“Radical Academia”? Understanding the Climates for Campus Activists

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EDITORS

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There are a number of myths that cloud our understanding of campus activism in the 21st century. One of these myths centers on the perception that campus activists are “radicals.” While such a characterization is not necessarily negative, fueled by the media’s penchant for focusing on certain types of activists, one of the underlying assumptions of this depiction is that radical is synonymous with disruptive. It would be folly to argue that no campus activists in American history have engaged in disruptive activities, but those who did always represented only the smallest minority. The vast majority of campus activists have engaged in peaceful activities designed not to disrupt the “establishment,” an overarching term to depict institutional inequities, but to change it.

Perhaps the most prevalent of these myths is the belief that students today, when compared with their predecessors in higher education (particularly those from the 1960s), are apathetic to engaging in activism. Such events as the Free Speech Movement of 1964, the building takeovers at Columbia University in 1968, and the national reactions to the Kent State shootings in 1970 have ingrained in our historical memory that those occurrences are reflective of campus activism and that current displays of student protests offer a pale comparison to the “high points” of demonstrations from the 1960s. This concept is wrong. Campuses have always experienced an ebb and flow of activism, with some points, such as the mid-1930s or late 1960s, representing apogees in student movements. The recent displays of student activism on American campuses signal a continued restlessness among the nation’s collegiate youth over various issues. With the growing concerns among students over rising tuition costs, the enduring need to improve diversity and create welcoming campus climates for every group in higher education, the protracted War on Terror, and the economic recession, activists are expressing their views with a vigor comparable to most periods in American history. The rebirth of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 2006 illustrates not only the persistent presence of activism on campus, but the continual connections between the various student movements throughout the history of American higher education.

The purpose of this work is not only to help dispel these two myths but also to help those in higher education better understand the needs of campus activists. Even educational leaders in the 1960s, during what is considered the peak of student protests, had difficulty understanding and coping with campus activism. Campus administrators must be fully aware of the rights and responsibilities that student activists possess, as protesters
remain a vibrant subculture in American higher education. Those in higher education need to understand the best paths to not only allow student voice, but also help direct that voice toward peaceful and constructive expression. The recent brutality in dealing with the Occupy Wall Street Movement, or the unneeded pepper-spraying of student protesters at the University of California-Davis, shows that it is a lesson that some still must learn.

In Chapter 1, Christopher J. Broadhurst both frames the volume by providing an overview of the history of campus activism and shows how current activism often builds upon the tactics and ideals of previous movements. Chapters 2 and 3 examine two often-disregarded groups in campus activism: graduate students and faculty/staff. Too often assumptions about the nature of campus activism lead us to believe that undergraduates are the sole participants in protests. In Chapter 2, Heidi Whitford explores the growth of graduate student unions and how graduate student participation in campus activism impacted not only their own learning, but also that of the undergraduate students they taught and mentored. Adrianna Kezar and Dan Maxey continue this exploration in Chapter 3 by illustrating the ways both faculty and staff can work with students to support campus movements and, by doing so, create more robust forms of activism.

Chapters 4 and 5 detail the vast array of tactics employed by campus activists. By using the student antisweatshop movement as a context for contemporary campus mobilization, in Chapter 4, Cassie L. Barnhardt elaborates on various forms of collective action tactics and organizing strategies that today’s students utilize to engage in campus activism. Penny A. Pasque and Juanita Gamez Vargas, in Chapter 5, focus on the comparatively newer method of performative activism and consider how student performances connect to social change.

In Chapter 6, J. Patrick Biddix links activism to civic learning and shows that campus protests can be considered indicators of a healthy civic learning environment. The concluding chapter, by Georgianna L. Martin, synthesizes the common themes of the volume and argues that campus activists are an integral part of the higher education landscape.

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This chapter frames campus activism by introducing the historical movements that have been important for higher education since the 18th century to the present and exploring the connections and shared characteristics among these various movements.

Campus Activism in the 21st Century: A Historical Framing

Christopher J. Broadhurst

The expression of student voice, both on and off campus, has a long tradition throughout the history of American higher education. The nature of colleges and universities fosters such expression, and American colleges and universities, in particular, provide environments suited for student activism. College life often allows much free time that can be devoted to engaging in the social life of campus. For those with a greater social consciousness, such time can be used for political activities as well. Additionally, higher education promotes an active intellectual culture and, ideally, values independent thought. Universities even encourage extracurricular activities by providing funds and space for student organizations. Not only do students often have a common bond of being of similar age, since everyone is on campus at one time or another, higher education eases communication between students. When students do communicate with each other, the growing diversity of campus enrollments helps introduce students to varying viewpoints (Altbach, 1989; Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975; Heineman, 1993). Furthermore, as students are on campus for only a finite period, it is sometimes harder to maintain movement momentum. Student leaders are only on campus for relatively short times, which often means students fight for quicker changes that allow them to reap more immediate benefits (Altbach, 1989).

The unique nature of campuses has helped spawn a variety of movements throughout the history of American higher education. This chapter explores the development of student activism on American campuses from the colonial period through the early 21st century. The campus protests of each period, while unique, often represent a continuation from earlier eras. Activists are often unaware of such connections, but strong protest
tradition in American higher education exists in the very causes students fight for and the tactics used to achieve their goals.

**Early Campus Activism: The Colonial Period and 19th Century**

As the colonial colleges developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, campus administrators were sometimes forced to contend with students’ rebellions against restrictive doctrines of *in loco parentis*, the classical curriculum, and substandard food and lodging (Moore, 1976; Novak, 1977). Students found the campus regulations particularly stifling, with punishable offenses including lying, stealing, keeping distilled liquor, entertaining nonstudents in their rooms, missing prayers or worship services, drinking, playing cards, going to taverns, playing pool, dancing, swearing, and associating with “lewd” women (Burton, 2007). A pattern also emerged among student rebels that would characterize student activism even up to the late 20th century: Often the more affluent students revolted as those from poorer backgrounds seemed more appreciative of their educational opportunities (Novak, 1977). Besides demonstrating against local campus doctrines, reactions to national issues could be found at colonial colleges as well, with students boycotting British goods and burning effigies of pro-British leaders in the colonies as part of the protests prior to the Revolutionary War (Rudy, 1996).

College students too were swept up in the revolutionary spirit that pervaded American society after the war, as campus demonstrations grew in size and scope during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Princeton alone witnessed six student rebellions between 1800 and 1830 (Rudolph, 1990). Although students fought for greater control over the curriculum and against what they perceived as poor faculty, the most frequent attacks were levied against what were viewed as disciplinary injustices by the administration or unpopular campus doctrines. Often some minor incident would spark a student revolt that was actually more reflective of an undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the administrators or faculty. In 1800, campuses such as Brown University, Harvard University, The College of William and Mary, and Princeton University endured student riots following such incidents as the suspension of students for loudly scraping their feet during morning prayers. While the revolts did not lead to changes in college rules, they were sometimes successful in reinstating the offending students. Violence often accompanied student riots during the 19th century and threats of bodily harm to faculty and administrators were not uncommon. In response to student revolts, administrators would enact stricter rules, expel the rebelling students, and disperse their names to their colleagues across the nation, essentially blacklisting them as troublemakers (Novak, 1977).

**Campus Activism in the Early 20th Century**

As the 20th century began, students slowly shifted the focus of their activism to issues outside of campus. Concerns over social reform were rising