


Taking Action in Higher Ed

A risk assessment guide for academic staff
in the United States

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Knoxville, TN





Taking Action as an Academic Worker

"The world is now experiencing a moral crisis whose enormity will reshape political attitudes and alliances for generations to come." - Steve Salaita

The moment for action has arrived.

For too long, many of us have stood quietly by as the universities that employ us led our nation into fascism.

Universities are mission-oriented public institutions. The mission of the university, and of the staff without whom the university would not exist, is to build public knowledge through education and research. Many of us do this because we love it. Many of us do this because we believe in it.

Many academic workers are dedicated to generating social change through professional success. We create change through teaching and research. We create change by supporting students, staff, faculty, and community members as they participate in the activities of the university.

Because academic workers believe in and need the work, we tend to stay quiet as our institutions act against their missions and our best interests. We may not agree with the gutting of salaries, or increases in tuition, or overinvestment in corporate partnerships, or disinvestment in educational infrastructure. But we do not act: because we are afraid, because we are uncertain, because we would rather do the work we were hired to do.



It is the summer of 2025, and it is no longer possible to ignore the reality that the university is one of the fronts on which the battle for democracy is being held. It is through the university that fascist extremists are seeking to decimate misinformation, to silence truth, and to consolidate wealth and power.

It is therefore the urgent obligation of all university workers, as educators and semi-public figures, to stand with our students and be leaders in our community. We cannot allow this battle to be lost. We, the authors of this resource, feel that urgency every day. We know you do too.

At the same time, this moment is not without risk. There have been targeted attacks on the lives and careers of university workers who have taken a stand. Some people have lost their jobs. Some have had to find a new profession. Academic contingency and the erosion of tenure protections have made some of us particularly vulnerable.

We wrote this resource because we didn't want to be silenced or frozen by fear. The first half contains information about your rights and risks as a university worker. The second half has exercises to help you understand your position. Use it for yourself, or try working through it collectively.

The goal is to empower academic workers to take action in ways that feel appropriate given the gravity of the moment and the very real consequences that we all might face.

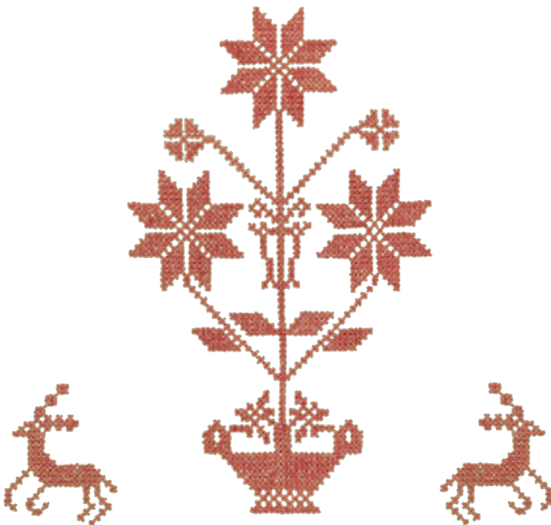
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Part 1: Understanding Action





Reflections on taking risk

All political action is risky, and activists may face everything from social discomfort to job loss, imprisonment, deportation, and physical violence.


Academic workers also face profession-specific risks such as loss of a career, loss of a job, loss of opportunities for promotions and advancement, and ostracization.

Systems of power will always seek to punish the people who want to dismantle them, and so all meaningful action carries some risk. With that in mind, there are three things to focus on when assessing risk related to political action.

First: most academic workers do not experience any career consequences for taking political action, just as most activists are never imprisoned or physically harmed. One goal of high-profile attacks on protestors and university workers alike is to make us afraid and to keep us silent.

Second: not all actions carry the same risk, and the riskiest or most visible acts may not be the most impactful. For example, activism that happens off campus and outside of your job may be less risky than work done on campus. Acts of individual or private support may be less risky than public statements.

Third: Just because something is risky doesn't mean it should not be done. Some consequences are worth facing when democracy is dying.




Universities and Fascism

Universities are at the forefront of the fight against fascism because universities provide access to knowledge, generate new knowledge, and create pathways to social mobility for the general public. Fascism hates knowledge and social mobility. Fascism hates the free and open functioning of universities.

Here are some places that you may see fascism taking hold at your institution:

- Disinvestment in academic labor through the ending of tenure protections and through increased reliance on underpaid and term-limited contract workers.
- Decimation of core academic disciplines, especially those that serve the public good by seeking to understand our world and improve our lives.
- Disinvestment in the preservation and circulation of knowledge through libraries, archives, and museums.
- Rejection of academic freedom, or the right to research and teach without interference, for faculty and staff.
- Rejection of academic freedom, or the right to express opinions in the classroom, for students.
- Implementation of policies that force educators to teach misinformation or omit accurate information.
- Deference to partisan or corporate interests when shaping education and research policy.
- Curtailing the faculty right to self governance.
- Firing or expelling noncompliant students and staff.
- Union busting or other attempts to control staff.
- Misuse of anti-discrimination policies, such as protections from anti-semitism, to target anti-fascist activists.

