On September 17, 2011, a group of protesters erected a tent city in New York City’s Zuccotti Park, located in the Wall Street financial district. Thus began a twenty-four hour a day occupation in protest of economic inequality and what many see as corporate greed and the corrupting influence of money in politics. The Occupy Wall Street protest sparked more than a hundred similar protests across the country. Many of these protests found their way on to college campuses, with thousands of students and some faculty adding their concerns to the grievances of Occupy Wall Street—including the rising costs of college education, cuts in public education spending, increasing burdens of student loan debt, the uncertain prospects of employment that students face upon completion of their degrees, and the increasing role that corporate money is playing in academia.

University administrators have found themselves trying to balance the rights to free speech of protesters, student safety, and the smooth running of university operations. Throughout the fall student protesters attempted to erect and occupy tents in campus spaces at several Universities. As recently as this Monday, January 23, students at UMass Boston started a physical occupation on campus—in this case, by erecting tents inside the Student Union, a move that received mix reactions from fellow students. While pre-med Joe Watson expressed his sympathy with the motivations, he disagreed with the chosen tactics: “I disagree with the demonstrations and camping out in the place where people are studying [...]. I know that some of us agree with the base message but there is a time and place and it shouldn't be in a student's learning environment.”

Different universities have reacted differently to encampments. After what The Harvard Crimson called “a tense dialogue” between Occupy Harvard protesters university administrators, students were allowed to erect a tent city in Harvard Yard. However, citing security concerns, Harvard closed many of the gates to the yard, allowing access only to those with Harvard University IDs—a move criticized by many students, faculty and staff as unnecessary and oppressive. The encampment remained until late December, at which point the campers voluntarily removed the tents, replacing it with a geodesic dome and information desk. The dome and info desk were subsequently removed by the University in mid January, due to safety issues.

At other universities, attempts to erect physical encampments were met with sterner resistance. In particular, two incidents at University of California campuses received national attention.

---


UC Berkeley

On November 9, thousands of protesters attempted to erect an encampment on the University of California Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza in defiance of administration’s policy. Campus police in riot gear, and armed with batons, used force to remove the tents and arrest several resisting protesters, injuring several protesters—both students and faculty. Berkely Professor, and former U.S. Poet Laureate, described his experience at the protest in *The New York Times*:

Once the cordon formed, the deputy sheriffs pointed their truncheons toward the crowd. It looked like the oldest of military maneuvers, a phalanx out of the Trojan War, but with billy clubs instead of spears. The students were wearing scarves for the first time that year, their cheeks rosy with the first bite of real cold after the long Californian Indian summer. [...] My wife was speaking to the young deputies about the importance of nonviolence and explaining why they should be at home reading to their children, when one of the deputies reached out, shoved my wife in the chest and knocked her down. [...] My wife bounced nimbly to her feet. I tripped and almost fell over her trying to help her up, and at that moment the deputies in the cordon surged forward and, using their clubs as battering rams, began to hammer at the bodies of the line of students. It was stunning to see. They swung hard into their chests and bellies. Particularly shocking to me — it must be a generational reaction — was that they assaulted both the young men and the young women with the same indiscriminate force. If the students turned away, they pounded their ribs. If they turned further away to escape, they hit them on their spines.³

The account of Shane Boyle—a PhD student—was less literary: “‘It really, really hurt – I got the wind knocked out of me,’ [he said], raising his shirt to reveal a red welt on his chest. ’I was lucky I only got hit twice.’”⁴

In response to the incident, Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgeneau, along with other administrators, sent a message to the Berkeley community stating, in part:

It is unfortunate that some protesters chose to obstruct the police by linking arms and forming a human chain to prevent the police from gaining access to the tents. This is not non-violent civil disobedience. [...] We regret that, given the instruction to take down tents and prevent encampment, the police were forced to use their batons to enforce the policy. We regret all injuries, to protesters and police, that resulted from this effort.

---


The campus’s Police Review Board will ultimately determine whether police used excessive force under the circumstances.5

The UC Student Association and thousands of faculty and staff condemned the police action, and the administration’s response to it.6

UC Davis
A second incident, at UC Davis, occurred nine days after the Berkeley protest. After protesters refused Chancellor Linda Katehi’s request to remove an encampment established the previous day, campus police arrived in riot gear at 3:30 on November 18 to remove it. A group of protestors engaged in a sit in, sitting in a circle with arms linked. When the protestors refused to disperse, a UC Davis Police officer began spraying the sitting students directly in the face with pepper spray while several onlookers recorded videos of the event on their cell phones. David Busco—one of the protesters—described the incident as follows: “I had my eyes closed [...]. My arm was around my girlfriend. I kissed her on the forehead, and then all hell broke loose. My entire body was eventually covered in pepper spray. My entire body. I was coughing up blood. I was puking.”7 The campus administration and police drew sharp criticism for the incident from UC Davis students, faculty, and staff—many of whom called for the resignation of Chancellor Katehi.

University of California President Mark Yudof criticized the use of force at Berkeley and Davis insisting:

Free speech is part of the DNA of this university, and non-violent protest has long been central to our history. It is a value we must protect with vigilance. I implore students who wish to demonstrate to do so in a peaceful and lawful fashion. I expect campus authorities to honor that right.8

Beyond Encampments
In addition to encampments, political protests related to the Occupy movement have sprung up in other incarnations as well. At several universities, students have disrupted meetings of university boards of regents—sometimes leading to confrontations with police.9 Moreover,
using the “human microphone” frequently associated with the movement, Occupy protesters have interrupted public speeches on campus by academics, politicians, government officials, and other public individuals. Critics contend that heckling campus speakers works against the university’s mission of encouraging the free exchange of ideas—that instead of encouraging free speech, disrupting speakers infringes on their right to free speech. Protesters reply that their public displays are both symbolic and necessary to spread their message, while those who are being interrupted have ample opportunities to have their voices heard.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Does the university have a responsibility to promote political dialogue on campus? If so, what should universities do to effectively accomplish this goal?

2. How should university administrators respond to large-scale political demonstrations on campus? Given that all protests can be somewhat disruptive, at what point do protests become so disruptive that university officials are justified in limiting them? What role should students and faculty play in these decisions?

3. When it comes to engaging in political speech on campus, to what extent do faculty, students, staff, and administrators all have the same rights and responsibilities? To what extent do these different groups have different rights and responsibilities?

4. When, if ever, is it appropriate for faculty members to encourage students to participate in political acts that are potentially disruptive, contrary to university policy, illegal, or dangerous?

---