RESPONDING TO RELIGIOUS OVERREACH ON CAMPUS

Religious overreach on campus is when colleges and universities weaponize their religious affiliation to harm students. When it comes to reproductive freedom, this can look like using the religious affiliation of the school to deny students access to reproductive healthcare, prohibiting students from speaking freely about reproductive freedom, and stopping students from filling the gaps in care their universities have created.

While religious overreach is common on Catholic campuses, specific moments of egregious or high-profile activity can provide opportunities for organizing and action. Consider jumping into action when your college or university does the following:

1. Revokes or denies a student organization's official registered status because it advocates for reproductive justice
2. Threatens or retaliates against students for distributing contraception or other sexual health products on campus
3. Disinvites planned campus speakers because of their affiliation with organizations that promote reproductive justice or offer reproductive healthcare
4. Suspends or fires faculty for hosting a speaker in class, having certain opinions, or lecturing on certain material
5. Removes reproductive health coverage through university health insurance plans

This guide is intended to support you as a student organizer on a Catholic campus to take action against your institution's overreach!



CONTENT

A BRIEF HISTORY ... 2
INCIDENT PREPARATION ... 3
INCIDENT RESPONSE TACTICS ... 8
A REMINDER TO REST ... 13

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS OVERREACH ON CATHOLIC CAMPUSES

1968 Father Charles Curran, a tenured theology professor at The Catholic University of America (CUA), was fired briefly in 1967 for arguing that the Catholic church should change its position on contraception. He was reinstated five days later after a faculty strike. In 1986, the Vatican declared that he could no longer teach theology at CUA after the dicastery in charge of promulgating Catholic doctrine (headed by Cardinal Ratzinger, who would later become Pope Benedict) decided he was unfit.

1990 Pope John Paul II releases Ex corde Ecclesiae, which outlines directives for Catholic universities. This encyclical instructs every Catholic university to reflect church teaching in its policies, practices, and campus culture.

1991 Georgetown University becomes the first Catholic school in the country to approve a pro-choice student group, GU Choice. However, in 1992 after receiving substantial pushback from the Archdiocese of Washington, the university withdrew recognition of GU Choice. Students then formed H*yas for Choice, which still operates today. The asterisk in "H*yas" symbolizes the organization's inability to refer to themselves by the school's mascot, the "Hoyas."

2000 Trinity College in Vermont (closed in 2000) disinvited Gloria Steinem from a speaking engagement because of fears she would discuss the church's opposition to abortion and homosexuality.

2013 Boston College threatens disciplinary action against students who distribute condoms. The administration states that "the distribution of condoms is not congruent with our values and traditions."

2018 After providing contraceptive coverage for six years through a third party, the University of Notre Dame announces that it will no longer offer this coverage. Students with Irish 4 Repro Health sue the university over the change.

INCIDENT PREPARATION

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

When thinking about your rights on campus in response to overreach, you might immediately think of the First Amendment. The bad news is that private colleges and universities, which include all Catholic schools, are not directly bound by the First Amendment, so the protections students have on public campuses do not apply.

However, you are not completely without rights. There are two potential protections you may have:

1 Some states have additional protections for students attending private campuses. Keep in mind that these protections are often limited for students attending religiously affiliated campuses

2 Colleges are legally bound to provide what they promise. In other words, they can't scam you or commit fraud. Consider whether you have been promised freedom of expression in promotional materials or student conduct policies.



GET FAMILIAR WITH YOUR STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT OR HANDBOOK

Your rights might be limited, but you do have a student code of conduct. These can be long and dense documents; however, they contain the protections you have as a student and outline school policies.

Begin by reviewing the policy on free speech, free expression, and demonstrations. It may be in a separate guide. They may include the following guidelines:

1. **Time, place, and manner restrictions:** These are supposed to be content-neutral limitations. They are typically for First Amendment and legal rights; however, many schools incorporate them into their free-expression policies. These can include time periods when protests can occur, free-speech zones or designated protest locations on campus, and limits on the type of disruption a protest can cause.

2. **Process for hosting a demonstration:** These policies usually outline the process for notifying the university and collaborating on a demonstration. The exact process can vary significantly depending on the school, but it typically involves a specific notification and a discussion between the students and the administration to ensure the demonstration adheres to established policies.