Where else have you seen fascism take hold at your institution?



Faculty and Staff

Faculty, especially tenure-track faculty and those at elite institutions, are uniquely positioned to lead resistance on campus.

To be a professor is to have social and cultural capital. This means your words carry weight, especially at your university but also in your community. With this authority comes an obligation to act.

Tenure or tenure-track professors have unusually high job protections. Departmental cultures tend to value and protect individual freedoms, while your institution may have policies in place to protect your academic freedom as well as your job.

Tenure-track faculty are among the higher-earning employees on campus. While it is not easy to move to a new TT position, credentials and networks provide a buffer to unemployment, allowing for contract work or a transition to industry.

The situation is different for staff, including non-tenure instructors. We wrote this resource for all university workers because we believe that the differences between faculty and staff are overstated and that solidarity requires a shared purpose.

But staff, including instructors, typically don't have contractual protections like tenure. Academic freedom policies may not apply to staff. University affiliations may not carry the same authority for those who aren't professors or don't have PhDs.

In a time of crisis, we all need to act. But we need to act from within a context where we understand our position, so we can be true to ourselves and protect our colleagues.



Understanding Freedom of Speech

It can be confusing for academic workers to understand when and how our speech is protected. This can lead to both overconfidence and an excess of fear.

While freedom of speech is enshrined in the US constitution, no individual in the United States is guaranteed the right to speech without consequences. There are few legal protections that would prevent an employer from discriminating against an individual on the basis of their political views or activities, whether they are expressed at work or when you are off-duty.

The following pages describe the partial protections that you may be able to rely on as an academic worker. Some of these protections are limited to workers at public institutions or those based in certain states.

Other protections, such as academic freedom, have limited legal standing. Your right to academic freedom will depend, among other things, on your contract or employee handbook. It will also depend on your position: university staff who are not in research positions may not be covered by academic freedom policies.

Finally, in the current political moment, we must acknowledge the limited relevance of legal protections. In order to comply with an antagonistic government, universities will act in flagrant disregard of the law and their own policies. Lawsuits may overturn these decisions, but they are unlikely to fully rectify their harm.

Being informed about your rights may help you make decisions, but it will not necessarily protect you from discrimination.



Legal and contractual protections

- The First Amendment, which guarantees rights of free speech, protects you from political discrimination *by the government*. In some but not all cases, the First Amendment protects public employees from being fired for expressing their political views outside of work. The First Amendment does not protect private employees.
- Some state laws protect employees from certain kinds of political discrimination from their employers. These include California, New York, Oregon, DC, and Washington. Several states also have laws that protect people from discrimination on the basis of off-duty activities more broadly. It is generally illegal for employers to intrude into private spaces in order to learn about your activities.
- Many universities adhere to principles of academic freedom, which allow teachers and researchers to investigate, discuss, and publish findings without interference, and to speak freely outside of work.

If you are a scholar of Middle Eastern history, for example, you could be protected for writing and teaching about Palestine as long as you adhere to disciplinary standards. If you are not, you could be protected for advocating for Palestine as a private individual outside of work.

These policies alone are not legally binding, however.

- Protection of academic freedom is sometimes written into university collective bargaining agreements, contracts, and faculty handbooks. These documents specify how your right to academic freedom is institutionally and legally protected.

Review these documents carefully, with the help of your union if possible, to understand your rights.



Learn More

NOLO is an educational resource that provides information about the law for individuals and companies.

- *Can employers discriminate based on political beliefs or affiliations?*

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/can-employers-discriminate-based-on-political-beliefs-or-affiliation.html>

- *Off duty conduct and employee rights*

<https://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/off-duty-conduct-employee-rights-33590.html>

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is a professional organization that aims to advance academic freedom, among other goals.

- *Protecting Academic Freedom*

<https://www.aaup.org/our-work/protecting-academic-freedom>

- *Academic Freedom FAQs*

<https://www.aaup.org/programs/academic-freedom/faqs-academic-freedom>

Palestine Legal protects the civil and constitutional rights of people in the U.S. who speak out for Palestinian freedom.

- <https://palestinelegal.org/>



Social Media & Data Privacy


So much political activism is mediated by digital technology. We post fundraisers and news articles on social media, send text messages and emails and calendar invites to discuss our opinions or plan events, conduct research using web browsers and search engines, and use digital maps to navigate to a protest or meeting.

