

CAMPUS PROTESTS AND POLICY EVOLUTION: HOW STUDENT
MOVEMENTS HAVE RESHAPED UNIVERSITY
GOVERNANCE AND SPEECH CODES

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how student-led protests surrounding the Israel-Palestine conflict influenced university governance and campus speech policies at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of California, Berkeley, and Columbia University. Through a qualitative case study approach, the research analyzes institutional responses across three politically and structurally distinct campuses using policy documents, legal filings, media coverage, and university communications. The findings reveal that while student protests consistently challenged university norms and called for structural change, the outcomes varied significantly. UC Berkeley adopted a more collaborative approach, facilitating dialogue and administrative concessions. In contrast, Columbia University and UT Austin employed aggressive disciplinary and law enforcement measures, with Columbia experiencing external political intervention that reshaped its internal governance. Across all cases, the political climate, leadership style, and institutional structure—collectively defined as “institutional identity”—emerged as critical factors in determining outcomes. The research underscores the ongoing influence of student activism in shaping policy but also highlights the limitations of protest power within constrained political and administrative environments. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between activism, governance, and institutional values in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The academic year 2023-2024 saw campuses across the United States become centers of debate and protest surrounding the conflict between Israel and Palestine. As violence and geopolitical tensions escalated overseas, American universities witnessed a surge in activism as students rallied around questions of human rights, foreign policy, and social justice (Acar et al., 2024). Student protests erupted across campuses in response to the Gaza conflict, with many calling for an end to violence, support for Palestinian civilians, and a reevaluation of U.S. foreign policy. These demonstrations quickly became contentious, drawing sharp divides among students, faculty, and administrators (Rosenfield & Margain, 2024). This wave of activism has brought renewed scrutiny to university policies on free speech, political expression, and administrative neutrality, amplifying a longstanding conversation about the role of campus governance in navigating complex, often polarizing, issues.

The 2023-2024 protests have underscored students' ability to push the boundaries of campus policy, challenging their institutions to engage meaningfully with complex, divisive issues. On many campuses, students and activist groups have organized demonstrations, teach-ins, and sit-ins calling for solidarity with Palestine and for university administrations to condemn the violence in Gaza (Romero, 2024). Some students have demanded that universities divest from companies involved in or profiting from the conflict, while others have insisted on official statements of support from their institutions (Tsui, 2024). In response, some universities have issued neutral statements or emphasized the need to foster open discussion, while others have imposed restrictions on protests and removed controversial statements in an effort to maintain campus order (Lapin, 2024).

These responses reveal a larger, ongoing struggle over free speech and administrative control in academic settings. In this latest wave of activism, students are not merely voicing opinions on international politics; they are attempting to reshape university policies and governance structures (Foody et al., 2024). By demanding that their institutions take a stand, these students challenge universities to align institutional policies with principles of human rights and social justice; a mission that can conflict with the institutions' traditional emphasis on neutrality. This thesis examines how incidents like the Israel-Palestine protests of 2023-2024 represent a turning point in student activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Higher education has long been a forum for intellectual and polarizing conversation, often serving as a catalyst for larger social movements. Student protests have influenced key debates around free speech, equity, and institutional accountability. These movements have shaped university policies, including the development of speech codes and disciplinary measures (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2024). This literature review explores the history of campus protests, the evolution of university speech codes and governance, and the legal and institutional implications for First Amendment rights.¹

I. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF CAMPUS PROTESTS

To fully understand how student activism has reshaped university governance and speech codes, it is essential to first examine the historical progression of campus protests and their pivotal role in shaping the relationship between students and institutional authority. By tracing the evolution of campus activism, this section will highlight key historical moments that laid the

¹The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

foundation for modern student movements.

A. Major Milestones in Campus Protests

Student activism can be traced back to the early 20th century. A notable early protest occurred in 1924 at Fisk University, where students opposed restrictive policies imposed by President Fayette McKenzie that censored Black radical thought (Rubino, 2024). Students defied curfews, organized demonstrations, and challenged surveillance efforts. Their persistence led to McKenzie's dismissal and the rollback of many policies, marking an early victory for student activism (Rubino, 2024).

A defining moment in the Civil Rights era came with the 1960 Greensboro sit-ins (Gauthier, 2025). Four African American students—Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond—protested segregation by sitting at a Woolworth's lunch counter in North Carolina and refusing to leave when denied service. Their peaceful resistance inspired hundreds of similar protests, becoming a turning point in student-led activism (Gauthier, 2025).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, activism expanded to national and international politics, particularly opposition to the Vietnam War. Universities like Harvard, UC Berkeley, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison became central hubs for anti-war activism (Gilbert, 2000). Even smaller institutions, such as the University of South Dakota, saw protests despite local resistance (Webb, 2015). The 1970 Kent State shooting, where National Guard troops killed four unarmed students during an anti-war protest, underscored the volatile events that student protests can create (Broadhurst, 2010).

B. Key Trends in Student Activism Across Different Eras

Student activism evolved significantly in the late 20th century. While civil rights and anti-war protests dominated the 1960s and 70s, the 1980s and 90s brought attention to free

speech, sexual harassment policies, and political correctness (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2024).

