

# #DisarmUC

## Disrupting the Arms Race

BLU BUCHANAN and AMARA MILLER

**ABSTRACT** As scholar-activists, the authors explore efforts of police disarmament within the context of an emerging social movement sweeping the University of California system. The Disarm UC coalition challenges the myth of policing as necessary for the production of a “safe” society, especially in an era in which fear-mongering has helped to naturalize far-right and authoritarian systems of control. Instead, this article asks how policing is always already a violent system within the American academy and how these historical precursors normalize the current militarization and mobilization of lethal force within universities. Such normalized violence reproduces historical inequities within academia and has material consequences for students and workers. Finally, the authors explore how social movements like Disarm UC disrupt police violence within the university, producing new social and material conditions for change.

**KEYWORDS** policing, militarization, student movement, abolition, critical university studies

Tensions had been building across the University of California, Davis, as many students waited to hear whether or not Eric Garner’s murderer would be indicted. When the decision was made in December 2014 that, yet again, police would be exempted from their role in white supremacy and state violence, we took to the streets, chanting the name of Eric Garner and calling for justice. We marched for hours, throughout the afternoon and into the evening, shutting down the streets to show that business as usual was built on the bodies of Black and Brown people. Along with so many protesters across the United States, we were confronted by heavily armed police in riot gear. Our peaceful circle of students was treated as if we could take down the entire system. Our pursuit of justice became acts of “the enemy.”

In the year that followed, a number of students fighting for racial, class, and gender justice (many of whom were members of Students and Workers Ending

Racial Violence, or SWERV) met with the police during community/police forums. Despite knowing the history of policing, and despite the re-traumatizing experience that sitting in a room with armed officers posed to many of us, we went to see and to bear witness. Beyond verbal commitment to the “Principles of Community,” what was the university going to do to ensure that it wasn’t feeding the anti-Black and militarized machine that is policing in the United States? Drawing on experiences in our communities, and with an eye toward structural analysis, we sat in these meetings hoping to hear a structural intervention to a structural problem. Instead, we were told the problem was:

1. Distrust by the community
2. Not enough training
3. Lack of funding
4. Not enough police officers of color applying
5. A dearth of community-police sports games

This type of response is shockingly common from police forces, especially ones on university campuses who frame themselves as kinder, friendlier, more approachable police officers. The goal of campus police was to build rapport with the community so, in essence, they could better identify friendly Black people who “belonged” on campus from “dangerous unknowns.” When confronted with potential structural solutions, including disarming themselves, they laughed. “I have a second amendment right to bear arms,” said one police officer. “How will we stop all these school shooters?” asked another. “How can you expect us to have less hardware than the public? If people can have guns so should we!” said a dispatcher.

After our organizers left that space, we realized that it is exactly this “arms-race” mentality that has molded the police (in the community at large as well as on campuses) into organizations that view people, particularly marginalized folks, as enemy combatants. Recognizing that the problem was and is a structural and historical one, we realized the university was not going to educate us for our liberation. If we needed big answers to the life-and-death struggles we were facing, we’d have to start with a deep investigation into the history of the institution of law enforcement in the United States and peer-reviewed research on police violence and militarization. A number of us, all sociology graduate students, used the skills developed through our training to research these issues. We also committed to educating other people at UC Davis about police brutality and inequities in incidents of state violence that reflect the historical origins of police in the United States.

So, what did we find out about the history of policing in the United States? Police organizations arose during the nineteenth century to serve as slave

patrols, border patrols, and later, strike-breaking forces. Historically, they have targeted racial minorities, poor populations, disabled people, as well as those perceived as breaking normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. Campus police departments arose later in the twentieth century and gained power and prominence in response to the desegregation of the university. As greater numbers of poor, Black and Brown, and queer students began attending institutions of higher learning, student protest movements challenged racist, sexist, and heteronormative practices in academia. Administrations responded by creating and militarizing campus police. With the Federal Department of Defense's 1033 program, police departments now have access to military-grade weaponry at little to no cost. In recent years, the powers of campus police have been extended beyond campus boundaries.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly troubling since the status of university police departments often means that they are able to avoid public oversight.<sup>2</sup>

We began our campaign small, on our local campus at UC Davis, with a series of teach-ins called "Black Study." Black Study built off of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's idea of the Undercommons and about the way that study can be turned to liberatory method, exploring and critiquing the nature of the university and its roots in white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> One of the key goals of this series of teach-ins was to address the sense of entitlement that the university creates, as if being "exceptional" would protect you from systems of state violence. We first had to address the myth that police violence doesn't occur on college campuses, or the common idea that "it can't happen here and it can't happen to me." Becoming a university student does not mean we are no longer exposed to the same violent forces that kill people back home in our various communities.

