

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS FOR CAMPUS PROTESTS



Students on college campuses, including law schools, may face specific challenges and responses to on-site protests and demonstrations. This guide provides an overview of what to expect when protesting on a university campus, including assessing levels of risk, digital security considerations, and possible responses from administration, outside organizations, and campus security or local police.

This information is meant to be a general overview. For more specific information related to your campus, please review the school's policies on demonstrations. These may be called event policies, speech policies, demonstration policies, or use of space policies depending on your school. Additionally, review any local or state ordinances related to demonstrations that could be applicable to your campus protest.

Common Examples of Campus Protests

The types of protests that take place on universities and college campuses vary depending on the local context and interests of students and student organizations. Some examples of common reasons for First Amendment demonstrations include:

- Protesting speakers invited to campus based on their previous comments or controversial positions
- Labor campaigns taking place at undergraduate, graduate, or law school campuses (e.g. faculty adjuncts, food, or workers strikes)
- Campaigns to change problematic school names
- Protesting faculty members engaging in hate speech
- Protesting a backlash to student organizing efforts

Tactics and Levels of Risk

There are several ways to protest on campus. The type of demonstration will depend on the goals of the organizers, the risk per tactic, and specific institutional context. Here are examples of actions that students have taken at their universities, campuses, and law schools. Please note that the “level of risk” depends on the type of action, and on the tolerance and agenda of your institution’s administration.

Low to Medium Risk Actions

- Paper Campaigns: Writing a letter/statement/petition to send to the administration expressing discontent with an issue or asking for an event to be canceled
- Flyering: Putting posters around the school and outside describing the issue and providing context and information
- Driving Campus/Public Opinion: Writing op-eds for school and local media, and using social media and other platforms to get the word out
- Counter Turn-out: Organizing a counter-event to discuss a speaker's record, occurring before, during, or after the scheduled visit
- Ghost Guests: Organizing a large group of people to RSVP for events and then not attend to leave the room empty
- Solidarity Actions: Joining workers or faculty on the picket line

Higher Risk Actions

- Setting up a table directly outside an event to share materials about the speaker/group/content
- Sending people to an event with lists of pointed questions to ask during Q & A to challenge the speaker or draw attention to their record
- Finding people to occupy as many seats as possible, then all walk out together silently (or hold signs)
- Holding a sit in before event occurs to protest it happening
- Vocally disrupting and/or holding up signs during the event
- Planning a counter-event with intent to disrupt (e.g dance party with music outside the room)
- Occupying a space on campus or administrative building
- Setting up an encampment on campus grounds
- Organizing a picket line on campus for students/professors/workers

Response from Campus Security or Police

You know your school administration best, and will have to assess how likely it is that your school's administration would call campus security, campus police, and/or local police during a protest or demonstration. Remember that your administration is beholden to interests you may not share, and it is always best to be prepared. For police encounters, please review the [NLG's Know Your Rights for Protesters](#), especially if the protest will include people who are minors, BIPOC, queer and trans, disabled, people without US citizenship, and those with criminal records.

Response from Administration

School administrations vary in their level of support for First Amendment-protected activities on campus. Some may be more flexible in their policies and standard practices, while others will attempt to quell protests and punish protesters in order to avoid disruption or attract unwelcome outside attention.

Protesters on law school campuses have experienced some of the following negative responses from their school administration including but not limited to:

- Threats by administration before, during, or after demonstrations
- Targeting a small group of student “organizers” for disciplinary action
- Threatening negative character and fitness reviews
- Threatening to rescind scholarships
- Not allowing students to walk at graduation
- Not excusing student from class for supporting strikes
- Removing fliers or other materials posted on campus
- Campus-wide emails skewing events to blame student activists
- Administration posting op-eds in the media to defend school reputation
- Banning students from campus for an off-campus arrest
- Calling campus or local police (see section above)

Response from Outside: Media and Organizations

Students protesting on campuses should be aware that their actions may be noticed and opposed by groups outside the university as well. When student demonstrations touch on a controversial or national conversation topic, some activists have experienced harassment from media outlets as well as local, regional, or national organizations. This can be particularly frightening for students, especially when there are threats of doxxing or physical harm. Some examples of outside harassment include:

- [Doxxing of activists](#) (sharing their names or addresses publicly)
- Social media harassment
- Attacks in the media
- Groups/individuals showing up on campus to harass or even attack students

If your work is targeting a university Board of Trustees, or similar position, consider looking at the background of individual stakeholders. Are there financial interests for you to be aware of? Lawsuits are a rising tactic corporations are using to target protected-speech. When you call attention to, for example, campus fossil fuel investments, might you be incurring the wrath of companies with interest in your campus? In other words, consider possible civil penalties and impact for your activism, in addition to criminal and administrative consequences.

Digital and Personal Security

It is important to remember that you may not have the same rights to privacy while you are on campus that you enjoy off-campus. This may differ at private vs. public institutions; private colleges/universities have broader authority to crack down on speech activities. Digital and personal security precautions can help ensure protesters are prepared. Some considerations to discuss before an action or campaign:

- Remember that all institutional email accounts may be monitored by administration
- Wifi networks and school-issued laptops may not be secure or private
- School lockers and dorm rooms may be searched at the discretion of the administration
- Cars parked on campus property may be searched with less than probable cause
- Overall, anywhere on the campus may not be secure!

Best Practices

- Connect with undergrads, grad students, and local organizations for extra support.
- Identify supportive faculty and administrators immediately. You may need their influence/assistance.
- Take steps to educate yourself about security culture and how to stay as safe as possible (e.g. use laptops or phones not connected to campus wifi).
- Consider organizing events and actions off campus, if you are concerned you or your group are being monitored.
- Document all responses from administration before, during, and after any demonstration.
- If some organizers are singled out for discipline, organize students, faculty, and outside groups to support them!
- Connect with legal support before the action, so you have someone lined up to support you if need be. Research your local jail's booking process so you know how to support your comrades if anyone is arrested. You can reach out to a local movement legal support network, including the National Lawyers Guild, for support.
- Frequently you will want to collect legal names and dates of birth of anyone risking arrest before the action, do not keep this information on you while attending the action in case of your arrest.
- Provide mental health resources for organizers and participants of protests. Make space for folks to gather and process the action and any negative responses or pressure from administration or outside sources.

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