STUDENT UNREST IN THE 1980s: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS

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The 1960s and early 1970s was a period of change, challenge, and value clarification in American higher education. Student affairs professionals were deeply involved with the issues of the day and saw the entire profession change in terms of direction, purpose and philosophy. Student affairs leaders shifted from being the “custodians” of campus values to being primarily concerned with student development and legal issues. The agenda was no longer the control of students and the enforcement of rules reflecting institutional values; instead, the professional energy of leaders turned to facilitating the development of young adults, the guaranteeing of students’ legal rights, and the building of new models for administration, policy, and program development. These changes were based on educational and human development philosophies, rather than on the social and behavioral control of students.

On many campuses, student affairs professionals were caught off-guard in the wake of the rapid change and violence of the 60s. Student affairs did not always play a leading role in helping students find meaning or non-violent avenues to urge institutional change. Many lessons from the 60s can assist student affairs professionals to understand the activism of the 80s.

This article will briefly review some of the history and the issues of the 60s and it will outline the progress of student activism of the 80s on the University of Vermont campus. From this experience, recommendations for student affairs professionals’ responses to today’s student unrest will be suggested.

The 1960s—A Period of Transition

The student activism of the 60s was deeply rooted in critical national issues, political concerns, and the youth culture of the era. The issues were basically threefold: the war in Vietnam, civil rights struggles, and local campus in loco parentis issues. The times and the values of young adults in this era reflected the post-Kennedy America. Students were concerned about others and the quality of life for all Americans—rich or poor, white or black, urban or rural. A spirit pervaded campus: social change could be a reality if one believed enough in change and worked rigorously for social right over social wrong. This national spirit of America’s young adults was reflected in the dress, music, and heroes of the youth culture.
War in Vietnam was the primary issue on many campuses. As the war advanced, increasing numbers of moderate students became committed to working for the end of the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia; what had started as a distant conflict became personalized as roommates, brothers, and boyfriends were drafted into active duty and were injured, maimed, or killed. Most college males were exempt from the draft; attending college to avoid being drafted became an American obsession.

Another issue of the turbulent 60s on many campuses was the fight for civil rights for minority groups. Students marched for the rights of blacks and were met with confrontations from white racists. Across the nation, minority students fought for their rights involving public transportation, restaurants, hotel accommodations, and admission to public colleges and universities.

The third issue of protest during this period was the struggle for students' rights on campus. Until the 60s, most campuses acted in loco parentis and enforced institutional values through regulation of student behavior. Students were denied due process in the discipline system. Women students faced women's hours and strict behavioral rules. Deans of men and women enforced these rules through the discipline system, and students were rarely allowed to make decisions about their personal lives. Students began to challenge these practices in the courts and, on occasion, in the streets. The rights of individual students began to be guaranteed by the courts, and through protest and legal action most institutions changed to reflect these new values of personal freedom.

The students of this era reflected the diversity in student composition that has been present in universities since World War II. In response to the impact of the "baby boom" of the 1950s and early 1960s, most colleges and universities grew rapidly. It was not unusual for institutions to double in size. This rapid growth in physical size often was not accompanied by a change in governance structures. This fact made institutions even less able to respond effectively to protest and rapid social change.

In the era of the late 1960s, students were not concerned about their chances of finding jobs after graduation. Unemployment was low and the economy was booming. A college degree almost guaranteed a position after graduation. This job security allowed students to be more concerned with social issues than with searching for a job.

Much was written in this period about the dynamics of student unrest. Keniston (1965) described alienated students who, in their rebellion against society, joined protest groups to oppose the "system" that was created and sustained by adults. In their protests, students completely rejected many values held sacred by adults. These beliefs were demonstrated in music, dress, language, hair length, and sexual behavior. Keniston (1968) also identified the committed students who joined the stream of student activism. This group was very committed to the basic issues of the era. They educated themselves, informed others, and appealed to those who felt strongly about the issues. Other authors (Halleck, 1969; Linowitz, 1970; Peterson, 1968; Reich, 1970; Scranton, 1970) wrote about the youth subculture, values of the protest groups, and the psychology of the individual and the group.

