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Campus Policing: Eight Steps Toward Abolition

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Over the last 60 years, campus police departments have been established as the main form of security and safety in colleges and universities. In recent years, higher education leaders have been forced to confront the negative impact of police presence on Black and racially minoritized campus populations. Following the insights of student activists and abolitionist movements, we argue that the nature of campus policing has been misunderstood and misrepresented, consequently obscuring the inherent racist violence that policing generates. We propose that higher education leaders and policymakers take seriously contemporary calls to defund and abolish campus police in order to craft safer and more empowering campus environments for minoritized populations on campus and in surrounding communities. We synthesize the demands of social movement organizations and work by scholar–activists to outline eight steps to campus police abolition, which provide concrete humanizing, transformative alternatives to the current system of punishment, surveillance, and control.

Keywords: campus policing, abolition, racial justice, campus safety

A uniformed, armed police officer strolling through the quad is a normal and expected sight on over 900 college and university campuses (Reaves, 2015). While it may be difficult to imagine a campus without police, the modern campus police department observed today is a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged in the 1960s in the name of student safety (Sloan, 1992). In recent years, however, higher education leaders have been increasingly called to confront how policing as a primary strategy for campus safety replicates the surveillance, control, and punishment of minoritized populations, especially Black students, on and off campus. Just as the broader institution of policing in society is designed to uphold oppressive systems and hegemonic power relations (Alang et al., 2023; Deivanayagam et al., 2021), campus policing is not exempt from performing oppressive functions simply by virtue of being located within an educational setting (Daggett, 2013; Merkwae, 2015; Sussman, 2012), (re)framed as campus/public safety (Dizon, 2023b), or directly reporting to university leaders (Peak et al., 2008).

In 2015, Black-led student activist groups from 76 U.S. colleges and universities issued demands for reforms to campus policing, mainly through the requirement of police to complete cultural competence training and student inclusion on police oversight boards (Chessman & Wayt, 2016). At the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, however, Black students specifically demanded the university defund and disarm its campus police department as well as take action to discontinue its criminalization

of "working-class, poor, and homeless Black and Brown people … in Chapel Hill and Carrboro," stating, "Policing as an institution must be abolished and must be replaced with restorative and transformative justice practices rather than functioning as a mouth into our penal system" (#WeDemandUNC, 2015, pp. 8–9). Still, as incidents of police harassment and violence toward minoritized and vulnerable communities have continued, most notably with the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the demand for the abolition of police in U.S. cities and on college and university campuses has grown (Baldwin, 2021; Sainato, 2020). Former undergraduate student body president at the University of Minnesota, Kerandi (2020), remarked on the failure of reforms in her open letter to university administration: "We have lost interest in discussion, community conversations, and 'donut hours.' We no longer wish to have a meeting or come to an agreement, there is no middle ground."

The shift from reform to abolition in the public discourse reflects the long-standing evidence that police, including campus police, often harm rather than protect those disproportionately vulnerable to criminalization and state-sanctioned violence. This includes the extent to which campus police directly participate in violence against minoritized students, staff, and faculty and their involvement in off-campus incidents (Watkins, 2020). We must not forget the University of Cincinnati Police officer who shot and killed Samuel DuBose in 2015 or the deadly shooting of Jason Washington by Portland State University Police in 2018, both of which occurred off-campus (Crombie, 2019; Perez-Pena, 2015). Altogether, the growing recognition by campus and community stakeholders that their safety and well-being are at risk of being threatened, rather than aided, by campus police has encouraged a broad-based movement for police-free campuses by coalitions (e.g., Cops Off Campus Coalition) and student-led organizations.

As abolitionist educator and organizer Kaba (2020) suggests, to reduce harms that continue despite and because of campus police, "we need more and effective options for the greatest number of

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people" (para. 5). Given the immense resources and relative autonomy of many higher education institutions, they have the unique ability to reimagine campus safety from an intersectional and abolitionist lens. Over the last decade, several postsecondary institutions have made efforts to address their relationship to the institution of slavery as well as the vestiges of anti-Black racism in present-day policies, practices, and culture (Bogues et al., 2021; Harris, 2020; Presidential Committee on Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery, 2022). Yet, campus policing remains largely unaddressed despite the foundation of U.S. policing in the history of slave patrols, the enforcement of Slave Codes, and, subsequently, racial segregation and political suppression in the Jim Crow south (Hassett-Walker, 2021; Lepore, 2020; Potter, 2013; Robinson, 2017).

