are wise to take advantage of it in as many ways as they can—for the benefit of their students, reputations and communities.

Unique Experiences for Students

A presidential debate provides host institutions great opportunities to give students real-world experience and related education. Longwood University is taking full advantage by offering students volunteer roles in the debate that match their field of study.

“If you’re a communications major, you might be put with CNN as someone who helps with their production,” McWilliams says. “If you are a statistics major, I can hook you up with Twitter and have you crunching real-time data. A history major might be giving tours of some Civil Rights or Civil War locations [on campus]. They are coming out of this not only with a cool story to tell but with some real, practical knowledge that they can put on a resume.”
The university is also offering 31 classes next fall that have either been created or reworked to incorporate the debate, including courses on conceptual physics, book binding and applied game theory.

**Expanding Brand Recognition**

When applying to be a presidential debate host site, representatives from Longwood spoke to people at two other Virginia institutions that hosted past debates—the College of William and Mary, which hosted a presidential debate in 1976, and the University of Richmond, which hosted one in 1992.

“Of the things they said, and what we recognized, is that moment for each of those schools was a launch point to a bigger place in national attention,” McWilliams says. “They really did a good job of using those events as a springboard to increase national prominence.”

During the hard-fought 2008 Democratic presidential primary, Cleveland State University (Ohio) was chosen as the site of a debate between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. At that time, the university was in the midst of transforming itself from a commuter school to more of a regional powerhouse, partnering with nationally renowned entities in their own backyard, such as the Cleveland Orchestra and the Cleveland Clinic, to develop university programs.

“Those [partnerships] are the kinds of things that have really elevated our reputation,” says Robert Spademan, associate vice president of university marketing at Cleveland State, “and this [debate] was a way of, eight years ago, putting the spotlight on us and having people go, ‘Whoa, this is different than I’d been thinking.’” The positive publicity the university received from this debate in the local press helped showcase this strategic shift.

In January 2016, the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) got a call that President Obama wanted to give a speech on campus. “We do not have a marketing budget that would ever give us exposure in the *Washington Post* or *Forbes* magazine,” says Erin Fogarty Owen, executive director of the UNO Office of University Communications. “So we really have to take advantage of these national opportunities to make sure that the press corps knows where these very famous people are.”

Owen knew that the press corps had a habit of forgetting the “at Omaha” part of the university’s name. Without it, the president would seem to be visiting the flagship in Lincoln. Every chance she had, she reminded the White House advance team, the press and anyone else who needed to know about the full name of the university and that the university’s mascot is the Mavericks, not the Cornhuskers. “We knew that without that relentless clarification we would miss an opportunity to let people know that our university is out there,” she says.

Her persistence paid off. “Obama came out and the crowd went wild,” Owen recounts. “Then it quieted down, and he leaned into the microphone and said, ‘Go Mavericks!’ And my job at that point was done.”

**Giving a Megaphone to Campus Success**

In the summer of 2013, University of Central Missouri (UCM) fielded a call from the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. They had heard about the Missouri Innovation Campus (MIC), a collaboration between a local K-12 school district, Metropolitan Community College and UCM. MIC students can earn a bachelor’s degree two years after high school with little to no student debt while gaining applied experience through paid internships. Eventually, the White House let UCM President Chuck Ambrose know that President Obama would visit the campus in July to tout the program.

“We were quite persistent with both his advance team and his policy team about the message [of MIC]—college access, affordability, and the value of a college degree for the future of the economy,” Ambrose says. “Not only did they appreciate it, they were all our partners. They were coming for a sort of shared purpose. You really felt like you had entered into a full partnership.”

The presidential visit gave credence to what the university was accomplishing with MIC. “President Obama actually wanted to tell our story, and he knocked it out of the park,” Ambrose says.

The visit resulted in an increase in enrollment, with a particularly large bump in international students. “[International students] believe that when the president of the United States says something is important, then it is,” Ambrose says. The president’s endorsement of MIC also helped further engage internal constituencies.

In addition, the president’s visit to UCM was a special moment for community members in Warrensburg. “There were people in our community that in their lifetime never thought they would see the first African-American president,” Ambrose says. “It was something that you knew that you were providing to your own community that was well beyond that once-in-a-lifetime experience.”
Mitigating the Challenges

While most campus officials will say that a presidential visit is worth the extra effort, that doesn't mean there aren't some challenges that will need to be dealt with.

Over the last eight years, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse has hosted a number of national political luminaries, including Bill Clinton, Chelsea Clinton, Michelle Obama and Joe Biden. In July 2015, UW-La Crosse Chancellor Joe Gow got the call that President Obama was also going to give a speech on campus.

“The challenge is that you are going to have some disappointed people in the community who won’t be able to get tickets,” Gow says. “Fortunately, the ticket distribution is handled by the White House. I had to tell them that there was nothing I could do.”

Spademan also says that who got tickets and who got to sit where during the primary debate caused some strife. But, in the end, it works itself out and the show goes on.

Also, with any politician or candidate, there will be some who love that person and others who don’t. When President Obama spoke at UCM, it was hot July day, and the people in the designated demonstration/free-speech zone were battling the heat. UCM staff delivered cold water to them, and “After the event, we had a campus-wide cookout, and we invited the protesters,” Ambrose says. Many of them came. “The critical component is to provide hospitality and invitation to everybody. Our campus is a marketplace of ideas, and the president was expressing some ideas that we really valued.”

Gow notes that while state Republicans, such as Governor Scott Walker and U.S. Senator Ron Johnson, have visited the campus, Republican presidential candidates haven’t asked to stop by. “People say to me, ‘Why do you only invite the Democrats?’ I have to remind them that we don’t invite them. We’re an open campus and anyone can come.”

And, finally, hosting a debate or presidential event necessitates the pinnacle of security precautions, and that can cause some disruption to campus schedules. When the White House advance team came to UNO, they had the event space on lockdown for a couple days before the president’s speech. However, UNO staff were able to negotiate its use for a hockey team practice.

Owen, and others, say that hosting a presidential event will inevitably be an all-consuming experience, but the end result is worth it. “College campuses are for debate, dialogue, talking about hard issues and asking hard questions,” Owen says. “We loved that the president came to this campus to have a national conversation about the future of this country. We need more conversations like that on college campuses.”

Longwood chose to be a debate host site because it’s mission is to create citizen leaders, people who can recognize problems in their communities and work proactively to try to fix them.

“I think it’s notable that even in a divisive political climate like we have now that these debates start with a handshake,” McWilliams says. “It’s a moment of civility, it’s a moment that symbolizes the end to personal and petty and nasty attacks and a move to a more substantive discussion of issues. That’s really what we try to create here at Longwood.”

Gayle Bennett is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.