Campus Activism: Racial Tensions, Political Choices, and Poor Decision Making

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Abstract

Racial tensions, political choices, and poor decision making is aiding the resurgence of campus activism on major college campuses across the United States. Student activism is forcing campuses to face their past and force new policies for administrators to consider to foster inclusivity and safe-places for students from all backgrounds at various different types of institutions. Devaluation and non-recognition of certain ethnicities, students with different types of sexual orientation, and embedded racism is not going unnoticed. Differing views on campus activism highlights how this could develop into an issue that could threaten normal daily life on a college campus or has the possibility to provide unique learning opportunities tied to student governance and democratic engagement. Regardless of campus views, educators should promote the social responsibility of assisting students navigate complex, societal issues for the future and beyond.

Campus Activism: Then & Now

Campus activism has been in place at higher education institutions dating back to the Colonial Period. The various topics have morphed into a myriad of issues decade-to-decade and include topics on: civil rights, war, improving conditions for the working class, racism, LGTBQIA advocacy, etc. The societal problems continue to circle the latest political realm and hot topics, yet diversity and racism continue to be a consistent trend in the history of campus
activism and is deeply rooted into the socialization cycle of oppression. Tactics such as sit-ins, marches, and peaceful protests remain steady tactics activists incorporate when trying to communicate their stance.

“More than 50 years ago, university leaders and the general public expressed concerns that the campus activism of the free speech, civil rights, and Vietnam eras posed a threat to campus and public safety” (Barnhardt, 2014). The same supposed threat plagues administrators in present-day and the number of protests continues to rise as we advance in this current decade. Racism and oppression among different communities (i.e. religious groups, LGBTQIA community, lower socioeconomic status individuals, etc.) continues to remain rooted in policies and practices on campuses. The demands from current activists is not unrealistic to understand at this current point in time. For example, consider the Black Lives Matter movement, “Black activists protesting across America’s colleges and universities have relied on these recently uncovered histories, and this process of self-reflection to further articulate their concerns and demands” (Anderson & Span, 2016). Making sure students, staff, faculty, and administrators are all on the same page is necessary to establish consistency and an avenue for students to utilize their voices on college campuses across the globe.

*Response to Campus Activism*

Administrators and campus communities need to be more cognizant and involved in understanding why campus activism is taking place, rather than trying to shut down or “fix” the problem. Dr. Kevin Kruger, President of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators stated in an interview, “I think that campuses should stop being so afraid of activism…I’m a strong believer that student activism is what we want students to do” (Lipka,
As educators, we need to provide new tools and access to resources for students to utilize when organizing campus protests or free speech events.

Activism promotes active, engaged citizens to be involved in democracy and civic ideals within their respective communities. Students need to be able to explore different tactics of communication, creativity, and develop skilful timing for the delivery of their message to campus communities. With adequate resources, more involvement from administrators, and a better understanding of social awareness – students will be able to produce successful communication and practices for whatever they are trying to advocate for in the future. Campus activism can be used to teach students necessary developmental skills that will aid in their holistic development and student affairs administrators would be able to advance civic learning opportunities and democratic engagement among student leaders.

*Future of Campus Activism*

Participation in campus activism empowers students to develop a sense of community and provides context for exploration of personal growth while attending college. Civic learning opportunities serve as a high impact practice that assists in student learning and retention efforts at different types of institutions in higher education. Student affairs professionals need to promote an active, encouraging role when communicating with students about campus activism and expressing their views. Administrators need to establish a consistent pulse of what is going on at their campuses and understand the context college students are facing today.

Through this lens, higher education administrators, faculty, and staff have the opportunity to foster unique experiences that will foster student growth allow students to have an even deeper understanding on their stance of whatever campus, societal, or global issue they’re trying to
tackle. “Studies show that partnering with faculty and staff creates deeper and broader learning outcomes for students during their collegiate experience” (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Helping students better articulate what they want and being able to effectively communicate to executive administrators and higher serves as an impactful resource to assisting college students navigate bureaucratic levels and learning curves.

Conclusion

Campus activism is not going anywhere and will remain prevalent on college campuses for years to come. The question of how administrators choose to approach these controversial topics will have the opportunity to provide empowering learning opportunities or negatively impact students’ collegiate experiences. Limiting this type of participation would not provide additional learning opportunities and would be detrimental to college students’ interpersonal development across the board. Serious review, engaged advisors, and resources need to be provided to college students in efforts to enhance democratic engagement, civic learning, and personal leadership development.
References


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