

Worksheet: The University as Sanctuary?

Part of the symposium, [“Offering Refuge, Building Solidarity: Universities as Sanctuaries”](#)

Co-presented by the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU and NYU Sanctuary.

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- *How can universities offer physical harbor and amplify the voices and experiences of vulnerable or marginalized communities?*

This panel brought together activists and scholars from NYU and other universities to exchange lessons learned from events in New York, Iran, Turkey, the UAE, and Nigeria, and discuss the possibilities and challenges faced in transforming the university into a sanctuary for undocumented people, students fighting oppressive governments, and authors and academics fleeing political persecution. This worksheet condenses key points raised during the session.

- *How might we think about different detention regimes together?*
- *What do scholars and students who have faced repressive conditions have to teach us? What can we learn from the history of abolition and sanctuary in the United States?*

Benefits of organizing on campus include the large capacity to collaborate, a defined network of organizations and clubs who can work together, opportunities for intersectional analysis of issues, and a structure for mentorship, which builds sustainable organizations and movements. Goals in campus organizing are often focused on feasible demands because university is a smaller and more defined community.

- *What are the limits of our intellectual and critical practices? And how can activists and scholars learn from each other across campuses, and generations?*

Reflecting on Iran, one panelist noted that “student demands can start out in a relatively reformist framework” (i.e. freedom of expression) and “escalate to challenge fundamental state repression.” This is something we have observed in campaigns for sanctuary on US campuses, where concerns for immigrant and undocumented are connected to anti-detention and pro-divestment efforts.

The progressive, outward images of universities are often deceiving. We need to make intentional policy to create sanctuary, because declaring sanctuary is powerful. Universities have created necessary (though often underfunded, and under-resourced) spaces for students of color and LGBTQ+ students, and these spaces are needed for undocumented students. Declaring the university a sanctuary campus gives students the security to come out. While the university makes a fuss about not wanting to attract

federal attention, the university serves its students and employees, not the federal government. Making the university a sanctuary also means using the classroom as a place to mold skills around civil disobedience that transcend the university context.

Likewise, “leaders of think tanks, like university administrators, like to project a sense that they are always independent and that their financing has no influence on what they do.” But foreign governments and corporations spend millions of dollars each year funding think tanks with minimal transparency, thus legitimizing oppressive governments while limiting criticism and dissent. Western universities are often drawn to non-democratic states *because of, not despite*, their authoritarian tendencies.

States often target academics whose work is critical of and contradicts the arguments of their governments. We need to protect this critical research. A crackdown on academic freedom does not only take the form of direct attacks against professors. Economic restructuring in US universities leads to cuts in funding and the privatization of research, this is a type of authoritarianism.

- *How can we “prepare ourselves in a different way” as we continue our organizing efforts within and beyond the university?*

In terms of activism across borders, “we live in an interconnected world with a glut of digital information, but little solidarity with people actually living in repressive regimes.” Solidarity requires actual movements in solidarity with each other—not a top-down NGO way of promoting human rights everywhere but here. The basis of solidarity needs to be in a critique of US society, undermining its moral high ground. Real solidarity cannot reinforce an imperial narrative.

“Activism is like a faith movement. When you’re convinced of it, it will happen.”