One significant moment in the late 20th century was the 1993 free speech controversy at the University of Pennsylvania. The case revolved around a student, Eden Jacobowitz, who was charged with racial harassment for calling a group of Black sorority members “water buffalo” in what he claimed was a reference to rowdy behavior in Hebrew slang (Kors & Silvergate, 1998). Jacobowitz’s defense sparked a national debate about political correctness and campus speech codes. While critics argued that Penn’s actions infringed on free speech, others felt the university had a duty to address racially charged language in a way that fostered inclusivity. Eventually, Penn dropped the charges against Jacobowitz, but the controversy led to broader discussions about the balance between free expression and the protection of marginalized groups (Kors & Silvergate, 1998).

The rise of digital platforms in the 2000s and 2010s transformed activism. Columbia University’s 2014 “Carry That Weight” protest drew national attention when Emma Sulkowicz carried a mattress around campus to protest the university’s handling of her sexual assault complaint (Myers & Buell, 2023). Sulkowicz’s protest also sparked a broader debate about due process rights, with critics arguing that universities were being pressured into unfair disciplinary actions against accused students (CBS News, 2016). This moment marked a significant shift in student activism, where performance art, social media, and a focus on sexual misconduct became central to student-led movements.

C. Shifts in the Goals and Strategies of Student Movements

Modern student movements have become increasingly intersectional, tackling issues of race, gender, environmental justice, and immigration. Movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) had a major impact on campus activism, particularly after the murder of George Floyd in

2020. Students at universities like William & Mary and the University of Minnesota demanded removal of racist symbols and structural reforms (Chaplin, 2020; More, 2021).

The Trump presidency also galvanized student protests, particularly around immigration, environmental deregulation, and threats to withhold federal funding from campuses allowing “illegal protests” (Davison & Suglyama, 2016; Najjar, 2025). However, CNN journalist Andy Rose states “the White House has not responded to CNN’s requests for specifics on what protests it would classify as illegal (Rose, 2025). These protests reflected growing concerns over free speech and academic freedom in a polarized political climate.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has recently emerged as a focal point of student activism. In 2024, students at the University of Virginia staged an encampment protesting Israeli actions in Gaza (Cline, 2024). At Stanford, demonstrators occupied administrative offices and caused property damage, prompting the university to remove the encampment citing safety concerns (Chea & Rodriguez, 2024). These actions pushed universities to reevaluate free speech policies, public safety protocols, and their responses to politically charged movements (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2024).

II. IMPACT ON UNIVERSITY POLICIES AND GOVERNANCE

Building on the historical context, this section explores how student activism has directly shaped university governance. Across decades, student movements have prompted policy reforms related to free speech, academic freedom, diversity, and administrative transparency. Institutions have responded in varied ways, some implementing reforms, others imposing restrictions (Drake, 2024). By examining key examples, this section highlights the evolving and often contested relationship between universities and student activists.

A. Policy Change

In response to recent protests—particularly pro-Palestinian demonstrations—many universities have enacted new restrictions on student demonstrations. Case Western Reserve University and Rutgers University, for instance, in 2024 required administrative permits for protests. Indiana University and the University of California system have banned encampments and limited protest times (Drake, 2024; Tsui, 2024). These measures reflect growing pressure from lawmakers and advocacy groups to curb campus activism.

While some universities have tightened restrictions on protests, others have responded by implementing policy changes that align with student demands. The UC system's decision to divest from South African apartheid in the 1980s was driven by sustained student pressure (Kristof, 1986). The 1924 Fisk University protest resulted in President McKenzie's dismissal and the inclusion of Black alumni on the board of trustees, amplifying student voices in governance (Rubino, 2024). Similarly, the Greensboro sit-ins led to desegregation of lunch counters (Gauthier, 2025).

B. Administrative Transparency and Accountability

Student protests have often pressured universities to adopt greater transparency and accountability in their decision-making processes. In response to demands for ethical practices, many institutions have been compelled to disclose their investments, especially concerning ties to controversial industries or foreign governments (Kristof, 1986). For example, the Fossil Free Stanford—the university's chapter of the national Fossil Free Movement, founded in Fall 2013—has collaborated with university officials to review investments and create a divestment plan (Neuber, 2013).

Similarly, movements advocating for racial justice have prompted schools to audit their historical ties to slavery and systemic discrimination, leading to formal acknowledgments. Yale

was one of the first to take this action amid rising racial justice protests in 2020. Yale historian David Blight was commissioned to lead a comprehensive study on Yale's connections to slavery. The resulting work, "Yale and Slavery: A History," documented the roles of the university's founders and leaders in supporting slavery (Pengelly, 2025).

C. Curriculum and Academic Reforms

Student protests have also led to significant changes in academic curricula, with universities creating new courses and programs that reflect the demands of activists. For instance, at Stanford University, the African and African American Studies (AAAS) program was established in 1969, following activism by the Black Student Union, which advocated for a more inclusive curriculum and greater faculty diversity (Balfour, 2006). The success of early student protests in establishing ethnic studies programs at universities like Stanford set a precedent for academic reforms (Asregadoo, 2000).

D. Campus Safety and Law Enforcement Policies

Campus protests have significantly impacted university approaches to safety and policing. While most schools prefer internal management, high-profile protests often result in law enforcement intervention. The use of law enforcement can raise concerns about the appropriate balance between institutional control, student rights, and public safety (McCarthy et al., 2007).