In this brief, we draw on critical insights offered by scholars and activists who have theorized and experimented with humanizing non-law enforcement alternatives to address harm, violence, safety, and well-being. Then, we outline eight steps toward the abolition of campus policing that higher education practitioners can enact to craft safer and more empowering campus environments for minoritized students, staff, faculty, and surrounding communities. This brief is primarily instructive to campus leaders who are positioned to reimagine campus safety policy, practice, and culture. Student affairs educators, faculty, staff, and administrators all have spheres of control through which they can significantly reduce cultural practices of policing and the ascribed authority of campus police. Student leaders may also derive ideas for campaigns and programs that help generate campus-wide dialog and politically educate peers on problems in campus policing and safety.

Rethinking Campus Police and Safety

To understand the urgency of divesting from policing in favor of non-law enforcement alternatives, higher education practitioners must critically question the narrative that police are the most appropriate response to campus safety issues. President Nixon's 1970 Commission on Campus Unrest coopted the discourse of safety and diversity to promote the buildup of campus security as a response to student activists—often Black, Asian, Latinx, and native students—challenging the status quo with demands for racial and social justice (Ferguson, 2017). Falsely equating the police with safety has led to the institutionalization of campus police across the higher education sector. Approximately 95% of 4-year postsecondary institutions enrolling 2,500 or more students employ police officers (Reaves, 2015). Misperceptions among students, staff, and faculty feed images of campus police as low-level security guards who are not "real" police (Allen, 2021, p. 102). In fact, campus officers are trained in the same police academies as municipal officers, and a majority carry firearms and have the power to arrest (Reaves, 2015).

Additionally, campus police officers exercise authority beyond typical law enforcement duties. Officers regularly collaborate with student affairs departments and human resources to address workplace issues, mental health crises, and threat management (Penven & Janosik, 2012). Campus police also support municipal law enforcement and patrol off-campus (Reaves, 2015). Consequently, campus constituents and local residents are exposed to armed officers during the course of daily life and in non-crime-related situations. Although purported to be gentler than municipal police, contact with a campus police officer can result in violence and death. Campus police

are armed with lethal and nonlethal weapons, including military equipment (Weissman, 2020). The militarization of police has been associated with increased fatalities from officer-involved shootings (Delehanty et al., 2017). The violence perpetrated by campus police toward vulnerable populations—including queer students and students in mental health crises—directly contradicts their purported role as safety providers. There have been notable incidents in which campus police killed a student experiencing mental distress and unarmed Black people off-campus (DeMio, 2015; Selk et al., 2017).

Higher education leaders further legitimize campus police by responding with ineffective reforms when violations of dignity and livelihood occur. In particular, popular police reforms are considered "best practice" despite the lack of rigorous evaluation and evidence of long-term impact. For instance, Engel et al. (2020) reviewed studies on body-worn cameras, de-escalation and implicit bias training, early-intervention systems, and civilian oversight boards. They concluded that studies of these reforms (a) demonstrated limited or mixed evidence regarding their efficacy in changing police behavior and (b) suffered from weak research designs. The authors also found that the adoption of body-worn cameras and early intervention systems by the University of Cincinnati Police Department did not prove to be effective in reducing the use of force or the likelihood of a fatal police–citizen encounter, such as the case of Samuel Dubose's death at the hands of university police in 2015. As a final example, 79% of campus police departments include community policing in their policies (Reaves, 2015). However, despite acquiring resources for shifting toward a community policing paradigm, Hancock (2016) suggested that campus law enforcement "turned to community policing not out of dedication to its ideals but to help meet the ever-growing financial demands of campus security," rendering such policies wholly ineffective (p. 473). Therefore, such reforms have thus not restricted the ability of campus police to inequitably surveil, detain, arrest, and harm campus constituents as they go about daily campus life.