3. **Outside speaker clauses:** These policies are also often where policies regarding hosting outside speakers reside and are where prohibitions on speakers who don't align with the university's values are established.

Pay special attention to mentions of contraception or contraceptive devices, policies regarding posters or flyers on campus, and definitions of conduct that is "irresponsible" or violates community values.

Following Protest Guidelines

Become familiar with protest guidelines, not because you must follow them in your actions, but because they are an important part of risk assessment. Demonstrations and protests are intended to disrupt, and sometimes this can occur within the restrictions of a university, while at other times it cannot.

Policies that Mention the College or University's Catholic Identity

At Catholics for Choice, we reject the notion that being pro-abortion, pro-contraception, and pro-reproductive freedom conflicts with Catholic identity. We see these values expressed by the majority of Catholics. The belief that they are not in alignment largely comes from an ostensibly celibate, all-male church hierarchy.

However, at the same time, we know that the "official" teachings of the church still oppose contraception, abortion, and other forms of reproductive. These teachings are often used to attack students working to advance reproductive freedom.

This language is also an opportunity to highlight that it is not about Catholic values, but instead reproductive control and anti-abortion ideology. For example, does your school have clubs that conflict with Catholic social teaching? There are many organizations that contradict Catholic values, such as organizations working to oppose immigration, maintain the death penalty, and support war and violence. Many universities find ways to have these voices on campus despite their violation of Catholic social teaching.

RISK TOLERANCE

Everyone has varying levels of risk tolerance, and that is okay! We also know that people who hold marginalized identities — BIPOC people, LGBTQIA+ people, undocumented people and immigrants, disabled people, etc. are often at a higher level of risk, especially criminalization, than others. Before you end up in a risky situation, have a conversation with your team and reflect on your own risk tolerance. It's also important to know that your risk tolerance can change, so make sure to check in with others frequently.

What is your personal risk? What is at stake?

- Are you on a scholarship that the university could revoke?
- What identities do you hold?
- What support systems do you have in your life?

What risks are you willing to take?

- Retaliation from the university?
- Arrest and criminalization?
- Doxxing or negative publicity?

What mitigations are available?

- Can you have anonymity in taking an action?
- Can someone else with a different risk tolerance take the action themselves?
- Can you complete the action in a group?
- Can you get permission or permits for a demonstration in advance?

DIGITAL SECURITY

Now that you have assessed your personal risk and risk tolerance, there are some strategies that you can employ to minimize risk:

- Check out your online presence. What information is publicly available about you? You can request that many websites, like Yellow Pages, remove your information. If you have funds, you can also use a service like DeleteMe to do that for you. You can also make your social media pages private so information is harder to find.
- Be careful about what information you exchange or store on university-owned devices or accounts. Often, campus policies allow them access to this information, which can be used against you. Consider anything you do on or with university technology as the school's property. Explore using a VPN if you're on the university's Wi-Fi.
- Vet your communication channels. Think about who might be in the channel and who they might tell about what they hear. People in your group chats might share what you are saying with the administration

Find more tips and tricks from the **Digital Defense Fund.**

Law Enforcement

It's also a good idea for your organization to have a policy on how you want to interact with law enforcement. These can be heated conversations, so it is best to have them before you are in a stressful situation (aka an incident of religious overreach). It's also important that everyone in the organization is on the same page about what you would do, even if they personally feel differently.

Alternatives to Law Enforcement

- Host de-escalation training.
- Invite legal observers and/or other trained bystanders to actions.
- Leverage nearby non-police community resources.
- Involve university processes as opposed to law enforcement, where available.



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Administration

Building relationships with administration can be critical, but it can take a while, so it's great to start the following before an incident occurs:

Identify your allies in the administration. Are there pro-choice Catholics or other people who are pro-choice in your administration? Those are the people that you want to start to build relationships with.

Make your enemies your friends (or at least make them think you are friends). Having relationships with administrators who are your targets can be difficult; however, those relationships can sometimes help de-escalate conflict and get you helpful information.

Other Allies

Don't just talk with admin: Start building your base of support! Alumni, faculty (particularly tenured professors), university donors, parents, nearby parish communities, student organizations, and other organizations in your community can all help in instances of religious overreach. When things get bad, these are the folks you can call to help and support you. The stronger these relationships are, the more likely they are to show up in your time of need, so just keep building.