Student demonstrations over the Israel-Gaza conflict starting in October 2023 have triggered widespread police crackdowns. In April 2024, more than 900 protesters were arrested in a ten-day span as universities removed encampments and dispersed demonstrators (Klemko et al., 2025). At Columbia and NYU, administrators cited hate speech and rising tensions in requesting police assistance, leading to mass arrests (Klemko et al., 2025).

The response to these demonstrations has varied based on institutional type. Private universities like Columbia must invite police onto campus, granting them more discretion in how protests are handled. Public institutions, such as Indiana University revised protest policies on April 25, 2024, to justify arrests, classifying encampments as trespassing (Wright, 2024). On April 24, 2024, Governor Greg Abbott ordered Texas state troopers onto the University of Texas at Austin campus to manage protests, highlighting how external political forces can override university autonomy (Klemko, 2025).

III. LEGAL PERSPECTIVES

Student activism and university governance are shaped not only by institutional policy but also by legal frameworks that define the rights and limits of campus expression. Court rulings and legal challenges have significantly influenced how universities regulate speech and protests. This section explores key legal cases and precedents that have shaped the landscape of campus activism.

A. Key Legal Cases and Precedents Affecting Campus Speech Codes

Legal challenges to campus speech codes have clarified the constitutional boundaries universities must navigate. Two landmark federal cases—*Doe v. University of Michigan* (1989) and *UWM Post v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin* (1991)—struck down speech policies for being overly broad and vague (Rabe, 2003).

In *Doe*, the University of Michigan banned speech that "stigmatizes or victimizes" based on identity. A graduate student challenged the policy, arguing it restricted protected speech. The US District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan agreed, ruling it unconstitutional to ban both protected and unprotected speech without clear standards. Similarly, The US District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin in *UWM Post* overturned a University of Wisconsin speech

code aimed at preventing discriminatory language, finding that emotional harm alone was not enough to justify restrictions. Both rulings emphasized that while universities can regulate true threats or “fighting words,” they cannot suppress controversial or offensive speech under vague policies.

B. Legal Challenges Brought in Response to Student Activism

Student-led lawsuits often arise when universities impose disciplinary actions or restrict protest activity. In *Uzuegbunam v. Preczewski* (2021), the Supreme Court sided with a student who was barred from sharing religious messages outside of designated “free speech zones.” The ruling reinforced that public colleges cannot unduly restrict student expression (Harvard Law Review, 2021). More recently, students at Columbia University filed a 2024 lawsuit claiming that involving the NYPD to dismantle pro-Palestinian encampments violated their First Amendment rights (Rozner, 2024). This case is ongoing with no new updates. These cases reflect growing tensions between institutional control and student expression.

Universities have also faced lawsuits over allegations of political bias. In *Young America’s Foundation v. Napolitano*, conservative groups sued UC Berkeley for placing disproportionate restrictions on right-wing speakers. One example is UC Berkeley cancelling an on-campus speaking engagement featuring Milo Yiannopoulos (Roman, 2020). The case led to changes in Berkeley’s event security policies such as imposing security fees to cover the costs of additional police presence and logistical arrangements for controversial speakers (Roman, 2020). Further, institutions have found themselves in lawsuits for failing to protect students during protests. In June 2024, three Jewish students at UCLA sued the university for allowing pro-Palestinian protesters to block access to parts of campus. A federal judge issued a preliminary injunction requiring the university to guarantee equal access to all students (Lenthang, 2024).

Conversely, universities have taken legal action against protesters. In 2011, eleven students at UC Irvine were criminally charged after disrupting a speech by Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren. They were convicted of conspiring to disrupt a public meeting and sentenced to probation and community service (Seif, 2012).

These legal battles reveal the complexities of protest governance in higher education. As universities continue to navigate the challenges of campus protests, legal precedents will play a crucial role in shaping policies that balance free expression with institutional governance.

IV. GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

While existing research offers important insights into the history and legal dimensions of student activism, several key gaps remain in understanding how protests shape university governance and speech codes. Most studies focus on the outcomes of protests or their historical significance, but few examine the specific mechanisms through which administrative decisions are influenced or policies are revised in response to activism.

First, although much has been written about legal challenges to campus speech policies, fewer studies examine what happens after those legal battles conclude. Specifically, there is limited research on how universities revise, implement, or quietly reverse speech policies once public and legal pressure subsides. This gap raises important questions about the durability and sincerity of institutional reform in response to legal scrutiny. Second, while many studies address the immediate legal or cultural impact of student activism, fewer focus on how such movements directly influence internal governance processes, such as administrative decision-making, committee structures, or policy oversight mechanisms. This leaves a gap in understanding how student protests translate into structural or procedural shifts within the university itself. This thesis aims to contribute to these understudied areas by analyzing how recent student-led protests

have influenced institutional responses, particularly in relation to speech code enforcement and governance practices during politically charged moments.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis seeks to explore how contemporary protest movements have influenced university policies and decision-making processes. While scholars have long documented the role of student activism in shaping broader social and political discourse (Eckert & Broadhurst, 2024; Rubino, 2024), there is a growing need to understand how universities are currently responding to politically charged protest movements particularly those that challenge the boundaries of free expression, public order, and institutional neutrality.

This research is guided by the following central questions:

1. How have Israel-Palestine related student movements at UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University influenced changes in university governance and campus speech policies?
2. How do institutional responses to student activism differ between the universities?

By investigating these questions through a comparative case study of three distinct universities, this project aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how student-led activism drives structural and policy-level change within institutions of higher education.