It can be both scary and overwhelming to think about how to protect ourselves from online surveillance, especially when participating in political action. At a fundamental level, everything online can be surveilled, even if you intend it to be private. Experts in digital security often remind us that the goal in most cases is not to be free of risk. The goal is to be intentional and informed when doing political work online.

As you continue to participate in social actions, there are some simple steps you can take to protect yourself. You can restrict activities to off-duty hours; use personal devices; and use software like Firefox, DuckDuckGo, and Signal with strong privacy policies. For some activities, you might also consider taking steps to work anonymously, using a VPN and a disposable email.

There are also a few specific things that university workers should take into account when making decisions about their use of technology.

University work culture often blurs the lines between work and extramural (private) activities, but those distinctions matter when it comes to your protections as a worker. Any public-facing activity that refers to your job, any time you use your work computer or campus wifi, or anything written or published during regular work hours has the potential to be



interpreted by your institution as representing the university—even if you use a disclaimer.

Social media can be particularly tricky for university workers, who may use their platforms for both scholarly and personal community building. Universities typically have specific policies about when and how their employees can talk about politics on social media. Make sure to review your institution's policies and get clear with yourself about how you want to engage online.

Finally, the last year has shown a significant increase in violence against student activists on the part of university and political administrations. As a university worker, you have a special obligation to protect students. This includes ensuring that your use of technology does not put students at risk.

Use the “technology audit” assessment at the end of this workbook to think through your own digital security.

Learn more:

- Take Back the Tech Safety Toolkit
<https://www.takebackthetech.net/be-safe/safety-toolkit>
- Center for Solutions to Online Violence
<https://www.femtechnet.org/csov/>
- Data and Activism resources:
<https://ourdataourselves.tacticaltech.org/projects/data-and-activism/>
- An Activist Guide to Privacy and Safety:
https://www.cyberghostvpn.com/en_US/privacyhub/an-activists-guide-to-online-privacy-and-safety/

Part 2: Assessing Risk





Assessing Risk, Assessing Hope

The remainder of this workbook is made up of a series of assessment exercises that are designed to help you think about your role in speaking out against fascism.

Understanding risk can be difficult. Many of us feel simultaneously angry and afraid, and for good reason. Anger might lead us to take impulsive actions that are unnecessarily risky. At the same time, fear might lead us to be silent when action is called for.

For example: in a moment of outrage, you might choose to re-post a political meme during the workday. This might feel good in the moment, but it has the potential to be a high-risk, low-reward action. On the other hand, you might choose to stay silent when a colleague implies that a faculty member's political views disqualify them for tenure. This is a place where your voice could be impactful in ways that go far beyond a single tenure case, but speaking up might feel dangerous.

The goal of these exercises is to help you differentiate between fear and risk, make decisions to reduce risk, and understand what risks you can afford to take. Ultimately, the hope is that thinking in advance about your choices will empower you to be less impulsive and more intentional, increasing your impact and reducing your risk.



A1: Taking Action

We are all capable of taking action to fight fascism. Which of the actions described here feel possible to you? Which are you already doing?

Extramural Actions (Private and Public)

- Join the local chapter of an advocacy organization
- Attend marches and other public actions
- Call or email your elected officials
- Campaign for pro-democracy politicians
- Donate and raise funds
- Write an op-ed in your local paper

On Duty Actions (Private and Public)

- Defend students & workers who are being targeted
- Defend student activists
- Join and participate in your union (or help organize one!)
- Join and participate in faculty or student governance
- Participate in a university divestment campaign
- Host a film screening on fascism and democracy
- Invite guest speakers to your classroom or a public event
- Organize a panel or table on higher ed and fascism at a conference
- Attend student actions such as marches and talks
- Organize an adjacent event, for example, on data privacy
- Organize a chapter of Faculty for Justice in Palestine
<https://www.fjp-network.org/>



A2: Environmental Safety

The following questions are designed to help you reflect on the culture of your institution, the conditions of your employment, and the support network you have at work.

Remember: while some of our colleagues may be exceptional, our institutions cannot and will not love us back.

1. Do you know of anyone at your workplace who is visibly speaking out against fascism or for Palestine, either on campus or privately? What actions are they taking?
2. Do you know of anyone at your workplace who has experienced discrimination because of their political views? What happened?



Environmental Safety, continued

3. Do you have any colleagues who could be your allies or co-conspirators when strategizing to take action? Who are they?
4. Who is your direct supervisor (i.e. department chair)? Do you know of a case when they were asked to defend an employee from discrimination of any kind? How did they handle it?
5. Who manages your administrative unit (i.e. dean)? Do you know of a case when they were asked to defend an employee from discrimination of any kind? How did they handle it?



