

## The Campus as Beautiful Object: Examining Implicit Binary Oppositions in a University Protest

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### Abstract

Indiana University shut down an encampment protest on its campus in August 2024. This paper examines how the stakeholders in that event fit into Helen Horowitz's (1987) framework of campus identity. By reflecting on the events through this lens, the paper seeks to examine how unstated binary oppositions like "insider vs. outsider" can be as influential as explicitly identified oppositions like "pro- vs. anti-Palestine." By applying Horowitz's model to contemporary events, scholars of higher education can address disparate campus conflicts with uniform language and draw comparisons more clearly between them.

### Keywords

Protest, student identity, institutional affiliation

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In April 2024, students at Columbia University began an encampment protest on their campus, urging Columbia to divest from Israel amidst the ongoing conflict in Gaza (Banerjee, 2024). Indiana University's Bloomington campus was the site of a similar encampment (Josenhans, 2024). In this paper, I will reflect on some of the language used in response to Indiana University's encampment and how it connects to the way institutional stakeholders understand their relationship to the university. I will approach this through applying Helen Horowitz's (1987) campus life framework. Specifically, I will focus on her archetypes of "insider," "rebel," and "outsider," how to apply these concepts to the events at Indiana University, and the utility of applying the framework to campus conflict more generally.

### **Terms of Opposition**

In reaction to the protest on campus, Indiana University's Board of Trustees passed a new "expressive action" policy on August 1, 2024 (Wiseman & Rosenzweig, 2024). The new policy deemed encampments like the one on Dunn Meadow impermissible without approval from campus administration. Then, shortly after that policy's passage, campus administration had the encampment's tents removed and the area temporarily fenced off (Hogan, 2024). I will be examining how the language different parties used to describe these events can be understood in more generalizable terms.

When observers describe conflicts like the one at Indiana University, it is easy to use the language of binary opposition. "Liberal vs. conservative" or "anti- vs. pro-Palestine" are simple summaries observers might use. It is true that conflict often boils down to disagreements, a group preferring "*this*, not *that*," a binary opposition. The issue is not that binary oppositions exist; they are inevitable. The issue is how easy it is for observers to ascribe binary oppositions which mischaracterize the parties involved.

If we look at the encampment movement and reaction at Indiana University, it is easy to make this mistake. When an encampment protest identifies itself as "pro-Palestinian," then the logic of binary opposition would say any movement against that encampment must definitionally be "anti-Palestinian" or "pro-Israel." The parties involved in these conflicts, however, may be participating in different binary oppositions than first meet the eye.

### **Rebels with a Cause**

I want to start by considering how students identify with their educational institutions. Horowitz (1987) examined the history of how students relate to colleges and universities. Her framework distinguished stakeholders who emotionally align themselves with the institution ("insiders"), those who define themselves by their opposition to the institution ("rebels"), and those who see their relationship with the institution as exclusively transactional ("outsiders").

In examining the case of Indiana University, members of the protest encampment would be defined as rebels. Rebels' beliefs bring them into open conflict with university administration, and they intend for their actions to redirect institutional policy. It's worth noting that however rebellious they are, Horowitz would insist that these students still have an emotional stake in the state of their university. Rebels still believe that the institution has value and that their values should be reflected by the institution. They expect to have a relationship with the university, even if that relationship is oppositional.

### **Celebrating the Past**

If stakeholders with a "rebel" inclination will be predisposed to call for institutional transformation, those with an "insider" inclination default to defending the status quo. In fact, they are more likely to see the very act of politicized demands for institutional change as being suspect. We may,

then, see the conflict at Indiana University as being an “insider vs. rebel” conflict as much or more than it is about “pro- vs. anti-Palestine” or any other opposition explicitly identified by the involved parties.

If a university’s administration is largely made up of insiders, they have a vested interest in the university being perceived positively. Insiders are more likely to see the institution as being “essentially good” and worthy of celebration for what it already is. It is this “insider” administration which posted signs around the former encampment promising to “...restore this location to its original condition...” (Higgs, 2024).

The university administration promising to restore Dunn Meadow to its “original condition” evidences an assumption that the status quo ante was “good.” Any deviation from that, definitionally, must be “bad” and require intervention. The encampment’s engagement with that physical space must, then, be reversed so that the insider can once again recognize the past in the present, to make what is bad good.

The language of “restoration” also carries an assumption that the campus must be beautiful. An all-campus email about the fenced-off area warned students and staff that “our beloved campus” was being “repaired” now that the “temporary structures” were removed (Hogan, 2024). The tents, which the campus rebels used to advocate for their position of campus transformation, here are described as being exclusively capable of harm against the campus.

If something is “temporary,” it isn’t “permanent.” Institutional insiders see themselves as permanent, operating out of a desire for continuity with the past. The aim is for institutional stakeholders to continue to recognize their “beloved campus” from one era to the next.

### **Continuity is Beautiful**

College insiders are much more likely to conceive of their campus as a “beautiful object.” This means that the campus is perceived as valuable in itself. Its value is not primarily oriented toward an ideological or economic end; the campus is valuable *because it is valuable*. It functions like treasure. Why is gold valuable? Because of its value. Gold is also valuable because it is rare and beautiful. There is only one campus, and it must be beautiful.

To confirm the value of the campus for all to see, it must be made to shine. It must have unique buildings, charming walkways, and striking art. An insider administration makes a beautiful campus because they believe the university has an essential worth that justifies its polishing. In turn, generations of students can see themselves as insiders who belong to a beautiful campus and treasure it for its beauty.

So, when students want to put tents on the pristine meadow and spray paint the sidewalks, there is going to be opposition from insiders. The subject of the protest, then, might not matter as much as the fact that the visibility of a protest makes the campus less “beautiful.” The fear insiders hold of the beautiful campus being defaced can inspire a counter-protest reaction, even if insiders hold no ideological opposition to the stated aims of the protest itself.

### **The Outsider Outside Binary Oppositions**

It is also important to retain some perspective. If the insider and rebel are binarily opposed, they ignore Horowitz’s third category: the outsider. The thing the insider and rebel share is that they care. Most students’ relationship to the campus is not one of deep emotional investment. Most students spend some time on campus, hope it’s pleasant, and expect to earn some credentials in exchange for payment. While they might prefer an attractive campus to an ugly one, that’s not the biggest reason they are here.

So much of the public discourse around higher education, especially where it concerns free speech on campus, fixates on insider/rebel conflicts. This can create an unrepresentative image of what

actually goes on at this beautiful object of an institution. Mostly people just show up and do their work and go home. For most, their emotional energy is directed elsewhere. For most, the university is just another place. Outsiders do not view the campus as a place to be transformed or preserved; it is just a place.

### **Generalizing the Particular**

This paper is not about Indiana University, and it's not about campus protests. This is about setting common terms for campus conflict.

Given their different priorities and audiences, insiders and rebels are unlikely to describe their conflicts using shared language. The tendency is for parties in conflict to establish binary oppositions which their opponents would not recognize. For example, insiders at Indiana University would not recognize being "anti-Palestine" as a driving motivation for their actions. Rebels, similarly, would not see themselves as being focused on the destruction of university property.

Researchers can use Horowitz's framework to address this tendency toward mutual mischaracterization. They can examine university conflicts and connect each group's explicit oppositional statements to implicit "insider vs. rebel" binaries. This approach can allow researchers to connect patterns across campuses and across time by coding for these archetypal relations instead of solely accepting involved parties' stated framing for each instance of conflict. This can allow for conceptual consistency in analysis and the connection of disparate events which, on the surface, may appear to have very little in common.

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