METHODS

I. RESEARCH DESIGN

For this project, I am using a multi-case study approach to explore how the Israel Palestine related student protests have impacted university governance and speech policies.

“Case studies allow you to focus in-depth on a ‘case’ and to retain a holistic and real-world

perspective—such as in studying individual life cycles, small group behavior, organizational and managerial processes, neighborhood change, school performance, international relations, and the maturation of industries” (Yin, 2017, p.5). I chose three universities that are known for their activism and public responses to protests: UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University. Each school offers a unique environment: different regions, political climates, and public and private statuses. Comparing each university highlights how context shapes university responses to student activism.

The goal is to better understand how student-led protests can lead to policy changes, whether in favor of the students or not. Rather than trying to make broad generalizations, this research focuses on a few detailed examples to analyze the actual outcomes of protest movements. According to Yin (2017, p. 13), “a case study is an appropriate approach to take when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control.” This design allows for a focused, comparative analysis that connects individual protest movements to broader institutional patterns.

II. CASE SELECTION AND RATIONALE

The universities selected for this study were chosen based on (1) their longstanding or recent histories of protests and student activism; (2) the diversity in their institutional structures; and (3) the availability of data, including legal proceedings, media coverage, and public university records (Yin, 2017).

1. UT Austin represents a public university in a politically conservative state, with recent controversies surrounding protest crackdowns, law enforcement involvement, and administrative censorship (Simpson et al., 2024).
2. UC Berkeley is widely considered the birthplace of the Free Speech Movement and

continues to be a national symbol of student political engagement and university-policy evolution (Rubens, 2001).

3. Columbia University, a private Ivy League institution, has been the center of recent, high-profile student protests relating to global conflicts, often attracting national media attention and invoking strong administrative responses (Romero, 2024).

Together, these three cases provide a balanced lens through which to examine how student protests shape university governance. I chose this case study method because it let me dive deeper into each university's unique context and better understand how their specific policies and decisions were shaped by student protests.

III. DATA COLLECTION

Data were gathered from a range of publicly available and institutional sources. The collection process came from three main categories of sources:

1. Document and Policy Analysis: University policy documents, including codes of conduct, protest and assembly guidelines, and speech codes, were analyzed for each institution. Only the most recent and revised documents, dating from March 2024 to the present, were included in the analysis, as this period captures institutional responses to the surge in student activism surrounding the 2024 Israel-Palestine conflict. These sources were used to understand how universities formally define, regulate, and revise protest-related policies in response to activism.
2. Media and University Statements: National and local news coverage and public statements from the university administrators were examined. These sources provided insight into both university positioning and external critiques of their actions. I analyzed media and university statements from March 2024 to the present.

3. Legal Records: Relevant legal disputes involving the universities were analyzed, beginning in May 2024 and continuing through the present. This starting point reflects the natural delay between protest activity and the initiation of legal proceedings, as many lawsuits emerged only after universities took disciplinary or enforcement actions. These records were examined to assess how legal pressures have influenced university decisions and policy changes related to student protest and free speech.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis framework. For each university, I created a detailed spreadsheet documenting key elements of protest activity, including a summary of major protest events, the university's immediate and long-term responses, a snapshot of relevant policies at the time, any legal actions or backlash, and emerging themes. I reviewed each source closely and recorded patterns, language shifts, and institutional behavior across these categories (Yin, 2017). This approach allowed for a structured comparison between cases. After collection, materials were analyzed to identify recurring themes across all three universities. These included: (1) administrative framing of protests movements; (2) changes to campus speech or conduct policies; (3) use of disciplinary mechanisms or law enforcement intervention; (4) legal disputes and external responses; and (5) faculty and student pushback or support.

Each theme was then situated within the institutional and sociopolitical context of the case. For example, UT Austin's protest response was analyzed within the framework of statewide political pressures and legislative priorities on campus speech. In contrast, Columbia's responses were interpreted in the context of donor influence. This multi-case study comparative method allows for a rich, context-sensitive interpretation of how student protests movements interact with and shape university governance structures and speech policies (Yin, 2017).

RESULTS

I. INTRODUCTION

The goal of this thesis is to address two research questions: (1) How have Israel-Palestine related student movements at UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University influenced changes in university governance and campus speech policies? and (2) How do institutional responses to student activism differ between the universities? This section presents the findings of a comparative case study examining how student protest movements at three major universities—The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), and Columbia University—have influenced university governance and campus speech policies. Each case is focused on a specific series of protest events in 2024 that were organized in response to the Israel-Palestine conflict, a period during which student activism intensified nationwide (Rosen & Entin, 2024). The data analyzed include university policy statements, institutional rules, legal filings, media coverage, and other publicly available sources. The findings are organized by university case study and are followed by a cross-case synthesis (Cruzes, 2015).

II. UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

At the University of Texas at Austin, student-led protests emerged in April 2024 in response to the ongoing war in Gaza. These demonstrations were primarily organized by the Palestine Solidarity Committee, which called for a university-wide divestment from companies associated with the Israeli military and the end of what students described as complicity in international human rights violations (Dey et al., 2024). The first major protest occurred on April 24, 2024, drawing hundreds of students and faculty to the Main Mall (Dey et al., 2024). That

same day, the university administration requested assistance from both the Austin Police Department and the Texas Department of Public Safety (FIRE, 2024). Law enforcement officers made 57 arrests, including students, faculty members, and at least one journalist (Dey et al., 2024). Five days later, on April 29th, 2024, protestors returned to campus and began an encampment on the South Lawn. This demonstration was met with forceful police intervention, including the use of riot gear, pepper spray, and flash-bang devices, which culminated in the arrest of 79 individuals on charges such as trespassing and resisting arrest (Simpson, 2024).

