

Free Speech and Student Activism in Higher Education Institutions

In 2024, the world saw the rise of student protests on college campuses across the United States. These demonstrations rekindled the conversation surrounding free speech, institutional values, and open dialogue.¹ The emergence of these protests, including campus occupations, adds to a long history of student activism in the United States.

Students have historically been at the forefront of ushering in change on topics including civil rights, war, and the environment. Among the first well-documented protests was the Fisk University Student Strike in the 1920s, where students demonstrated against the authoritarian policies of the school's president, Fayette Avery McKenzie, who called for students to step back from protesting Jim Crow laws.² A notable catalyst for student activism was the movement against the Vietnam war, which included the infamous Kent State massacre, where members of the Ohio National Guard shot students protesting the expansion of the war into Cambodia.³ The largest student protest in the U.S. happened in response to this event, with 4 million students participating in demonstrations across the nation which significantly influenced President Nixon's decision to withdraw troops from Cambodia.⁴ In 1985, Columbia University became the center for South African Apartheid divestment activism.⁵ Students occupied Hamilton Hall in the thousands, asking administrators to divest funds from South African Apartheid corporations, and their demands were ultimately met.⁶

With recent governmental actions towards pro-Palestinian protestors, including the detention of Columbia student Mahmoud Khalil by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, free speech and academic freedom appear under threat.⁷ The American Civil

¹ Perry, Nick, Jake Offenhartz, and Jocelyn Gecker. "US Colleges Revise Rules on Free Speech in Hopes of Containing Anti-War Demonstrations." AP News, August 15, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/campus-protests-gaza-israel-hamas-war-columbia-b2321b9626e4a824f47cfce6b680e6d9?utm_source=copy&utm_medium=share.

² Lester C. Lamon, "The Black Community in Nashville and the Fisk University Student Strike of 1924-1925." *The Journal of Southern History* 40, no. 2 (1974): 225-44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2206893>.

³ Kenneth J. Heineman, *Campus Wars: The Peace Movement At American State Universities in the Vietnam Era* (NYU Press, 1994)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kelly Schoolmeester, "Columbia University students win divestment from apartheid South Africa, United States, 1985," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, Feb. 7, 2010, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/columbia-university-students-win-divestment-apartheid-south-africa-united-states-1985>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Philip Marcelo, "What to know about Mahmoud Khalil, the Columbia protester arrested by ICE and facing deportation," *AP News*, March 11, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/columbia-university-mahmoud-khalil-ice-440828980a4ee7bf4ddcf3d123e02b3e>

Liberties Union defines that the First Amendment protects any speech, no matter how hateful.⁸ Despite this, private institutions are allowed to impose more limitations on speech, such as anti-bias terminology.⁹ These new governmental responses challenge institutions on defining protected speech, determining when academic freedom extends to protest, and establishing whether universities should remain neutral platforms for all ideologies.

⁸ American Civil Liberties Union, “Speech on Campus,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, Dec. 18, 2023, <https://www.aclu.org/documents/speech-campus>.

⁹ PEN America, “The Basics,” *Campus Free Speech Guide*, <https://campusfreespeechguide.pen.org/the-law/the-basics/>.