The prevalence and management of campus police reflect a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of police in the United States. The buildup of campus police over the last 60 years and the belief that reforms can address officer-involved deaths and misconduct assume that police, and police alone, promote safety and security. Higher education practitioners must begin to consider the track record of harm and violence that accompany armed officers. Moreover, we encourage the consideration of abolitionist praxis as a foundation upon which to base campus safety policies and practices.

Eight Steps Toward Abolition

For decades, critical scholars and activists in the United States have organized to promote alternatives to the retributive and punishment-focused criminal legal system, which disproportionately targets minoritized and vulnerable communities. These efforts are understood as a call for abolition, defined as "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment" (Critical Resistance, n.d.). Alternatives include community-based programs for violence intervention and prevention, restorative justice, mental health, and noncriminal crisis response. Examples of these efforts demonstrate positive local impacts, which include reducing exposure to the harms associated with police contact and incarceration (Jacobs et al., 2021; Latimer et al., 2005; Ritchie et al., 2020). Abolition means

dismantling institutionalized systems of violence while recognizing the power of communities to develop "a vision of a restructured society in a world where we have everything we need" (Kaba, 2020, para. 3). Abolitionist movements identify the root causes of harm in social inequality rather than pathologizing communities as inherently criminal. Organizers work to ensure that basic needs are met for communities to thrive with solutions that do not rely on the police. Abolitionist alternatives include projects for mutual aid, affordable and safe housing, food security, and positive school environments, all of which provide communities with the infrastructure that fosters safety and minimizes violence (S. L. Johnson, 2009; Kondo et al., 2018; Spade, 2020; Wen et al., 2017).

The present moment calls upon higher education practitioners and policymakers to explore non-law enforcement alternatives for campus safety and well-being. Specifically, these alternatives should neither rely upon police nor facilitate the involvement of campus constituents with the broader criminal legal system. As Sainato (2020) has detailed, students, staff, and faculty have suggested options for reallocating institutional funds away from campus police and toward housing, mental health services, trauma-informed care for sexual assault survivors, and other culturally relevant services. In other instances, some colleges and universities have already implemented humanizing, transformative alternatives to punitive practices, such as restorative justice and Good Samaritan policies (Karp, 2019; Oster-Aaland & Eighmy, 2007).

The following eight steps toward the abolition of campus police synthesize and interpret abolitionist demands of student activists and social movement organizations, as well as the work of scholar–activists as applied to college and university contexts (Baldwin, 2021; A. Y. Davis, 2003, 2022; Dizon, 2023a, 2023b; Gilmore, 2022; Herzing, 2017; Johnson & Dizon, 2021; Kaba, 2021; Rodríguez, 2021; Spade, 2020). For instance, the title of this brief is directly inspired by "8 to Abolition: Abolitionist Policy Changes to Demand from Your City Officials."[1] Like the authors of "8 to Abolition," we recognize that campus police abolition will not happen overnight. However, measures to reduce the costs, scale, scope, authority, and legitimacy of campus police create the opening needed to cultivate police-free campuses that are safer, more inclusive, and life-affirming. We recognize that while our list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, it offers important direction for abolitionist praxis in postsecondary contexts. Understanding that abolition is a collaborative process of imagining and experimenting, for which there is no singular correct starting point, interested practitioners should engage these eight steps as a set of possibilities rather than a finite prescription. We also encourage readers to examine and meditate on these recommendations as a way of shifting individual and institutional paradigms about policing and safety within their spheres of influence. Last, let these recommendations for practice serve as an invitation upon which those more deeply immersed in the everyday management of college and university campuses can amend and expound to fit their particular geographic and institutional context.

1. Defund Campus Police Departments

Defunding campus police calls for the reallocation of resources (i.e., financial and material) spent on policing to preventative and survivor-centered services for campus safety and well-being. This also includes reducing the expansive role of campus police in responding to issues of campus safety that do not require armed officers (e.g., mental health and wellness checks). Reducing the campus police budget can be achieved through salary reductions, firing officers with excessive force complaints and egregious misconduct records, elimination of funds for public relations, suspension of paid administrative leave for officers under investigation, hiring freezes, discontinued use of billable campus police services by other campus departments, and the termination of contracts with municipal law enforcement agencies and private security companies. Additionally, future proposals to expand campus police budgets must be rejected, including funding proposals that aim to reform departments through new programs and initiatives. Last, college and university administrators should provide campus and community stakeholders with a detailed accounting of previous and current campus police budgets and year-to-year plans to reduce funding.

