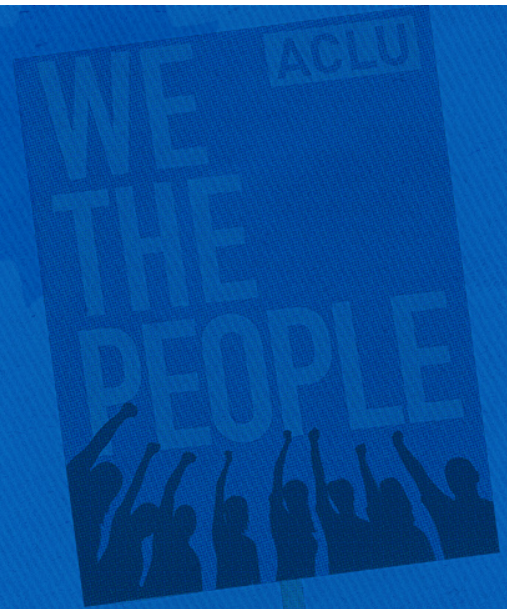


ACLU Florida

CAMPUS PROTEST POLICIES AND ORGANIZING TOOLKIT FOR ACLU STUDENT CLUBS



INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF PROTEST ON CAMPUS

Throughout history, student-led protests have played a critical role in shaping society. From the Civil Rights Movement to anti-war demonstrations, from climate action to the movement for reproductive freedom, students have consistently been at the forefront of demanding change. These fights for freedom have also included targeting and crackdowns from the government. A few examples include:

The Greensboro Sit-ins (1960):

Four Black college students in North Carolina sparked a national movement by refusing to leave a segregated lunch counter. Their peaceful demonstration was a key moment in the Civil Rights Movement.

Vietnam War Protests (1960s–70s):

Students on campuses across the U.S. mobilized against the Vietnam War, culminating in mass demonstrations, including the tragic Kent State shooting in 1970.

South African Apartheid Divestment (1980s):

College students pressured universities to divest from companies supporting apartheid, contributing to the fall of the racist regime in South Africa.

Black Lives Matter and Racial Justice Protests (2010s–2020s):

Student activists have challenged racial injustice, police violence, and campus discrimination, leading to institutional policy changes.

Reproductive Rights and LGBTQ+ Advocacy (2020s):

College students have organized walkouts, rallies, and policy campaigns to defend bodily autonomy and LGBTQ+ rights.

Current Racial Justice and Immigration Protests (2025):

Students are participating in demonstrations against racial injustice, mass deportations, and restrictive immigration policies, including nationwide “Day Without Immigrants” protests and the 50501 demonstrations opposing discriminatory government actions.

WHY PROTEST MATTERS TODAY

Protest is more than just an event—it's a tool for change. Universities are places where ideas are challenged, and policies can be influenced. Through collective action, students have won fights for free speech protections, labor rights, climate policies, and racial justice reforms. However, many universities still impose unclear or restrictive policies on student protests, and recent state laws have introduced new factors that students must navigate.

In Florida, students can peacefully protest in outdoor areas of campus, as long as their protest does not disrupt normal university functions and is consistent with the university's policies, and reasonable, content-neutral time, place, and manner restrictions.

At the same time, laws such as the 2021 Anti-Protest Law give law enforcement broader discretion in defining and responding to protests, raising concerns about selective enforcement and suppression of peaceful demonstrations.

Additionally, some universities have implemented new policies—like Florida State University's restrictions on camping, amplified sound, and concealed identities during protests—that could impact how students organize. In addition to the 2021 Anti-Protest Law, Florida enacted legislation effective January 1, 2025 requiring individuals to maintain a distance of at least 25 feet from first responders, including law enforcement officers, when instructed.

If students can't effectively navigate these policies, the entire system breaks down—protests can be delayed, restricted, or even shut down entirely. The First Amendment protects the right to peaceful protest at public universities. Still, campus policies and state laws can protect student activism or restrict it through bureaucratic hurdles, vague rules, and selective enforcement.

This toolkit empowers students to understand their specific campus policies, enabling them to advocate effectively while remaining protected under the law.