The alienated and the committed students formed a network which spread across America. The first organized group statement was the Port Huron statement (Davidson, 1966). Davidson said:

For participatory democracy is often like a chronic and contagious disease. Once caught, it permeates one's whole life and the lives of those around us. Its effect is disruptive in a total sense. And within a manipulative, bureaucratic system, its articulation and expression amounts to sabotage. It is my hope that those exposed to it while building a movement for student syndicalism will never quite be the same, especially after they leave the university community. (p. 11)

From this beginning emerged Students for a Democratic Society, a representative group of the era. Their purposes reflected good intentions and, at times, strong patriotic values.

How did higher education respond to the issues of the 1960s? The diversity of response reflected the diversity of American higher education. For the most part, the initial response was ineffective. Most institutional leaders were inexperienced in massive activism and protest. Violent confrontations occurred between police and students. This violence often erupted because of surprise and lack of training of police forces. One of the early violent confrontations at Indiana University occurred between protesting students and recruiters for Dow Chemical Company (Foster & Long, 1970). In this confrontation, student affairs professionals tried to gain control of the situation, but were unable to do so. Such confrontations happened on hundreds of campuses, with the most significant tragedy occurring at Kent State University in May 1970 (Michener, 1971). The tragedy at Kent State made evident to every American the violent potential of student protest. The fact that the incident occurred at a conservative midwestern institution made the implications even more significant.

Student affairs professionals on some campuses, however, played a significant institutional leadership role, working effectively with protest groups. Often, deans would help student leaders organize successful protests to communicate their message while avoiding violence and property destruction. The institutional leaders receiving assistance first were activist leaders who were seen to be supportive of the principles of free speech, freedom of assembly, and the right to speak out against the war or social injustice. On some campuses, student affairs professionals were completely bypassed and ignored by both the activists and the institutions' presidents and governance boards. The protest groups worked directly with the president and the Board of Trustees of such institutions. This bypass of the student affairs personnel often occurred because the student affairs professionals lacked leadership, philosophy, or training. At many institutions, this ineffectiveness of student affairs staff damaged their reputation for years. Shaffer (1970), when writing about the end of the 60s, referred to the role of student affairs staff in future activism situations by saying, "Many have concluded that student personnel has failed in its response to current demands for university reform. These observers feel that a number of developments are making traditional student personnel services and organizational structures irrelevant and obsolete" (p. 128).
The 1960s were a period of rapid social change in America and in higher education. The role of student affairs professionals shifted from one of behavioral control to one of education, environmental management, and human development. This brief background review is important to consider as a base for the decade of the 1980s.

1980s—Student Activism Revisited

Until mid-decade, there had been little student activism in the 1980s. Student values were significantly different from those in the 1960s. In the late 1970s, students were described as being from the "me generation." According to Lamont (1979), instead of being concerned about others, social injustice, war, and civil rights, students of the 1970s and 1980s were primarily concerned with themselves.

The popular literature of this period was directed toward self-improvement, self health, and self-preservation. Levine (1980) and Wall (1984) described this generation as one without heroes. Levine characterized students of this period as politically conservative and personally moderate to liberal, concerned yet optimistic about oneself, highly vocational, and pessimistic about the future of America. He went on to describe cycles of student interests and values since the early 1900s. Levine detailed the cycles fluctuating between concern for self and concern for others. From his work it can be seen that the mid-1980s are a period of self-concern, leading into a period of concern for others. Research reported from the Higher Education Research Institute (1984) study of college freshmen in America made clear that the trend is toward more concern for self and vocationalism, while concern for developing a meaningful philosophy of life has declined steadily for the past fifteen years.

Politically, the trend has been toward students becoming more conservative. On many campuses, organizations espousing ultra-conservative values have become viable. At some institutions, the "new right" has become a powerful political and social force within the student body. Hart (1984), in both a recent book about Dartmouth College and in the conservative student newspaper The Dartmouth Review, spoke at great length about the need for return to ultra-conservative values in American education. At some institutions, the new right has taken on the form of structured student organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan or the Neo-Nazi Party.

This movement to the political and social right was nationally publicized in the popular media with the overwhelming collegiate support of Ronald Reagan in the 1984 Presidential elections. Many college students reported support for Reagan as a hero of the new conservative attitude and values on campus.