One of the other issues we had to address was the idea that somehow a militarized police force made us safer from school shootings. This discursive tactic, used to great effect since the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, has enabled universities to get hardware as big as Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicles with only minimal pushback from local communities. But there is little to no evidence that having armed police, or having police at all, discourages shooters or intervenes in their sprees. Mass shootings account for less than 1 percent of homicides in the United States, and murder generally is on the decline, with violent crime on campuses declining by 27 percent over the past decade. "From 2000 to 2013 there were just 12 active-shooting incidents at the nearly 5,000 U.S. degree-granting institutions—fewer than one a year."<sup>4</sup> In fact, police kill more people yearly than mass shooters do.<sup>5</sup> Even in those rare cases when there is an active shooter situation, campus police rarely intervene in time.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, research has shown that when police have greater access to weapons, it can actually lead to more attacks against cops.<sup>7</sup> Greater access to weapons

also has an extremely insignificant effect on officer injury rates, meaning that it doesn't make cops any safer. So, does greater police militarization equate to greater safety for the general public? Delehanty et al. found that "1033" transfers to police are actually associated with significant increases in the number and rate of observed civilian casualties from police violence.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the data shows that greater militarization leads to greater police violence.

After spending a year working on a prison divestment program (another project organized by SWERV) and educating students on campus about the issue of armed police, the 2015 academic year began with news of the shooting of Sam Duboce by a University of Cincinnati police officer. Our first public action was a march from our student center to the campus police station, where we taped up our list of demands (fig. 1), including police abolition, to their locked doors. We realized that we needed to build an abolitionist movement, and we needed to start by breaking the arms race between police and the community. We needed to break the power of the police, and to do that we needed to start by disarming them.

Since then, who have we become and what do we stand for? Disarm UC is a collective that calls for demilitarization and disarmament of campus police, particularly within the University of California system. As a collective, we adhere to a radical ethic of care. Our principles are drawn from femme politics which forefront transformative justice and community care in our organizing. We realize that the only way to undermine the systems of violence in which we live is to remake the world through alternative relationships to each other and within the community we wish to see (fig. 2). These logics inform the Disarm UC movement, and our relationship to the university as a whole.

For our collective, demilitarization means the disruption and elimination of the flow of information, materials, and training between domestic police departments and the US military-industrial complex. In addition to disrupting these collusions, we demand that the power of the police be immediately reduced through disarmament as well as through more effective community accountability measures. As a collective, we understand disarmament to mean the removal of life threatening weapons from the police forces on our campuses. We recognize this ranges from semi-automatic guns and handguns to other weaponry, such as tasers and military-grade pepper spray, which can also have lethal effects and which can contribute to lifelong disability.

Recent cases within the UC system and beyond demonstrate that the militarization of the university is a project that disproportionately impacts the safety and well-being of minority students and workers, who are the most likely to become targets of police surveillance and violence. Near UC Riverside in July 2018, campus cops shot and killed a Latino man, Juan Garcia. Earlier in 2018

# Davis Stands with Ferguson

## UCD Demands

**WE DEMAND:** the abolition of campus police.

**WE DEMAND:** UC Davis divest from companies directly and indirectly involved in the prison industry.

**WE DEMAND:** that the number of Black faculty at UC Davis AT LEAST match the national percentage of Black people in the US population.

**WE DEMAND:** Hiring of more Black faculty across the different academic disciplines.

**WE DEMAND:** that the University publish data on the homepage of the UCD website on the admission rates of Black, Indigenous, and Latina/o students and disaggregates for race, gender, and class.

**WE DEMAND:** that University of California Davis doubles the amount of Black students on our campus over the next three years, starting today, January 7th, 2016. The Department of Education reports the Black undergraduate population makes up just 2.1% of the student body. This is unacceptable.