This toolkit will:

Guide students through finding and understanding their school's protest rules (e.g., permit requirements, designated areas, restrictions on time, place, and manner).

Empower students to document, assess, and potentially challenge restrictive policies.

Provide a step-by-step process for requesting meetings with school officials to clarify policies.

Encourage the creation of student-led resources, like club guides or protest best-practice sessions.

Understanding these policies is critical for exercising your First Amendment rights.¹

¹ **Note:** Just because an individual has a First Amendment right to do something, does not always mean that law enforcement or others won't violate that right. This toolkit is not intended to provide legal advice. For legal advice regarding whether your rights have been violated, be sure to speak with an attorney.

STEP 1

FIND AND REVIEW YOUR SCHOOL'S PROTEST POLICIES

Where to Look

Start by locating your school's official policies governing student protests and demonstrations. Many of these may be available online. These are often found in:

- ▶ **Student Handbook**

Look for sections on free speech, campus demonstrations, and disciplinary actions.

- ▶ **Code of Conduct**

This will outline behavioral expectations and potential consequences for violations.

- ▶ **Campus Free Speech Policies**

Some schools have specific guidelines about when and where protests can take place.

- ▶ **Facility Use and Permitting Guidelines**

Check if your school requires permits for protests or has designated areas for demonstrations.

- ▶ **Student Organization Policies**

If organizing through a club, see if additional policies apply to events.

Key Questions to Answer

- ▶ Do students need a permit to protest? If so, what's the application process?
- ▶ Are there designated "free speech zones"? (Some schools still have them, even though Florida law limits their use.)
- ▶ Are there restrictions on time, place, and manner? (E.g., noise limits, prohibited locations, or curfews.)
- ▶ What disciplinary actions could students face for protesting? (E.g., suspension, fines, or academic consequences.)
- ▶ Are there exceptions for spontaneous protests in response to urgent events?

PRO TIP

Document everything!
Take screenshots or print out policies so you can reference them if needed.

STEP 2

ENGAGE WITH UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS TO PROTECT FREE SPEECH

Rather than waiting for conflicts to arise, ACLU campus clubs should proactively engage with university leadership to:

- Communicate their commitment to protecting free speech on campus.
- Seek clarity on existing policies and enforcement practices.
- Explore ways to collaborate to ensure students and faculty can express themselves.

This approach helps build relationships, prevent misunderstandings, and ensure student activism is supported rather than restricted.

Who to Meet With, One or Some of the Following:

Dean of Students

Oversees student conduct and can clarify how protest policies are enforced.

General Counsel's Office

University lawyers who interpret and apply policies; can clarify legal boundaries.

Student Government Representatives

Can advocate for policy changes and help push for fair free speech protections.

Faculty Allies and Academic Leaders

Professors and administrators who support student activism can provide guidance and advocacy.

Campus Safety Officials

If applicable, discussing protest safety with campus police/security can help prevent unnecessary conflicts or escalations.

How to Structure the Meeting:

- Introduce the ACLU club's role in supporting free speech and student activism.
- Ask about current campus policies on protests, demonstrations, and speech-related issues.
- Discuss past enforcement practices and whether any protests have faced disciplinary action.
- Explore opportunities for collaboration—are there ways students and faculty can work together to ensure free speech, regardless of viewpoint, is protected while maintaining campus safety?
- Request clear, written guidance on policies that may impact student protests.

PRO TIP

If you receive vague or inconsistent answers, follow up with an email summarizing the conversation and requesting a written response.

STEP 3

ASSESS AND CHALLENGE RESTRICTIVE POLICIES

Once you've reviewed your school's policies, determine whether they **unfairly restrict student protest rights**.

Red Flags to Watch For:

- ▶ Unreasonably burdensome permit processes (e.g., requiring weeks of advance notice).
- ▶ Harsh disciplinary consequences for peaceful protests—some universities threaten suspension or arrest for minor policy violations, especially for protests that are seen as politically controversial.
- ▶ Strict free speech zones that limit protests to small or hidden areas of campus.
- ▶ Selective enforcement—if your university allows some protests but not others, or only disciplines certain student groups, this may be an example of viewpoint discrimination.
- ▶ Broad disciplinary policies that could be used to punish peaceful protests.