Catholics for Choice

If you encounter an incident of religious overreach, you are not alone. Here are some ways that CFC can support you:

1. Provide mentorship and technical assistance as you think about next steps.
2. Connect you with other students who have had similar experiences.
3. Amplify your experience on our platforms and help you connect with the media.
4. Support you in developing pro-choice faithful messaging in response.

Do you have any other ideas for how we can support you, or would you like to explore these options? Schedule time to talk with us or email us at students@catholicsforchoice.org.

INCIDENT RESPONSE TACTICS

An incident of religious overreach happening on campus can be stressful! Here are the first steps to take for responding to overreach:

1. **First, pause and take a breath.** Are there any immediate actions that need to be taken to protect people's safety?
2. **Let your base know what happened**. This can be as simple as letting the group chat know, or as significant as issuing a statement. Consider who you need to have in your corner right now and how you can involve them.
    a. *Pro tip: This is a great time to reach out to CFC for support!*
3. **Convene your allies.** Now that people know what has happened, it is time to decide what to do about it. This is an ideal time to assess your organizational capacity, identify your targets, discuss tactics, and clarify your demands.
4. **Start implementing your tactics.** It is okay to change course as you respond to what does and does not work. Remember the principle of escalation: As you continue taking action, you want the pressure you apply to your target to increase.

Consider what tactics have worked in the past and what has been successful on your campus. You don't have to reinvent the wheel: lean into what works! Additionally, consider the target of your actions. Who has the power to effect the change you are demanding? Analyze tactics that would put pressure on them and that they might respond to.

Additionally, take organizational capacity into account. How many people do you have, and how much time can they commit? It's OK if the answer isn't much! Understanding how much time and energy you have as an organization can help you select tactics that match your capacity and skills.



GOING TO THE MEDIA

Going to the media includes reaching out to local journalists or campus reporters to "pitch" the story, submitting an op-ed to your campus or local papers, or even going bigger!

The media can be a great way to highlight your university's actions and apply public pressure. Media attention can also compel the university to issue a statement clarifying its position.

Getting the press involved is not without risks. Media can generate support for your cause, but it can also attract just as much negative attention. This negative attention can have security implications, so before going to the media, be sure to weigh your security and risk tolerance.

MEETING WITH ADMINISTRATORS AND STAKEHOLDERS

Having a conversation directly with the source of the overreach can be a useful tactic. In addition to giving you space to voice your perspective and demands, it can also help you gather insight into the administration's perspective.

When the Administration Refuses to Meet

- **Ask for a meeting, even if they say no.** Sometimes, persistence is key. Tracking your attempts to schedule a meeting can also drum up public support.
- **Leverage your allies.** Some individuals on campus have greater access to administrators than others. Can you leverage your connections to them? Think peers who work in their offices, student government officials who have standing meetings or whom the school has a duty to meet with, faculty members who hold positions of power, and allies in their departments.
- **Up the pressure and make the demand for a meeting.** Going public with your demand for a meeting can be another strategy. Sometimes, it takes a little extra pressure to get the admin to the table.
- **Attend public events, such as a campus conversation with the dean.** Often, administrators host public-facing events where students can meet staff and share their feedback and ideas. They can be great ways to start to build a relationship and get your idea.
- **Get tips from your student government and other student organizations**. Students working on similar issues may have insight into the best strategy and people to contact.

Tips for Meeting with Administration

Use language rooted in shared values. At Catholic institutions, this may mean using language grounded in Catholic values. It can also mean appealing to the values that the university has articulated it abides by.

Be wary of co-optation. Often, when the administration is willing to meet in these moments, it is because they want an easy way out of turning off the pressure. This doesn't mean you can't work with them, but be wary of letting up all pressure for the sake of discussion. You may consider using an inside-outside strategy, where you continue discussions and negotiations with the administration (the inside) while maintaining public pressure (the outside).

After meeting with the admin, share what they said with the rest of the group and consider how it informs your next steps. Did they mention a particular area of difficulty they are having? How can you make that difficulty be lessened, or make the stakes of saying no higher than the difficulty?