This political movement to the conservative end of the spectrum continued into mid-decade. Since 1983, there seems to have been a slight shift to the left. On many campuses, protests have materialized over the United States' involvement in Central America. On most campuses the Central American protest involved only a small number of students, did not attract a great deal of attention, and was not seen as a movement.

During the 1984-85 academic year, the political stability in the Republic of South Africa began to deteriorate. Student activist groups began to organize to protest universities and colleges having investments in companies with holdings in South Africa. The student demand was almost universal in its support for divestment of holdings with companies doing business in South Africa. The summer of 1985 saw an increase in violence in South Africa, with more killings and more racial oppression. With the opening of the 1985-86 academic year, activist students organized large protest activities on scores of American campuses. Heavy media coverage provided the movement with the necessary publicity. The protest activities spread as the year progressed and campus after campus became embroiled in conflict. Demands were made to governing boards and college and university presidents to divest of all holdings immediately. Many campuses were completely paralyzed by the protests, the demonstrators, and the dissent. The issues soon spread to investigations of retirement funds, foundations, and governance issues.

On many campuses, increasing numbers of students became involved at various levels in the debate. The cause was easy for students to join because the issues were so clear. The extreme institutionalized racism of the apartheid system in South Africa was a clear target that everyone could oppose. The structure, management, and impact of college and university endowment funds seemed unclear and distant to most students. The investment of these funds was an excellent target that could draw a wide range of support. The cause and target of most protests was acceptable even to moderate students. On many campuses, many students seemed ready for a social cause to support. Some institutions took advantage of the opportunity to foster educational initiatives (Hexter, 1985). The protest over divestment issues began to change the relationships and patterns of thinking on many campuses.

The techniques of protesting divestment issues at many institutions appeared similar to the methods used in the 1960s. At the University of Vermont, the impetus and leadership for the protest were a 37-year-old freshman as well as faculty members who were activist leaders during the 1960s. These leaders presented workshops on activism, protest, and civil disobedience. They encouraged, provided training for, and carried out sit-ins, teach-ins, blockades, office takeovers, and intimidation of trustees. These 1960s techniques seemed out of place in the values and student culture of the conservative 1980s; however, a core of committed students were attracted to these actions which often proved effective. Many students outside of this active core were alienated by the techniques used but were committed to the cause. This more moderate group used more acceptable channels to attempt to effect change. The moderate group used the traditional governance channels and political influence tactics that were acceptable to the conservative values of the 1980s. A third group of conservative students was opposed to any level of change. The committed core of activist students built a "shantytown" on the Green at the University of Vermont to symbolize the living conditions in South Africa. The moderate group supported the concept of Shantytown and the conservative factions on campus constantly attacked and badgered the activist students.
The response of the faculty was mixed at Vermont, as could be predicted from the 1960s experience. Some were supportive and were involved in the protest, while others demanded that administrators take immediate steps to end the protest. Frequently, the faculty were the link to teach the values, attitudes, and techniques of the 1960s protest to the 1980s students. This transmission of protest techniques through faculty and other non-traditional students as well as the immediate use of media allowed the movement to develop much more quickly than it did in the 1960s.

The 1980s response of the student affairs professionals at the University of Vermont was typical of the response at many institutions. Because some lessons had been learned from the 1960s, a policy and steering committee with members representing faculty, campus police, student affairs departments, the General Counsel, and the President's Office, was appointed and chaired by the Chief Student Affairs Officer. This group met, sometimes daily, to assure clear communications and quality policy development and implementation. Just before the opening of the academic year and in anticipation of a period of student activism, training workshops were developed and conducted for campus security and residence halls staffs. Care was taken to stress role differentiation, educational philosophy, and policy interpretation. Presentations were also given on South Africa so that those staff members involved would understand the substance of the anticipated protest. Residence halls staff members were encouraged to do programming on South Africa, using faculty and other campus resources.

At all times during the semester at the University of Vermont, the student affairs staff attempted to protect the students' rights of free speech and the right to dissent. In conjunction, a clear line was drawn stating that disruption would not be tolerated. The student affairs staff assisted the activist students with legal dissent, but on two occasions the Dean of Students ordered the arrest of students and faculty when disruption of normal functioning of the institution occurred. This action was in keeping with the University of Vermont Dissent and Disruption Policy. (Each campus community member arrested was individually informed of the policy and the violation before the arrest was made. Also, each person was given a chance to leave before an arrest was made.)