What to Do If You Find a Problem

- ▶ Document everything. Save policy language, emails, and meeting notes.
- ▶ Gather student and faculty support to raise concerns collectively.
- ▶ Engage your student government and faculty union to push for policy reforms.
- ▶ Reach out to the ACLU of Florida if you believe policies violate state or federal free speech laws. You can connect with an ACLU of Florida organizer at volunteer@aclufl.org.

PRO TIP

If your school has a history of shutting down protests unfairly, public pressure (petitions, op-eds, media attention) can be a powerful tool.

STEP 4

CREATE A PROTEST POLICY GUIDE FOR YOUR CAMPUS

Once you've gathered all the information, help other students by creating a simple, student-friendly guide to your school's protest policies.

What to Include:

- ▶ A summary of key policies (permit rules, locations, restrictions, school rules, etc.).
- ▶ Step-by-step instructions for obtaining permits or approvals
- ▶ A list of campus contacts (e.g., student legal services, administrators, faculty allies)
- ▶ ACLU Florida [Know Your Rights](#) information
- ▶ Best practices and [safety tips](#) for peaceful protests (including having a clearly defined goal and ensuring participants engage in peaceful and lawful resistance)
- ▶ Information on de-escalation and non-engagement with counter protesters and/or law enforcement

PRO TIP

Partner with student organizations to share the guide and inform new students each year.

STEP 5

ORGANIZE A PROTEST POLICY LEARNING SESSION

To ensure that more students understand their campus policies, host a training session or discussion where students can:

- ▶ Share research findings about the school's policies.
- ▶ Discuss past experiences with protest enforcement and noncompliance with school protest rules.
- ▶ Role-play scenarios to practice engaging with administrators.
- ▶ Discuss concerns and protest “best practices” for protests.
- ▶ Develop collective strategies to challenge unfair policies.

PRO TIP

Invite a local ACLU FL representative, faculty expert, or student leader to help guide the conversation. Offer this session to school clubs interested in protest or free speech.

STEP 6

TRAIN LEGAL OBSERVERS TO MONITOR POLICY ENFORCEMENT

If your school has a history of selective enforcement or police presence at protests, it may be helpful to train “Legal Observers” who can document interactions with law enforcement and administrators. “Legal Observers” do not need to be lawyers. They are trained individuals who are neutral observers and document protest activity that can be useful in helping lawyers and advocates assess if there are any violations that need to be addressed.

What Legal Observers Do

- ▶ Monitor interactions between protesters, police, and university officials.
- ▶ Document incidents of policy violations or suppression.
- ▶ Record badge numbers, timestamps, and statements to ensure accountability.
- ▶ Act as neutral witnesses (they do not participate in the protest itself).

PRO TIP

Contact the [National Lawyers Guild](#) or the ACLU of Florida for legal observer training resources.

STEP 7

KNOW WHAT TO DO IF POLICIES ARE VIOLATED

If students face unfair discipline, retaliation, or suppression of their protest rights:

Immediately document what happened (videos, photos, statements).

Contact a student legal services office or civil rights group.

Submit a complaint to university administrators explaining the violation.

Reach out to the ACLU of Florida for guidance.

STEP 8

PASS A FIREWALL FOR FREEDOM CAMPUS RESOLUTION

Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have teamed up to help students defend their campuses from the Trump administration through passing a [“Firewall for Freedom” Campus Resolution](#). This resource guides students through how and why to pass a campus firewall resolution.

The toolkit also offers guidance on what to do after a resolution passes, like engaging administrators and scaling up your impact, and what to do if a resolution doesn’t pass, including alternative tactics like grassroots organizing, direct action, and building power without formal endorsement.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

THE POWER OF POLICY TRANSPARENCY

This toolkit is meant to empower students to take action in shaping their campus free speech environment. Understanding your school's protest policies, decision makers, and enforcement mechanisms is a critical part of student activism. By researching campus rules, engaging administrators, and sharing knowledge, students can ensure their right to protest is protected.

If you have any questions or would like any additional information, please contact the ACLU of Florida at volunteer@aclufl.org.

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