Defunding campus police need not be a politically contentious decision. California State University, Fullerton, reduced its campus police budget through layoffs and management reduction in light of COVID-19 financial impacts (Benda, 2020). Campuses thus have the ability to reduce and reallocate police budgets and with more intention. Los Angeles Unified School District cut the number of school resource officers and diverted $25 million from the school police department to educational services (Gomez, 2021). Institutions can develop a rationale for reallocating budgetary priorities to align with their educational, student-centered missions.

2. Disarm and Demilitarize the Campus Police

Campus police departments have become increasingly armed and militarized, posing a danger to campus constituents. Rifles, shotguns, grenades, sidearms, batons, pepper spray, and tasers are among the arsenal deployed by campus police officers (Reaves, 2015). Additionally, over 100 institutions have acquired military equipment through the federal 1033 program (Weissman, 2020). Steps to disarm and demilitarize campus police departments include discontinuation of lethal and so-called less-than-lethal weapons and military equipment; termination of participation in the Department of Defense 1033 program; prohibition of campus police officer involvement in counter-terrorism/counter-insurgency efforts and local/federal law enforcement investigations; and training exchanges with municipal police, foreign law enforcement agencies, and the military. Additionally, administrators should assess and evaluate the psychological and material impact of a militarized police presence on the campus and within the local community. Last, campus police departments should prohibit the use of proactive policing, including pretextual stops of presumed campus outsiders and other broken windows[2] policing strategies.

Examples of turning back the militarization of campus police include the University of Maryland, which announced in 2020 that it would return equipment obtained through the 1033 program. Portland State University had an unarmed police force until permitting firearms in 2014. Organizers pressured the university to

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[1] https://www.8toabolition.com/

[2] In the criminology literature, broken windows theory suggests a focus by police on minor crimes (e.g., vandalism, loitering, and fare evasion) that signal antisocial behavior and civil disorder can prevent or deter future crimes, especially major or violent crimes, and create an environment of lawful order.

overturn that decision in 2021. Two years later, the university rearmed the police but did not inform the campus until 2 months later. These examples demonstrate that there is no defensible logic to have an armed and militarized campus police force, as decisions can be made and reversed depending on the current political climate.

3. Assess Safety Policies and Practices

Due to legal mandates and reactions in the immediate aftermath of extreme violence, higher education leaders and policymakers have implemented common-sense safety policies that may not necessarily be endorsed by students, staff, and faculty (Schafer et al., 2018). Higher education practitioners and lawmakers should review how campus safety policies and practices address the root causes of insecurity, harm, and violence. Institutional actions can include the audit of campus safety policies that require police involvement; the elimination of mandatory campus police involvement in non-crime-related incidents; the investigation of incidents of excessive force and misconduct by campus police officers; the development and implementation of a climate assessment among students, staff, faculty, and local community members to understand safety, well-being, and experiences with campus police; and the development of appropriate institutional policies, practices, and resources that accurately and comprehensively address safety beyond a narrow focus on campus crime.

There are numerous examples of universities and colleges assessing campus police services and safety issues. All police chiefs within the California State University system banned the use of carotid restraints[3] (California State University, 2020). The University of Cincinnati, Portland State University, the University of Maryland, and the University of California system have either appointed internal task forces or commissioned an external audit of campus police and safety. The University of Iowa recognized that its current safety systems were not effective for many students, including feeling unsafe around campus police (Matthes, 2021). When assessing safety policies and practices, institutional leaders should be mindful of resorting to popular reforms and consider policy alternatives that do not include or augment police power.

4. Decriminalize Political Expression and Minoritized Identities

Campus police departments emerged in direct response to racially minoritized student activism (Ferguson, 2017). Political dissent, especially when waged against the university itself, and non-White identities continue to be targets of campus police forces. Colleges and universities must decriminalize political expression and proactively protect minoritized populations from police violence. Administrators should cease deploying campus police against political demonstrations on campus and be prohibited from filing lawsuits against students, staff, faculty, and community activists. Campus protest policies that discipline students, staff, and faculty should also be rescinded, alongside the expungement of existing disciplinary records for students, staff, and faculty related to political expression. To shift the campus racial climate, administrators, faculty, and staff can work to proactively shift the campus discourse of safety to eliminate racist and classist stereotypes that frame racially minoritized and unhoused people as threats. Specific steps include removing language that reinforces stereotypes from safety communications and policies and prohibiting the use of pretextual stops by campus police.