In the weeks that followed, the university faced criticism from both internal and external constituencies. A letter of no confidence in university president Jay Hartzell was signed by over 200 faculty members, citing concerns over the university's failure to uphold academic freedom and students' constitutional rights (Downen et al., 2024). The Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility, an internal oversight body, released a report concluding that the administration had violated its own procedural guidelines by involving law enforcement without first exhausting internal conflict resolution mechanisms (CCAFR, 2024). Despite this criticism, President Hartzell and the administration maintained a firm stance on protest management, citing the need to preserve order and ensure the physical safety of the campus community (Hartzell, 2024).

Immediately following the protests, the university enforced several university rules. These included an enforced 10:00 p.m. curfew for on-campus demonstrations and a ban on face coverings worn during protests, except when required for medical or religious reasons (Wood, 2024). Additionally, student protestors were required to submit event notifications in advance through an internal approval system as stated in Sec. 13-702. Application Process of the University Catalogs. Several students who participated in the protests received formal

disciplinary letters and transcript holds (Jung, 2024). One student later filed a federal lawsuit against the university, alleging that these sanctions constituted retaliation in violation of the First Amendment (McGlinchy, 2024). While the case is ongoing, Qaddumi, the plaintiff in this case, sought a temporary restraining order to prevent the enforcement of his suspension, but the court denied his request (Fogel, 2024). The administration's overall response focused on reinforcing time, place, and manner restrictions without introducing any new governance structures or policies addressing the protesters' demands for divestment or speech reform. No substantive steps were taken to review the university's financial ties to companies associated with the conflict, nor were any student-led proposals formally recognized in the administration's post-protest communications (CCAFR, 2024). As such, while the protests prompted significant administrative enforcement actions and procedural revisions, they did not result in governance reforms directly tied to student protest.

III. UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

At the University of California, Berkeley, student activism in response to the Israel-Palestine conflict materialized in the form of an encampment known as the “Free Palestine Camp,” which was organized by the UC Berkeley Divest Coalition. The encampment began on April 22, 2024, with roughly ten tents on the steps of Sproul Hall (Natera & Yelimeli, 2024). Over the course of several weeks, the protest grew in size and visibility, expanding to over 170 tents by early May (Kaleem et al., 2024). Unlike UT Austin, UC Berkeley initially allowed the encampment to continue without police intervention (Kaleem et al., 2024). Administrators stated that the protest fell within the bounds of the university's free speech and assembly policies, if it remained non-disruptive and peaceful (Christ, 2024).

On May 14, 2024, Chancellor Carol Christ issued a public letter to protestors outlining

the administration's commitments, including the creation of a task force to evaluate the university's investment portfolio (Christ, 2024). The task force was charged with assessing whether Berkeley's financial holdings were aligned with its stated values (Kaleem et al., 2024). The letter also addressed global academic partnerships and internship programs, pledging to ensure compliance with anti-discrimination standards (Christ, 2024). Following this communication, protestors voluntarily dismantled the encampment (Kaleem et al., 2024). A separate incident occurred on May 15, 2024, when a group of student activists unaffiliated with the main protest occupied an abandoned university building. Despite earlier communication between administrators and student organizers, this subgroup claimed the university's response to their demands had been insufficient, prompting a more escalated form of protest. The building was occupied for approximately six hours before the university authorized police action, resulting in multiple arrests (Marion & Kirkwood, 2024).

UC Berkeley's protest policies are governed by long-standing time, place, and manner regulations, which were reaffirmed but not significantly revised during the initial protest period. However, in August 2024, the University of California system issued updated protest regulations that banned encampments and established stricter controls on demonstrations across all campuses (Drake, 2024). These stricter controls are an absolute ban on camping or encampments, unauthorized structures, restricting free movement, masking to conceal identity, and refusal to reveal identity. These system-wide changes were partly in response to growing political scrutiny and concerns about campus safety. At Berkeley, the changes were implemented as policy enforcement tools rather than as punitive reactions to student protest (Drake, 2024).

Faculty reactions at UC Berkeley were largely supportive of the student protests. While the February 2024 disruption of an event featuring an Israeli speaker drew criticism and was

widely condemned by the administration, the encampment and divestment actions were viewed by many faculty as legitimate expressions of political concern (Christ & Hermalin, 2024; Cooke, 2025). Several faculty unions across the UC system subsequently filed labor complaints alleging that the administration was infringing on academic freedom and engaging in viewpoint discrimination by limiting pro-Palestinian expression (Scialla, 2024; UCLA Faculty Association, 2024). The case is currently under review by the Public Employment Relations Board, with no resolution announced to date (Scialla, 2024).

The outcome at UC Berkeley suggests that while protest activity did not lead to immediate divestment or formal changes to governance structures, it did result in procedural adaptations and the establishment of administrative pathways for ongoing discussion. The creation of a task force, the review of financial and academic partnerships, and the system-wide codification of protest limitations all indicate that student activism played a role in shaping both the dialogue and the policy infrastructure surrounding campus speech and governance.

