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
as more Americans began paying attention to the plight of the working class. Socialism itself was gaining ground as a political party, and student groups, such as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS), organized campuses in the struggle for social reform. By 1915, the ISS had over 1,300 members in 70 campus chapters. While the membership initially appears low, it should be noted that the entire U.S. undergraduate enrollment in 1912/1913 was only 400,000. Proportionately, the ISS could rival the better-known student groups of the 1960s (Altbach, 1974).

On American campuses, the ISS enacted educational programs that advocated socialism and social reform, particularly reform centered on improving conditions for the working class, to their fellow students. Some individual campus chapters became involved in such activities as organizing unions for student workers or fighting to keep military programs off campus. Antimilitary protests were not uncommon before World War I, as many students opposed military intrusion into campus life. Experiences in World War I showed the nation the horrors of war and led to a growing peace movement on American campuses in the 1920s. Campus issues were still important, as students demonstrated for ending censorship of campus newspapers, allowing women to smoke on campus, abolishing compulsory Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC), and increasing student presence in college or university governance. Forecasting activists’ desires for curricular reform in the 1960s and stemming from their belief that the growth of campuses had turned higher education into a business, students bemoaned the fact that the developing universities were negligent of their needs. Activists argued that the curriculum was not responsive to the desires of students and was not suited to study the needs of society (Altbach, 1974).

An outpouring of student activism began during the 1930s that exceeded, at least proportionately, the campus-based protests in the 1960s. Fueled by the Great Depression and the ascendency of fascism in Europe, the decade witnessed the growth of socialism and communism on campus. Old causes continued to be fought by student activists: abolition of the ROTC, censorship of student speech, strict collegiate regulations, and the threat of war. Advocates of the peace movement urged America to set an example to the world by disarming (Rudy, 1996). The sentiment began to spread to the nation’s college campuses following the Student Congress Against War, a nationally attended convention for peace, held in Chicago in December 1932 (Altbach, 1974). Continuing this quest for peace, a group of Oxford students vowed in February 1933 that they would not fight for their country (Holden, 2008). The “Oxford Pledge” became popular on American campuses, and student groups held antiwar conferences throughout the decade, which witnessed students pledging not to fight in any war conducted by the American government. Students took part in peace strikes and purposely missed class to attend antiwar rallies. In April 1934, about 15,000 college students, primarily from campuses in the Northeast, walked out of classes
to protest war (Holden, 2008). Nearly 18% of American college students participated in one strike alone in 1935 (Altbach, 1974).

Socialist and communist student groups continued to grow during the 1930s as well. With other smaller Marxist-influenced student organizations, the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID), formed from the ISS in 1932, fought for an array of causes that included workers’ rights and the rising threat of military conflict. One of these groups, the National Student League, sponsored a national antiwar demonstration in which 25,000 students took part. In 1935, the SLID and the National Student League merged to form the American Student Union. Throughout the remainder of the decade, the American Student Union sponsored a number of demonstrations against war (Altbach, 1974).

**Campus Activism in the 1940s and 1950s**

Campus activism nearly disappeared during World War II, as victory in the global conflict was the priority for many Americans, including students. The patriotic fervor following Pearl Harbor essentially crippled the Peace Movement and reduced it to a core of some 1,000 energetic activists. Following the war and into the 1950s, the rising anticommunist sentiment contributed to preventing activism from returning to prewar levels. During the decade, students, as members of the silent generation born in the horrors of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust, leaned more toward conservatism and engaged in less activism. For example, although 33% of students opposed the Korean War, few expressed their disapproval by protesting (Altbach, 1974). Student expression, though, was not dead in the 1950s. Groups such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) actively involved students in local community programs (Horowitz, 1986).