Institutional leaders may be challenged to decriminalize political expression when under pressure. The University of Arizona and the University of California, San Diego, faced criticism in the past for filing charges against student activists (a continuing practice as many institutions seek to criminalize current activism in support of Palestinian self-determination). These incidents were viewed as caving in to pressure from conservative media and as retaliation for challenging the administration (Leingang, 2019; Perez, 2023). The other side of this issue is when administrators have been criticized for permitting controversial speakers on campus. Institutional leaders can carefully consider the differences between free speech and hate speech to prioritize the dignitary safety of students. Said differently, leaders should give weight to the consequences of words and images on minoritized populations and their status of being seen as equals (Delgado, 1993; Stokes & Davis, 2022). Prioritizing dignitary safety was evident in the University of Minnesota's decision to prohibit the use of generic racial suspect descriptions as a means of mitigating a hostile campus racial climate for Black students (Jaschik, 2015).

5. Eliminate Campus Stakeholder Involvement in Policing

Structures that encourage, empower, or mandate campus stakeholders to call upon campus police contribute to the ascribed authority of armed police officers in various aspects of campus life. Student affairs departments regularly collaborate with campus police for non-law enforcement issues (Penven & Janosik, 2012). Faculty and students are encouraged to collaborate with campus police in safety planning (Perrotti, 2007). In short, faculty, staff, and students are empowered to police one another and whomever they deem to be a threat to their sense of security. Alarmingly, racist and class-based stereotypes have motivated campus constituents to call campus police (Dizon, 2023a). It is imperative to not only abolish campus police departments but also a culture of policing that normalizes state-sanctioned violence and criminalizes differences along the axes of race, class, and gender. Reducing stakeholder involvement in policing the campus could include discouraging calls to campus police to report Black and other racially minoritized people as suspicious, as well as calls to criminalize unhoused people; the provision of nonpolice alternatives for non-crime-related incidents; the development of crisis management protocols that limit the use of campus police; training campus stakeholders in de-escalation tactics; and education on the historical and present harm of policing on minoritized populations.

Examples of these steps include the passage of the Caution Against Racially and Exploitative Non-Emergencies Act that makes racially motivated phone calls to 911 illegal in the city of San Francisco (Cramer, 2020). In response to student and labor organizing on campus, the University of California, Riverside, and the University of Michigan have both made public commitments to provide campus constituents with unarmed, nonpolice

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[3] A carotid restraint is a chokehold technique that restricts blood flow to the brain causing temporary loss of consciousness. Following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, such techniques were explicitly prohibited by the U.S. Department of Justice (2021) "unless that standard of necessity for use of deadly force is satisfied" (p. 2).

emergency responders (Fitzgerald, 2023; Ghori, 2022). Research demonstrates that student affairs professionals and faculty are in need of crisis training (Holzweiss & Walker, 2018; Wang & Hutchins, 2010). Although staff and faculty should not be seen as primary crisis responders, it may be helpful to provide the skills to successfully de-escalate and respond to crises given their constant, direct interactions with students and other campus constituents.

6. Establish Restorative and Transformative Justice Options for Conduct Issues

In K–12 schools, critical educators have responded to the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline and the presence of school resource officers (i.e., school police) with efforts to integrate restorative justice practices as disciplinary alternatives (Winn, 2018). Restorative justice refers to a framework that "begins with a concern for victims and how to meet their needs, for repairing the harm as much as possible, both concretely and symbolically" (Zehr, 2014, p. 17). Similarly, grassroots organizers have experimented with transformative justice practices to address harm and violence in their communities while addressing systems of oppression (Project NIA, 2013). A transformative justice framework seeks to repair harm without relying on the criminal-legal system because of its systemic inequities. Transformative justice analyzes the structural conditions in which harm occurs and is motivated to prevent future harm by creating life-affirming resources and systems (Mingus, 2022). Building from these traditions, some colleges and universities have undertaken restorative justice efforts in student conduct and implemented bystander trainings to promote safety and reduce sexual violence (Jouriles et al., 2018).[4] Institutional leaders can go further by working with student affairs staff and students to humanize non-law enforcement safety personnel and crisis management procedures, develop victim- and survivor-centered responses to encourage accountability and reporting, defund and eliminate the conditions that necessitate policing, and develop policies and practices that mitigate the root causes of possible harm campus stakeholders may encounter.