IV. COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

On April 17, 2024, students affiliated with the Gaza Solidarity Encampment erected approximately 50 tents on the East Butler Lawn of the Morningside campus (Columbia University Senate, 2025). Their demands included institutional divestment from companies affiliated with the Israeli military, increased transparency in financial investments, and support for Palestinian academic representation (Stahl et al., 2024). The university administration initially allowed the encampment to proceed, but on April 18, 2024, university president Minouche Shafik authorized the New York Police Department (NYPD) to clear the site (Shafik, 2024). The police action led to over 100 arrests and was met with widespread condemnation from faculty, students, and civil liberties groups (Columbia University Senate, 2025).

Protestors reassembled on April 19, 2024, on the West Lawn of the campus, establishing a second encampment (Faheid et al., 2024). President Shafik maintained the university's position that while Columbia supports free expression, it could not tolerate disruptions to academic operations or threats to campus safety (Shafik, 2024). The administration met and negotiated with protesters from April 20th to April 29th when President Shafik announced an end to negotiations, where no resolution was agreed upon (Columbia University Senate, 2025). However, as tensions escalated, student organizers chose to occupy Hamilton Hall on April 30, 2024, (Columbia University Senate, 2025). The NYPD was once again called in by the administration. The occupation was forcibly ended, and another wave of over 100 arrests followed (Columbia University Senate, 2025).

The university's internal response included the suspension and expulsion of students who had participated in the Hamilton Hall occupation. Several degrees were also revoked, which the administration justified by citing violations of the student code of conduct and campus safety policies, including unauthorized entry, property damage, and disruption of university operations (Looker, 2025). These disciplinary actions were not limited to students; the administration initiated reviews of faculty who were believed to have supported or facilitated the occupation (Columbia University Senate, 2025). In the days that followed, Columbia transitioned to hybrid learning for the remainder of the spring semester, citing safety concerns (Olinto, 2024). The administration also made significant logistical adjustments, including canceling its main commencement ceremony and replacing it with smaller, student-led departmental events (The Associated Press, 2024).

Columbia's governance response evolved significantly over the months following the protest. While initial policy enforcement focused on restoring order, the situation escalated

dramatically when the federal government intervened. In March 2025, the Trump administration revoked approximately \$400 million in federal grants and contracts awarded to Columbia, citing the university's alleged failure to protect Jewish students from antisemitic harassment (Najjar, 2025). The administration demanded several structural changes, including placing Columbia's Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department under external oversight, banning face coverings during protests, and revising building access policies. While these demands were politically charged, Columbia complied with several of them, including implementing a campus-wide ban on face coverings, prohibiting demonstrations inside academic buildings, and tightening guest access protocols for the Morningside campus (Najjar, 2025).

Though some of these measures were a direct response to federal pressure, other policy changes preceded it. In October 2024, the university released new guidelines on protest management that emphasized a content-neutral application of rules, clearer protest zones, and greater involvement of trained campus police. Columbia also introduced stricter protocols for the use of amplified sound and outdoor installations, citing concerns over academic disruption and property damage (Columbia University Senate, 2024). These policy updates were framed as part of a broader effort to preserve the university's commitment to free speech while ensuring physical safety.

The response to the protests led to widespread faculty and student dissatisfaction. Numerous faculty members and Speaker of the House, Mike Johnson, called for President Shafik's resignation, and a subsequent vote of no confidence in Shafik was conducted (Columbia University Senate, 2025). Further, some tenured professors, such as Katherine Franke of the Law School and Henry Swieca of the Business School, publicly announced their departures from the university, citing a hostile and repressive campus environment (Columbia University Senate,

2025). President Shafik ultimately resigned in August 2024 (Columbia University Senate, 2025). Meanwhile, student groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine filed legal challenges alleging civil rights violations and selective enforcement of protest policies. At the same time, lawsuits were filed by Jewish student groups who argued that Columbia had failed to prevent a hostile campus environment (Columbia University Senate, 2025). However, in November 2024, the New York State Supreme Court² dismissed the Students for Justice in Palestine’s case, upholding the university’s suspension of the group (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2024). On the other hand, the Jewish student groups and Columbia University settled by agreeing to implement additional safety measures, including hiring a “Safe Passage Liaison,” a designated staff member responsible for coordinating safe travel routes for students on campus, and maintaining a 24/7 Public Safety escort program (Venkat, 2024).

In sum, Columbia University’s response to the 2024 protests was marked by a shift from cautious tolerance to aggressive enforcement, followed by federally imposed governance changes and internal administrative turnover. While some protester demands received limited engagement, such as calls for financial transparency and academic review, most institutional responses were designed to manage conflict rather than resolve the underlying concerns raised by students (Columbia University Senate, 2025; Looker, 2025). The trajectory of Columbia’s response represents how a private university in a liberal metropolitan setting can still become subject to intense political and financial pressure.

V. CROSS-CASE SYNTHESIS

Across the three case studies—UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University—the most significant finding is that institutional responses to student protest varied widely. These

² In New York, the Supreme Court is a trial-level court, not the highest court in the state. The court of last resort is the New York Court of Appeals.

variations were shaped by political context, institutional type, and administrative philosophy. While each university experienced large-scale protests in response to the 2024 Israel-Palestine conflict—along with calls for divestment, transparency, and protection of student speech (Columbia University Senate, 2025; Dey et al., 2024; Natera & Yelimeli, 2024)—their approaches diverged across five major themes: law enforcement, policy enforcement and change, disciplinary action, governance outcomes, and faculty and community responses.