One form of activism that surged during the 1940s and 1950s was the battle for desegregation. Although great strides were taken during those decades, challenges to the concept of “separate but equal” began much earlier. Legal cases attacking the doctrine dictated by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 began as early as the 1930s. Students like Thomas Hocutt, Lucile Bluford, and Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher used the courts to protest the policy (Synnott, 2008; Wade, 2008). Spurred by the success of these early litigants against segregation, African-American students made amazing advances with their activism in the 1950s. Students not only continued to question the separate-but-equal doctrine, but also further tested the policy by arguing that they had an added undue financial burden as there were no equal regional facilities for African Americans, forcing those students to move away. More and more lawsuits flooded the courts, and African Americans increasingly gained access to higher education although many campuses staunchly resisted these legal advances, particularly in the Deep South. African-American student activists who were successful, however, faced an
unwelcoming environment: separate dorm rooms, segregated lunch tables, and special sections of classrooms marked “colored” (Wallenstein, 2008).

**Campus Activism in the 1960s**

The great rise of student activism on the nation’s campuses in the 1960s often reflected a growing dissatisfaction with American society and higher education in post–World War II America. During the period, rampant anticommunism abounded as the Soviet Union emerged from World War II as a rival to the United States. The ensuing Cold War between the world's two superpowers roused the fears of Americans, caused increased defense spending and a massive military build-up, and led to the expansion of federal involvement in higher education as the various governmental agencies pumped research funds into campuses on unprecedented levels (Geiger, 1993; Lucas, 2006).

This influx of federal funding to campuses, coupled with the arrival of baby boomers to campus, contributed to a great expansion of higher education following the war. Campus enrollments swelled from 3.6 million in 1960 to 8.5 million by 1970 (Lucas, 2006; Thelin, 2004). The expansion contributed to student complaints that campuses were becoming impersonal. With massive classes filling auditoriums, computerized registrations, and graduate assistants teaching more courses, undergraduates felt disconnected to their faculty. Students also had little input on university governance, the campus curriculum, or policies such as mandatory ROTC. More upsetting to students was the doctrine of *in loco parentis* that treated individuals who were adults like children. Strict campus rules governed contact between the sexes, enacted restrictive curfews, and regulated drinking. Students under 21 had their grades sent to their parents. Many campuses even had dress codes, policed the length of hair, and forbade facial hair (Anderson, 1996). Such conditions gave rise to the concept of student rights, and campus activists began holding demonstrations and rallies to have greater voice in their institutional decision making. Although the greatest example of the growing student rights movement was the Free Speech Movement (FSM) at the University of California, Berkeley that began in 1964, the sheer scale and media coverage of the FSM had a dramatic effect on the nation’s campuses and helped popularize the idea that students should have a greater voice in campus governance. Following the FSM at Berkeley, other campuses experienced similar, if smaller, movements centered on student rights. A survey of students from 850 campuses during the 1964–1965 academic year found the dominant campus issue concerning students was the restrictive doctrine of *in loco parentis* (Anderson, 1996; Farrell, 1997). As students began challenging the policy, activists on each campus developed platforms for student rights that were remarkably similar. By the decade's end, the student rights movement had begun to secure the demise of *in loco parentis*.
While activists on each campus often fought for their student rights locally, national organizations emerged in the 1960s that not only took up the mantle for student rights, but also demonstrated for a collection of causes. Collectively termed the New Left, members of these groups, often dominated by White college students, drew inspiration from earlier socialist/communist student groups that predated the decade and focused on spreading the concept of participatory democracy (McMillian, 2003). Politically, the New Left confronted Cold War liberalism, a bipartisan effort by Democrats and moderate Republicans to thwart communism, both at home and abroad. Socially, the New Left also questioned the historic inequalities faced by those who were not White, male, heterosexual, and from a higher socioeconomic group (Gosse, 2005). Groups such as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Student Peace Union (SPU), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), and Youth International Party (Yippies) helped forge a sometimes unified cadre of campus activists. The New Left, which led demonstrations, such as the Vietnam Summer in 1967 (DeBenedetti & Chatfield, 1990), the Columbia University protests of 1968 (Slonecker, 2008), and the Days of Rage in Chicago in 1969 (Miller, 1983), made national news and evidenced the achievements of student activists in 1960s. New Left leaders, such as Tom Hayden (SDS), Stokely Carmichael (SNCC), and Abbie Hoffman (Yippies), became national celebrities. Never before had student activists held such a prominent place in American society.

