

Deconstructing the institutional lines made for faculty activists: Facing the fear and power of intentionally crossing the line

Nora Timmerman

Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, USA

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Abstract

“Crossing the line” has a negative implication, implying trespass, boundary-crossing, a violation. The authors of the 2024 SRHE call for papers point out the challenges universities face to navigate the “line between social critique, dissent, and insubordination.” In this paper, I use oral history interviews with faculty activists, literature, and theory to deconstruct the notion of “crossing the line” in academic activism. I answer the question: what kinds of institutional “lines” are created for faculty activists, how are those lines reinforced, and why and when do faculty cross them? My paper suggests that line crossing is defined by a power relationship between employers and employees, and that this line is constituted by employees taking power through a refusal to cooperate with what the institution needs to function. Thus, crossing the line is not simply an inappropriate act, but possibly a strategic political action.

Full paper

“Crossing the line” has a negative implication, implying trespass, boundary-crossing, a violation. The authors of the 2024 SRHE call for papers point out the challenges universities face to navigate the “line between social critique, dissent, and insubordination.” In this paper, I deconstruct the notion of “the line” in academic activism with a specific focus on the “lines” created by and for faculty activists. I answer the question: what kinds of institutional “lines” are created for faculty activists, how are those lines reinforced, and why and when do faculty cross them? To clarify, this paper investigates the often unspoken, but still very much felt and enforced institutional rules, limits, or boundaries that guide faculty activist conduct. Things like betrayal, dishonesty, and assault, are also examples of “crossing a line,” but this paper is focused instead on institutional, not interpersonal, line crossings.

Data for this paper comes from three sources. First, I analyzed 10 oral history interviews with faculty activists from four U.S.-based postsecondary institutions, each of which participated in sustained, collaborative, and disruptive forms of campus activism aligned with a social movement during the 20th Century. Five of these interviews are from faculty at the University of Michigan who participated in anti-Vietnam war activism, three from San Francisco State University who went on strike for five months for racial liberation, one from the University of Hawaii who coordinated a blockade for an Indigenous-led anti-eviction movement, and one from faculty at Columbia who participated in anti-apartheid sit-ins. Second, I draw from an extensive review of the research literature on faculty activism. Finally, I bring in

auto-ethnographic notes from the current and unfolding faculty involvement at my university's pro-Palestinian encampment movement.

First, what kinds of institutional “lines” are created for faculty activists? Some institutional lines for faculty activism are written in policy. For example, most public postsecondary institutions have policies dictating how faculty may exercise their personal right to protest as citizens, but not as representatives of the institution. Yet, one of the most powerful lines created for faculty activists is the line between behaviour that allows the institution to function and behaviour that “clogs” the institution by disrupting its functioning (Piven, 2017). For example, there is “a line” between being a faculty mentor for a student club that writes a letter to ask for divestment, and being a faculty member who sets up a tent on the lawn and does not willingly leave until a divestment demand is met. This line is constituted by refusal to do what others depend on you for, it is a line that draws its power from interdependence: the institution depends on its employees for its functioning, and if (enough) employees withdraw their cooperation, the institution cannot function (Piven, 2006).

Second, how are institutional lines of acceptable faculty activism (re)enforced? Lines between acceptable and unacceptable faculty activism are enforced through a range of overt and perceived forces. Law enforcement officers forcefully removed students from my university last week and charged them with trespassing; if faculty had been in the encampment with them, they would also have been forcefully removed. In addition to the overt use of force, cultural norms of institutional loyalty are strong amongst educators (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Marshall & Anderson, 2009) and in this historical moment of widespread precarity in higher education, the lack of job security is wielded both from outside and inside of faculty communities to instill fear of job loss for any activist conduct that falls outside the lines of acceptable expression (Timmerman, 2018). One University of Michigan faculty member I interviewed explained a shift in faculty culture as one of the reasons faculty stay within the lines of what is expected of them: “how would you form a counterculture these days with faculty? They aren’t feeling countercultural. They’re not interested in counterculture. But the students are.”

Given the risks, why and when do faculty cross institutional lines of acceptable activist conduct? The intensity with which the line of acceptable activism is managed is proportional to the power held within its breaking. It is heavily policed (figuratively and literally) because the university cannot function when enough employees (or students) cross the line. The ability to shut down the university gives groups of faculty power over those who need the institution to function, which is precisely why groups cross that line. Thus, crossing the line is not simply a risky move, an act of insubordination, or something that is culturally inappropriate. Crossing the line may be a strategic political action.

References

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