7. Invest in Campus and Community Care

Colleges and universities have become increasingly corporatized and shaped by neoliberal market forces (Kezar et al., 2019). The emphasis on profits results in leadership and accountability that rarely consider ethics, equity, and justice (Giroux, 2002). Financial investments in campus police signal institutional interests to preserve control and avoid legal liability. Maintaining the status quo hurts the majority of campus constituents, as evidenced by underfunded student services, less-than-livable wages and salaries for campus workers, the overreliance on contingent and adjunct labor, and enrollment strategies to attract full tuition-paying students over students from low-income families and minoritized backgrounds. Demands to divest from policing recognize the need to reinvest institutional finances to create structures and resources that center groups who have been systematically disadvantaged (Dizon et al., 2022). Institutional leaders have already begun to invest in campus and community care by ensuring students have access to affordable food, basic needs services (Abdulahi, 2023), and peer support networks (Greenbaum, 2018). Additional steps include providing culturally sustaining mental health services and affordable housing; compensating staff and faculty with livable wages and

salaries; diverting campus police funds to increase scholarships for students; creating p20 pipeline programs with local school districts; establishing food banks for local residents; permitting local residents to access campus resources, such as the library, public events, and green space; lobbying for laws that reduce poverty; and paying property taxes or payments in lieu of taxes as a means to redistribute wealth and resources back into public services and local communities.

8. Create Inclusive Campus Environments

Higher education institutions must address the legacy of racism and its influence on policies and practices, including policing and security (Patton, 2016). Police abolition is intimately tied to movements for racial justice, such as the Black Lives Matter movement/Movement for Black Lives. Colleges and universities must do more to invest in resources to admit, retain, and graduate students from minoritized backgrounds, including formerly incarcerated students. While the following recommendations are currently in operation across campuses, they can be intentionally tied to an abolitionist commitment to reimagine who the university is for and move away from higher education's exclusionary, racist, and White supremacist origins. Efforts include the recruitment, retention, and promotion of minoritized staff, faculty, and administrators; supporting identity-based student organizations through funding and advising; establishing support for courses and programs of study in race- (e.g., African American and Asian American studies) and gender-based (e.g., women's and queer studies) epistemologies and other critical fields; creating and funding identity-based resource centers that provide care and support for minoritized students at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and citizenship; and educating campus constituents on principles of equity and inclusion.

Conclusion

The hegemony of the police has resulted in the belief that an armed, militarized force is integral to higher education's status as a public good. However, a safe campus is not one in which police officers and deputies of the campus safety enterprise (i.e., administrators, faculty, staff, and students) routinely criminalize Black and other minoritized people through surveillance and punishment. Opponents consider demands for abolition as naive idealism. However, abolition is a practical strategy to confront inequities in higher education and restructure resources and policies to provide disproportionately vulnerable campus stakeholders with the capacity to thrive (Kaba, 2020). Abolitionist thinking invites all involved in higher education, from students to researchers to policymakers, to confront our passive reliance on police and the restrictions we have placed on our imaginations to envision police-free campuses. Fostering an abolitionist ethos throughout campus policy, practice, and culture requires that higher education leaders and campus constituents dramatically reimagine relationships with local communities, elected officials, alumni, and trustees. Relationships that have not previously been considered important may be critical to elevate and prioritize, while other relationships may need to shift and end. Davis et al. (2022) ask the difficult

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[4] See the University of Denver's restorative justice approach: https://studentaffairs.du.edu/student-rights-responsibilities/restorative-practices

question, "How to draw a line when the work is unfolding and unfinished?" (p. 167). For colleges and universities, it is past due to take part in this unfolding work that ultimately has no line because abolition moves us *toward* the horizon of a perpetual remaking of our campuses and our world into places in which we can all be free.

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