Some students livestream or publish live updates of high-stakes meetings with administration. This tactic provides transparency in student organizers' discussions with the administration and puts pressure on the administration by holding it to its word. Keep in mind that private conversations with administration may provide additional insight; however, it can be difficult to hold the administration accountable to promises made.



PUBLIC PROTESTS AND DIRECT ACTION

Direct action includes activities like hosting a rally, organizing a walkout or strike from classes, protesting a school event, illuminations or projections, banner drops, art displays, campus encampments, building occupations, and so much more.

Public protests and direct actions carry higher risks than some of the other actions described. Because of this, assess your risk tolerance before planning the event.

Planning Direct Action

1. **Get other people on board.** You will need other people to be part of your action. This is a time to mobilize your base and also tap into allied partner organizations.

2. **Schedule trainings if necessary.** Do you need to host an event to train folks on the tactics you are using (e.g., non-violence or de-escalation)? Do you need to get people on the same page about the action before it happens?

3. **Think about safety**. Is this an arrestable action? If so, what are your processes for jail and bail support? If it is not, do you want designated de-escalation volunteers?

4. **Deciding whether you want to work with the administration.** Do you want to let them know about your action and work within the bounds of the policy, or are you comfortable working outside of it?

5. **Align timing, tactic, and demands.** Think about whether an upcoming campus event like Admitted Students Day, Alumni Weekend, or a Board of Trustees meeting could put pressure on the administration. Ensure that your tactic makes sense when planning an action and that it clearly communicates the demand.

6. **Tip off the press!** Decide what kind of attention you want to draw from your protest and whether media coverage would be beneficial. Consider reaching out to reporters in the area who you think would be interested, and let your student press know about the event in advance.

TAKING LEGAL ACTION

Legal action has long been used as a tactic to create change on a broader level, as seen in cases such as *Brown v. Board, Roe v. Wade, and Obergefell v. Hodges*.

However, there are also some limitations to this strategy. As previously discussed, there are no strong First Amendment protections on private campuses, leaving limited opportunities to build a strong case. Additionally, this strategy can take considerable time. It can take years, if not decades, to receive a decision on a case. Lastly, the legal climate must be conducive to this strategy's success. In the current legal environment of the federal judiciary, achieving positive outcomes may be more challenging.

MOVING OFF CAMPUS

When incidents of religious overreach happen on campus, many students decide to take their work off campus or work creatively to continue their mission. This technique can be combined with any of the other tactics or can be deployed on its own.

When engaging with institutions that do not want your organization to exist or the work to happen, existence is resistance. Merely continuing the work unsanctioned in and of itself is a form of resistance. Continuing to do this work challenges institutions and can fill gaps.

Sustainability and Infrastructure: Without your university keeping your organization together, you must maintain a keen eye on it. This means documenting institutional knowledge and ensuring that mentorship can keep people aware of organizational processes in the long-term.

Structure: what structure of the organization works for you! Often, when organizations are on campus, there are required structures; however, when you are no longer on campus, you can break these bounds and create an organization that is values-aligned and reflects the work you want to do. Consider whether there are other ways you could organize that align with the organization's values and goals.

Organization Status: Some student organizations that move off campus pursue official nonprofit status, becoming 501(c)(3) or 501(c)(4) organizations. However, this strategy is relatively rare, time-consuming, and expensive. Many other student organizations that move off campus opt to become community organizations without official status. This allows them to remain nimble and doesn't impose the same administrative burden; however, this strategy makes receiving funds and grants more challenging.



ADDITIONAL RESPONSE TACTICS

- Organize letter- or email-writing campaigns to flood your target(s)' inbox(es).
- Use wheatpasting, stickering, or other guerilla publicity tactics like sliding flyers under dorm doors.
- Host a town hall or a speak-out on campus.
- Start a petition to show support for your cause. You can take it a step further with a no-donation pledge, asking people not to give to the university until your demands are met.
- Pass a resolution or legislation in your student government.



A REMINDER TO REST

Experiencing religious overreach on campus can be really hard! In these moments, we can feel alienated from our faith or community; however, you are not alone. An essential part of doing this work and creating meaningful change in your campus community is taking care of yourself and those in your community. None of us can do this work alone, and none of us can do this work without rest.