A. Law Enforcement

The most immediate point of divergence was in the use of law enforcement. At both UT Austin and Columbia University, police were deployed early and in multiple phases of the protest (FIRE, 2024; Shafik, 2024). UT Austin relied on local and state police (i.e., APD and DPS), while Columbia called in the New York Police Department on two separate occasions, resulting in mass arrests. These actions suggest a model of protest management that prioritized institutional control and risk minimization, particularly in politically sensitive or high-profile environments. In contrast, UC Berkeley allowed its encampment to continue for several weeks without law enforcement involvement and only authorized police action after the occupation of an abandoned building—an incident separate from the main protest (Kaleem et al., 2024).

B. Policy Enforcement and Change

Another key area of contrast lies in policy enforcement and change. All three universities invoked existing time, place, and manner policies to regulate student protests. However, only Columbia and UT Austin enacted new post-protest regulations, including bans on face coverings and restrictions on indoor demonstrations (Najjar, 2025; The Committee on the Rules of University Conduct, 2024; Wood, 2024). These measures were often framed as responses to safety threats, but they also functioned as mechanisms to deter future occupation-based protest

strategies. In contrast, UC Berkeley did not independently create new campus-specific policies. Instead, it implemented protest restrictions only after system-wide updates were introduced by the University of California Board of Regents in August 2024 (Drake, 2024). These included a ban on encampments and additional clarification on protest boundaries.

C. Disciplinary Action

In terms of disciplinary actions, Columbia University imposed the most severe consequences. Students involved in the occupation of Hamilton Hall were suspended, expelled, and in some cases had their degrees revoked (Looker, 2025). At UT Austin, protestors were issued disciplinary warnings and transcript holds, and one student filed a federal lawsuit challenging these measures on constitutional grounds (Jung, 2024; McGlinchy, 2024). UC Berkeley imposed comparatively light disciplinary measures and reached a voluntary agreement with protestors that ended the encampment without mass suspensions or legal fallout (Christ, 2024). This reflects a spectrum of enforcement philosophies developed through comparative analysis of administrative decisions, policy language, and timing of interventions across the three universities. (1) Repressive approaches, such as at Columbia, involved rapid police deployment and mass arrests. (2) Punitive responses, like those at UT Austin, relied more heavily on formal disciplinary procedures, suspensions, and legal consequences with involving immediate law enforcement. (3) Cooperative models, as seen at UC Berkeley, prioritized negotiation, voluntary compliance, and de-escalation through dialogue. This reflects a spectrum of enforcement philosophies I developed through comparative analysis of administrative decisions, policy language, and timing of interventions across the three universities. While not drawn from a single existing framework, these categories – repressive, punitive, and cooperative – emerged as consistent patterns in how administrations chose to respond to protest events.

D. Governance Outcomes

The governance outcomes resulting from the protests also varied. At UT Austin, there were no changes to investment strategies, administrative structures, or governance processes despite intense faculty criticism (Downen et al., 2024). The university maintained its disciplinary posture and emphasized regulatory compliance. At Columbia, governance outcomes were shaped heavily by external forces. Following intervention from the federal government, Columbia experienced the loss of approximately \$400 million in funding and was compelled to alter internal policies, restructure its Middle Eastern studies department, and increase campus security controls (Najjar, 2025). These federally imposed changes exceeded the scope of any student demand and introduced a layer of governance realignment not present in the other cases. UC Berkeley, while less reactive, did make concessions to student protestors by establishing a task force to review its investment portfolio and initiating a review of academic partnerships (Christ, 2024). These changes were institutional in nature and designed to continue beyond the protest period, suggesting a more procedural approach to integrating protest outcomes into long-term governance.

E. Faculty and Community Responses

A final contrast lies in faculty and campus community responses. At both UT Austin and Columbia, administrative decisions generated widespread dissent among faculty. Each institution saw votes or letters of no confidence in their respective presidents, and public condemnation of police involvement (Columbia University Senate, 2025; Downen et al., 2024). At Columbia, this culminated in the resignation of President Minouche Shafik (Columbia University Senate, 2025). By contrast, faculty at UC Berkeley largely supported the protestors and pushed back only when external pressure began to affect protest rights and academic freedom (Cooke, 2025). These

internal dynamics reveal how shared governance and institutional culture mediate administrative authority during moments of campus crisis.

Together, these comparisons illustrate that while the immediate catalysts of protest were similar, the institutional responses were highly differentiated. Public institutions in red and blue states faced different pressures, and private institutions were vulnerable to external financial and political coercion. The balance between speech rights, safety, and administrative control was not uniform across campuses but rather depended on institutional identity.

VI. CONCLUSION

The case studies of UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University reveal divergent institutional responses to student-led protests concerning the 2024 Israel-Palestine conflict. These responses varied in their use of law enforcement, application and revision of protest policies, issuance of disciplinary measures, and openness to student demands. In some instances, protest movements influenced the creation of administrative review processes or policy clarification; in others, they resulted in heightened regulation, punitive action, or structural changes imposed from outside the university (Christ, 2024; Drake, 2024; Looker, 2025; Wood, 2024). The results demonstrate that the influence of student activism on university governance is not determined solely by protest content or tactics but is deeply shaped by the political and institutional environment in which those protests occur.

