

The Chronicle of Higher Education

<http://www.chronicle.com/article/How-One-Campus-s-Faculty/239715/?cid=db&elqTrackId=ed295c88a2e046d79ab7efd8c4eaa814&elq=a939cfa657284e128e369d5f607cdfa9&elqaid=13337&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5538>

How One Campus's 'Faculty Resistance' Is Speaking Out Against Trump

By *Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz* APRIL 06, 2017



Courtesy of Estela Bensimon

Estela Bensimon is a higher-education professor and director of USC's Center for Urban Education. "Sometimes we can become so immersed in our work, in our lives," she says, that "we don't realize that we are surrounded by students who are experiencing a great deal of stress."

President Trump's election [shocked many people in higher education](#), and his policies have provoked widespread anger among academics. Less than three months into his term, some faculty members at the University of Southern California are channeling their outrage into a more organized form of resistance. Their first task was writing letters. One of their first asked university administrators to support undocumented students, including those who had earned protection from

deportation under President Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, said Ariela Gross, a professor of law and history.

After the Women's March on Washington, Ms. Gross and colleagues elsewhere at USC realized that they should combine their efforts to fight Mr. Trump's travel ban and other controversial executive orders that marked his first month in office.

That's how the USC Faculty Resistance — a group of faculty members dedicated to supporting marginalized people on the campus and protesting some of President Trump's policies — took flight, Ms. Gross said.

The organization's first official action was raising money for a [full-page advertisement](#) in the *Los Angeles Times* stating that faculty members, among other things, supported people who "engage in civil disobedience and protest" if members of the academic community are "harmed or deported due to targeted state actions."

Last month the group also wrote a [letter](#) to Michael Quick, USC's provost and senior vice president for academic affairs, and C.L. Max Nikias, its president, with a list of seven changes that would help immigrants at the university. Suggestions included extending summer housing to students who fear they may be targeted or deported if they return to their home countries, and appointing a tenured professor to serve as special assistant to the provost for immigration and international affairs.

The Faculty Resistance isn't just speaking out on behalf of people at USC. Its members say they are trying to change what it means to be a faculty member in the Trump era. That shift is apparent at the university in a handful of ways, such as when professors increase their activism outside the classroom or make subtle changes in their academic work. Some professors proposed a campaign to urge immigrants to apply for citizenship, and to ask the administration to declare the university a sanctuary campus.

The Faculty Resistance also aims to put professors in a position to fight some of the Trump administration's policies in the long run.

William G. Tierney, a higher-education professor and co-director of the university's Pullias Center for Higher Education, has worked at USC for 22 years. Before moving to California, he worked at Pennsylvania State University for eight years. In his 30 years in higher education, Mr. Tierney said, he's never seen a sense of urgency for faculty activism like this.

"I keep saying to people that this is a long-term struggle, and it's not one act," Mr. Tierney said. "It's not simply putting an ad in a newspaper or sending a letter to the

provost and president. I think that all of us in academe have an obligation to voice what we believe and think and want to see happen."

A 'Friendly Critic'

That's what Ms. Gross has in mind for the Faculty Resistance's future, setting up the group to be a "friendly critic" of university leaders and policies, she said.

Mr. Trump's election prompted Estela M. Bensimon, a higher-education professor and director of the university's Center for Urban Education, to change the center's monthly newsletter, she said. Beforehand the newsletter was a typical listing of events and plans that was similar to what one might find at any academic center. Now it's a letter from the head of the center herself.

Ms. Bensimon said she carefully writes the newsletter to take positions against some of the White House's directives. For example, one of the newsletter's latest issues [criticized the U.S. education secretary](#), Betsy DeVos, over a speech focused on community colleges. Ms. DeVos "doubled down on her commitment to turn these institutions into vocational schools and certificate mills," Ms. Bensimon wrote, adding that Ms. DeVos was "painfully unqualified" for her post.

If the Trump administration has given faculty members one positive thing, it's been a wake-up call for people who may have been complacent about political causes, she said. Now there's a renewed sense of urgency and activism for instructors.

Ms. Bensimon also became more aware of the people in her center who had been struggling to cope with Mr. Trump's election, she said. Students facing uncertainty because of the White House's directives need more support than ever, she said.

After the election, she held a meeting for people to air their concerns, but it wasn't until later that she found out that one student working at the center was undocumented. She said she was embarrassed to admit that she didn't know the student's status.

Ms. Bensimon has shifted her priorities to ensure that the undocumented student feels supported, she said. She's helping her with her DACA application, and exchanged cellphone numbers with the student, letting her know that Ms. Bensimon is always available should her undocumented status put her in a sticky legal situation.

“There's a moral responsibility to step up, and there are plenty of people who are in far

more insecure situations who are stepping up and being brave.”

"Sometimes we can become so immersed in our work, in our lives," Ms. Bensimon said. But "we don't realize that we are surrounded by students who are experiencing a great deal of stress."

While students nationwide have taken up similar causes to resist some of Mr. Trump's policies, it's important for faculty members to take their own stand, said Manuel Pastor, a professor of sociology and American studies and ethnicity.

When professors speak out against some of Mr. Trump's directives, it's not simply a symbolic message that they are fighting for values, like transparency, welcoming immigrants to the university, and inquiry based on facts, he said. A separate faculty resistance shows that faculty members want to use their power to help students and others on the campus.

"When they make it clear that they care about these issues," Mr. Pastor said, "it's enormously important for the students."

Tenure, and all the protections that come with it, is a type of privilege in academe. So Mr. Pastor and his colleagues want to exercise that privilege for those who don't enjoy the same protections.

"Any of us who have obtained a privileged position have done it with a lot of support along the way," Mr. Pastor said, adding that it was time to pay back that support.

"There's a moral responsibility to step up," he said, "and there are plenty of people who are in far more insecure situations who are stepping up and being brave."

Fernanda Zamudio-Suaréz is a breaking-news reporter. Follow her on Twitter @FernandaZamudio, or email her at fzamudiosuarez@chronicle.com.