**WE DEMAND:** More funding for retention programs already in place at UC Davis. With a “normal time to completion” rate of 68%, Black students continue to face obstacles to their retention.

**WE DEMAND:** An Ethnic Studies requirement for all students who attend UC Davis.

**WE DEMAND:** that the UC system ‘ban the box’ on their job applications, and make a formal priority to hire formerly incarcerated people.

**WE DEMAND:** that all administrators be compensated at the same rate as workers. UC Davis Chancellor Linda Katehi currently receives a base salary of \$413,916. When students and workers, particularly those who are Black and Brown, struggle to make ends meet this wage gap is not only immoral, it highlights the continued exploitation of students and workers for executive profit.

**WE DEMAND:** The creation of a UC Davis Afro- House. Many Black students cannot afford to live in Davis with the high prices of rent. An Afro- house would provide a cheaper alternative housing solution for Black students, that would also serve as a safe space for Black Aggies to congregate and learn from each other.

FIGURE 1. List of demands from Davis Stands with Ferguson action.



FIGURE 2. “Disarm the UC.” Art created by Amara Miller.

at UC Berkeley, a Black member of the UC service-workers union, AFSCME 3299, was assaulted by police. At Picnic Day 2017, undercover cops at UC Davis attacked five Black and Brown youth, and there has also been recent police violence against Black students at UC Merced. Other instances of police violence in the UC system include the infamous 2011 UC Davis pepper-spray incident, the beatings of Occupy Cal activists and allies by UC Berkeley police, or the incident in 2010 when campus police officer Jared Kemper pulled a gun twice on tuition-hike protesters. Other cases outside the UC system, like the police killing of non-binary student Scout Schultz at Georgia Tech, highlight the ways police violence continues to disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ and disabled students and workers.

We've had our share of wins throughout this process. Disarm UC is responsible for the UC Student-Workers Union, UAW Local 2865, calling for the disaffiliation of AFL-CIO from police unions. Over the years we've built a strong basis of support for Black students and workers, establishing a statewide network for addressing police violence in the UC system. AFSCME 3299, the UC service-workers union, has called for the demilitarization of police, UAW Local 2865 has also called for the disarming and demilitarization of police, as has the UC Student Association, the UC Davis Graduate Student Association, and the Davis College Democrats. The national professional Society for the Study of Social Problems just passed a resolution calling for the disarming of campus cops across the nation. We've submitted statewide California Public Records Act requests and helped create model language for student associations to engage in disarmament struggles. We've also worked in collaboration with the UC Student-Workers Union to present groundbreaking new employment contract language at the bargaining table that presents the vision of a disarmed and demilitarized university for all. Although it was not adopted, these efforts work to establish greater oversight and accountability of campus police. Disarm UC also engages in a variety of ongoing political education efforts, such as teach-ins, informational videos, and other media production.

But building a movement that seeks to address issues of police violence is not easy. The very nature of Disarm UC means that the targets of our organizing are always large institutions with monumentally more power than us. Police have the monopoly on legitimate use of force within the United States, are trained to target civilian populations, and are represented by some of the most powerful unions in the country. Our organizing is done with a recognition of the risks of surveillance and state violence. As a result, strategizing and tactical choices in our organizing are made with careful planning and preparation, often entailing a great deal of research work, and always in conjunction with a great deal of political education. In building this movement, we have faced intense opposition and pushback, not just from the right but also from a white liberal left. Our experiences have mirrored Martin Luther King Jr.'s words from Birmingham Jail, that the greatest stumbling block toward racial justice is the white moderate who

is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom . . . and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season."<sup>9</sup>

Some of us have lost friendships during the course of our work, and all of us have experienced the gambit of emotional exhaustion. However, in the course of

building the Disarm UC movement we have also gained a radical community of comrades in the struggle. Another world is possible.

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#### Notes

1. Nelson, "Why Nearly All Colleges."
2. Moraff, "Campus Cops."
3. Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*.
4. Moraff, "Campus Cops."
5. Slaughter-Johnson, "Police Killed."
6. Bauman, "Campus Police."
7. Wickes, "Demystifying ' Militarization.'"
8. Delehanty et al., "Militarization."
9. King, "Letter."

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