The New Left, indeed most of the movements of the period, were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. Continuing the efforts to desegregate education that had begun decades earlier, students in the 1960s intensified their resistance to both de facto and de jure racist policies that permeated American society. When on February 1, 1960, four students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NC A&T) refused to leave a segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, the ensuing sit-ins that rapidly spread across the South provided a youthful surge to the Civil Rights Movement and invigorated a movement that by 1960 was losing steam (Chafe, 1980). Spurred by the success of the sit-ins, students took part in such activities as “freedom rides” to challenge segregated public transit in the South (Lawson, 1991), registering black voters in Mississippi (Bartley, 1995), and desegregating higher education. The glacial pace of change and acceptance for civil rights prompted some within the movement to abandon their previous approach to social change and adopt a more radical, and sometimes more violent, perspective. The ensuing Black Power movement built on a burgeoning sense of racial identity among African Americans. Drawing inspiration from this movement, student activists, sometimes through newly formed Black Student Unions (BSU), began issuing a variety of demands on campus: increased Black enrollment, open admissions for minorities, more hiring of Black faculty and
staff, the creation of Black Studies programs, increased representation of Blacks in campus governance, better financial support for Blacks, and better working conditions for the nonacademic staff (a greater percentage of whom were African American; Van Deburg, 1992).

The success of African Americans encouraged other groups to seek their civil rights as well. The American Indian Movement (AIM) and National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) initiated efforts to improve conditions for Native Americans, including the expansion of educational opportunities (Gosse, 2005; Patterson, 1997). A Chicano Power Movement emerged in higher education, and a number of student organizations appeared on campuses, such as United Mexican-American Students (UMAS) and the Mexican-American Youth Organization (MAYO), which fought for improved campus climates, such as increasing Chicano enrollments, creating Chicano Studies programs, and eliminating racism toward Mexican Americans (Anderson, 1996; Gosse, 2005; Patterson, 1997). Asian-American student groups also sought improved conditions in both society and in higher education, including campus initiatives to create Asian-oriented studies programs and working in poor Asian-American communities to improve conditions there (Gosse, 2005).

As various minority groups were struggling for equality in the 1960s, both women and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) community embarked on a quest to improve their rights. Inspired by the concepts of self-identity of the Black Power movement and coupled with the growth of feminism, female student activists confronted the rampant chauvinistic and patriarchal attitudes that existed in student organizations such as SNCC and the SDS. Women within the protest movements were often relegated to secretarial work. They were expected to cook and clean, and they suffered through inhospitable environments (Echols, 1989). Campus activists challenged discrimination in American higher education, such as discriminatory hiring policies or underfunding for female athletics, and advocated for Women's Studies programs and increased female enrollment (Davis, 1991). The Gay Power Movement fought discrimination within higher education, and lesbian and gay student organizations began to appear on campuses. The Student Homophile League (SHL), formed around gay identity, was created at Columbia University in 1967 (Beemyn, 2003) and, in the spring of 1971, Jack Baker, a gay rights activist, was elected student body president at the University of Minnesota (Farber, 1994; Gosse, 2005). By the end of that year, students had formed more than 175 gay student organizations on American campuses (Beemyn, 2003).

One of the most dominant issues on American campuses during the 1960s was the Vietnam War. Fueled by the expansion of the national media, horrific images of the war flooded American televisions on a nightly basis. For truly the first time in American history, war was brought home to the entire nation (Farber, 1994). Although a peace movement had existed for decades among students, Vietnam pushed it to new heights. What
began as a core of only a few thousand ardent activists advocating for peace in 1960 transformed into a massive movement that could summon hundreds of thousands of supporters by the decade’s end. At University of California, Berkeley in 1965, over a two-day period, 20,000 individuals took part in a teach-in on Vietnam. Between 20,000 and 25,000 student activists took part in the SDS March on Washington in April of 1965, making it the largest antiwar demonstration to date. Within five years, another protest in Washington summoned a staggering 500,000 activists, primarily college-aged youth, making it the largest single demonstration in American history. Students were not just protesting the war, but the draft, military recruiters and the ROTC on campus, and American military policy in general. The gradually growing restlessness with the war would reach new heights in May 1970 (DeBenedetti & Chatfield, 1990).