A3: Understanding Fear

Which of the following are you comfortable facing as a consequence of taking action in support of democracy? Use this to reflect on the spaces where you feel courageous, and where you feel fear.

- It would be okay if my colleagues / students liked me less
- It would be okay if I was denied an opportunity to speak, collaborate, or join a committee or project
- It would be okay if I was formally reprimanded
- It would be okay if my contract was not renewed
- It would be okay if I was passed over for a merit-based raise or bonus
- It would be okay if I was denied tenure or promotion
- It would be okay if I lost my job
- It would be okay if I had to change careers

Understanding Hope

Which of the following do you hope to experience as a result of taking action?

- I hope to feel less guilty
- I hope to feel more empowered
- I hope to help support vulnerable students and colleagues
- I hope to help empower student activists
- I hope to feel more connected to my institution or city
- I hope to help educate my community
- I hope to become part of grassroots change
- I hope to model what it means to be an engaged academic



The following table contains a list of possible actions. For each action, would you feel safe, uncomfortable, or afraid? Use this to understand where your limits are, and where you can offer an enthusiastic (or cautious) yes!

Action	Afraid	Uncom- fortable	Safe
Speaking at a large off-campus public protest			
Marching in a large off-campus public protest			
Publishing a local op-ed			
Publishing a national op-ed			
Volunteering with an off-campus advocacy group			
Circulating a fundraiser on social media			
Sharing information about a fundraiser privately			
Attending an event hosted by a student advocacy group on campus			
Providing faculty/staff support for a student advocacy group			
Having private conversations with students who are publicly anti-fascist			



A4: Conduct a Tech Audit

These guiding questions are intended to help you start thinking about how you use technology in your organizing work. For many of us, security is appealing, but the steps to getting there can feel overwhelming. Consider if there are two or three changes you want to make to feel more secure.

- 1) What are your goals? Are you trying to comply with university policies? To prevent the university from knowing about your activities? To protect other people from being tracked by your university? To keep your work anonymous?
- 2) Schedule: When are you on or off duty? Which activities do you want to restrict to off-duty: sending emails, texting, conducting research, posting political opinions online?
- 3) Email: When organizing, do you want to use your work email? Personal email? Do you need an anonymous account?
- 4) Messaging: Which platforms (Messenger, WhatsApp, Signal) do you want to use for organizing? For sharing info? Do you need to turn on disappearing messages?



Conduct a Tech Audit, continued

5) Social media: Which accounts are associated with your job? Which accounts, if any, do you want to use to post about politics? Have you turned off location and activity tracking?

6) Maps, Calendars, and Documents: Do you want to use your work accounts, personal accounts, or anonymous accounts? Have you turned off location tracking?

7) Browsers: Are you using a secure browser like Firefox, and a secure search engine like DuckDuckGo? Do you need to set up a VPN so you can work anonymously?

8) Machines: Do you use technology that belongs to your university? Can you move away from using employer tech?



A5: Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a way of thinking about the kinds of risks we are able to take. Collectively, we support highly vulnerable people as they take actions to protect themselves, while calling on those who are less vulnerable to be more visible and bold in their work.

How vulnerable are you at work? As you answer each question below, consider whether you are made to feel 1) very vulnerable, 2) somewhat vulnerable, 3) somewhat secure, or 4) very secure.

	1	2	3	4
How secure is your current contract?				
How secure are you in your profession? Could you find another equivalent (or lower-paying) job?				
Could you find income outside your job (like contract work)?				
How do your identities (ethnic, racial, religious, gender, ability) impact your job security?				
How do your debts, expenses, or financial resources impact your dependence on your current job?				
How would teaching or researching anti-fascist topics impact your job security?				
How would sharing your political opinions impact your job security?				



A6: Taking Action

Use this assessment to check in with yourself if you're unsure whether a specific action is right for you.

What action do you want to take?

Write down a single negative consequence that you fear you might experience if you take this action. (For example: *my supervisor might reprimand me.*) Follow that with a single positive outcome that you might experience. (For example: *I might feel less guilty.*) Repeat until you cannot think of any other consequences you might face. For every negative outcome, you must offer a positive outcome.

How likely is it that you will face these consequences?

What would happen if the worst case scenario happened to you? Would you be okay?

Taking Action in Higher Ed: A risk assessment guide for academic staff in the United States was written by current and former university workers in the summer of 2025. It is based on *How To Stand Up for Palestine*, published in 2024 by activists in East Tennessee.

The information in this resource does not constitute legal advice.

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