DISCUSSION

I. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

This study examined student protests at three major universities—UT Austin, UC Berkeley, and Columbia University—during the 2024 Israel-Palestine conflict to understand how these movements influenced governance and speech policies. Three primary findings emerged.

First, institutional responses and resulting policy changes varied significantly between the universities. Second, while student protests had a visible impact on university governance, the degree of influence was mediated by broader factors, including the university's leadership style, relationship with external political actors, and funding sources; a concept framed here as "institutional identity" (Clark, 1987). Third, administrative engagement with student protestors appeared to directly affect the level of faculty and public criticism. Universities that engaged in open dialogue (e.g., UC Berkeley) received less backlash than those that escalated enforcement or involved external law enforcement (e.g., Columbia and UT Austin).

II. PLACING FINDINGS IN CONTEXT OF EXISTING LITERATURE

The findings from this research build upon existing scholarship that emphasizes the historical significance of student activism in shaping campus policy (Broadhurst, 2014; Kors & Silverglate, 1998). Earlier student movements, from the Civil Rights era to anti-Vietnam protests, have long challenged universities to reconcile student demands with institutional values. This research contributes to that discourse by emphasizing the institutional context—what this thesis terms "institutional identity"—as a key determinant in how protests are managed and whether they translate into policy change.

Columbia's shift from negotiation to disciplinary action and eventual compliance with federal demands highlights how external political and financial pressures can override student influence. In contrast, UC Berkeley's more cooperative approach, including the creation of a task force to examine investment portfolios, aligns with prior literature suggesting that universities with a strong legacy of protest tolerance tend to respond with greater procedural flexibility (Klemko et al., 2024). These comparisons deepen our understanding of how protests are filtered through university-specific dynamics, echoing the arguments made by Roman (2020) and Rosen

& Entin (2024) regarding the fragile balance between campus free speech and administrative control.

III. DISCUSSION OF UNEXPECTED FINDINGS

One unexpected outcome of this research was the degree to which administrative tone and engagement affected both protest outcomes and reputational fallout. For instance, the voluntary dismantling of UC Berkeley's encampment following a respectful letter from the chancellor defied expectations of a prolonged or forced confrontation. This contrasted sharply with UT Austin and Columbia, where minimal negotiation preceded large-scale law enforcement intervention and national backlash. These findings suggest that administrative tone can significantly shape the trajectory of campus unrest.

Another notable observation was how Columbia's internal policy shifts were not solely reactive to student demands but rather imposed externally, especially after the revocation of \$400 million in federal funds. While students at all three universities called for divestment and transparency, only Columbia underwent structural governance changes, largely as a result of federal intervention rather than grassroots pressure. This challenges the assumption that student activism alone is the primary engine of policy change.

IV. LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insight into how universities respond to contemporary student protest movements, it does have limitations. Most notably, it relies on publicly accessible data including media reports, university press releases, legal filings, and institutional documents rather than primary interviews with students, administrators, or legal counsel. As a result, the analysis reflects a synthesis of institutional narratives and external reporting, rather than firsthand testimony. To mitigate this, multiple independent sources were cross-referenced for

each event or policy development to ensure accuracy and reduce overreliance on any single perspective.

Another limitation lies in the study's case selection. Focusing exclusively on three institutions—UT Austin, Columbia University, and UC Berkeley—offers comparative depth but introduces potential selection bias. These schools were chosen for their diverse governance structures, geographic locations, and political environments, but they do not represent the full spectrum of higher education responses nationwide. As such, findings may not be generalizable to all universities, particularly smaller or less politically prominent institutions.

The timing of data collection also presents a constraint. Some relevant events, including ongoing litigation remain unresolved at the time of writing. These unfolding developments could significantly affect future institutional policies and student activism. Nonetheless, this study provides a timely snapshot of a pivotal moment in higher education governance, and its findings serve as a foundation for future longitudinal and interview-based research.

V. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study highlight both the need for and importance of further research on how universities respond to student activism. As protests continue to shape campus policy and public debate, understanding these dynamics remains essential for students, administrators, and policymakers alike. Future research should expand the sample size to include a wider range of institutions, including community colleges and mid-sized public universities that may respond differently due to resource constraints or regional political dynamics. Interviews with stakeholders—students, administrators, faculty, and legal representatives—would offer deeper insight into institutional motivations and protestor strategies.

Another valuable route would involve assessing how digital activism shapes university

responses. Social media has transformed the visibility of protests, yet it remains unclear how institutions adjust when activism is amplified online. Are responses shaped more by real-time visibility than by internal policy review? Finally, there is a need for longitudinal research that tracks the aftermath of protest-driven policy changes over five to ten years, helping to determine whether institutional reforms endure or are reversed after public attention fades.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that student activism remains a potent, complex force in shaping university governance. However, its success depends less on the scale or intensity of protest and more on the institution's political context, leadership posture, and external pressures.

Universities like UC Berkeley, which chose to engage protestors and negotiate outcomes, demonstrated that policy evolution can occur without disciplinary overreach. In contrast, Columbia and UT Austin's reliance on law enforcement highlighted the risks of escalation, including reputational damage, internal dissent, and in Columbia's case, federally imposed oversight.

Ultimately, this research affirms that student movements can influence governance, but the extent and nature of that influence are deeply shaped by institutional identity. Universities navigating future protests must balance expression and order carefully, recognizing that procedural transparency and administrative tone can be as impactful as the protests themselves.

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