**Recommendations for Student Personnel Administrators**

From the experience of the 1960s and the development of student unrest in the 1980s, there are several implications for student personnel professionals. These implications can serve as guidelines for the development of institutional policy and strategies for working with campus dissent in the 1980s:

* In anticipation of student unrest sometime in the next few years, each campus should renew or create a clear policy on dissent and disruption. The policy should be designed to foster communication and freedom of speech, but also to define the line between dissent and disruption. Clear lines of staff accountability and responsibility should also be addressed in the policy.

* The student affairs staff, under the leadership of the chief student officer, should prepare to assume campus leadership roles during a period of dissent. This staff should be developed to have the expertise and skills required to manage the dissent in order to meet the needs of the activists and also the needs of the other members of the campus community.

* The chief student affairs officer should communicate often with the president and other senior officers as the dissent advances. Hopefully, from his or her understanding of students, institutional policy, campus politics, and the theory of dissent and disruption, the chief student affairs officer will be seen as an expert leader and consultant playing a valuable role in institutional decision-making relative to the protest.

* If there is any anticipation of dissent in an upcoming semester, the student affairs staff should participate in a comprehensive staff development program designed to prepare them to manage dissent. Care should be given to teach educational philosophy and to have each professional understand institutional policy and the philosophical, educational, and legal underpinnings of the policies. Strategies and potential action steps should be discussed and staff roles should be clearly defined. Senior student affairs staff who were involved with the issues and dissent of the 60s should work with junior staff as consultants.

* Student affairs leadership should work closely with the campus police to identify areas of responsibility, in the event that the police will be needed. Student affairs staff can also be effective resource consultants for campus security staff on topics of student dissent and disruption, values, attitudes, and life styles.

* It is critical that all student affairs staff understand the issues being addressed in the particular dissent. Each staff member should be very knowledgeable and be able to discuss the issues with any student or faculty member as an educator and well-informed member of the campus community.

* In anticipation of student unrest, it is essential that student affairs professionals keep formal and informal channels of communication open with faculty and student leaders. It is likely that during a period of activism, traditional governance systems will be stressed and occasionally manipulated and used by dissenting groups. These governance groups must be respected and will look to student affairs staff for support.

* It is critical that student affairs staff understand the educational and legal philosophy behind the institutional decisions and actions taken at a time of dissent. This philosophical understanding will be used constantly by staff as they articulate institutional positions and decisions.

* Through the educational leadership of senior student affairs officers, it is vital that the student affairs staff should respect the dissenting students as sincere individuals who believe strongly in a cause. During the stressful period of unrest there is a tendency for staff to view students as "the enemy." Student affairs professionals must be continually reminded of their role as responsive educators whose role merits training students with respect.

* Above all, it is critical that the chief student affairs officer be a strong, confident leader. In the 1960s, student affairs often was seen as weak and only reactive in many situations. Often the entire campus ignored student affairs staff because of their ineffectiveness and lack of philosophical, educational, and political leadership. At times, they were not respected by faculty, senior administrators, students, or dissenters. Through preparation and training, each staff member can play a leadership role.

In conclusion, it is evident that the mid-1980s is ushering in a values change among many students. This change in interests and values, coupled with world, national, and campus politics, may lead many campuses into an intense period of student activism. The recent issue of divestment is only one item of a potentially long agenda for the 80s. On every campus, student affairs professionals have the
potential to lead the institution through a period of dissent as educators and human development specialists. Shaffer (1970) urged student affairs professionals to approach the 1970s with a new spirit and challenge for leadership:

Student personnel workers will have to lead aggressively the integration of all forces in the environment to contribute effectively to the fullest development of all individuals, even if this means that they become disconcerting irritants in goading lethargic faculties and unaware administrators to make innovative responses to changed conditions before crises erupt. (p. 130)

Even though these comments were made to challenge student affairs professionals to lead in the 1970s, fifteen years later they still ring true as a challenge for leadership in student affairs for the next era of dissent.

REFERENCES


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