On May 4, 1970, 13 seconds on a small university in northern Ohio unleashed a flurry of unparalleled campus protests and produced a pivotal moment in American higher education. During that brief span of time, National Guardsmen opened fire on a crowd of protesters at Kent State University. Comprised primarily of students, the crowd was voicing their outrage at the American invasion of Cambodia. The barrage of 67 bullets that dispersed the crowd left nine injured and four dead. Images of protesters weeping over the bodies of their fallen comrades quickly flooded the media, and across the nation students’ outrage over the shootings triggered the largest student protest in American history. Millions of students on over 1,000 campuses protested (Heineman, 2001). The accompanying violence, too, was unparalleled. Students and police fought at over 24 campuses. ROTC buildings were damaged at over 30 institutions, and authorities investigated nearly 200 arsons and bombings, half of those on America’s campuses. Sixteen governors activated 35,000 National Guard troops to suppress the escalation of violence (Anderson, 1996; Heineman, 2001). Fifty-seven percent of campuses experienced significant negative impact on campus operations during the period, 21% experienced a shutdown of regular academic activities for at least one day, 14% witnessed strikes by student and faculty, 26 campuses shut down for one to two weeks, and 51 shut down for the remainder of the semester (Peterson & Bilorsky, 1971).

Protests in the Late 20th Century

Although traditional forms of protests did decline after May 1970, contrary to popular perception, students were far from apathetic. With even Yippie leader Jerry Rubin transforming into a Yuppie (Young Urban Professional) in the 1980s, students have been portrayed as driven by greed and self-interest in the decades following May 1970. Such a characterization is untrue. Students continued to engage in activism and display social concerns. Volunteerism increased in popularity, and causes such as helping the
homeless, ending world hunger, and combating human rights violations became popular among students (Loeb, 1994; Rhoads, 1998).

American foreign policy continued to draw the ire of student activists. The United States sometimes supported dictatorships with atrocious human rights policies. Students protested U.S. involvement in Central America and raised money to send medical supplies to the region. Protests against CIA campus recruitment, prevalent in the 1960s, continued in the 1980s. While most demonstrations were small, some brought out hundreds of students (Vellela, 1988). In April 1983, the Freeze, a campaign to halt the arms race between the Soviets and United States, sponsored a series of nationwide protests about the threat of nuclear war. That month, nearly 350 campuses took part as heightened concern over increased militaristic rhetoric between Moscow and Washington reemerged. Following the American military invasion of Grenada in late 1983, 20,000 students gathered in Washington to protest the invasion of the small Caribbean island (Howlett & Lieberman, 2008). During the Gulf War, student protests against the conflict sometimes reached the levels observed during Vietnam. Following President George H. W. Bush’s November 1990 announcement that he was sending nearly 200,000 troops to the Gulf, a wave of activism struck American campuses. Demonstrations on some American campuses involved nearly 3,000 student participants, and on February 21, 1991, 250 campuses in 37 states conducted a coordinated national protest (Loeb, 1994).

The Divestment Movement emerged as the most publicized student protest during the 1980s. Building upon a movement that had begun in the 1960s, students attacked both the injustices of apartheid and higher education’s de facto financial support of apartheid through investments in South Africa. Beginning in the mid-1980s, students escalated their push for divestment, with some campuses having hundreds of students take part in demonstrations. To further protest higher education’s ties to South Africa, students built shanties that served as symbols of oppression in South Africa on a number of college and university campuses. The Divestment Movement proved extremely successful: 60% of campuses that experienced protests divested compared to only 3% of those with no protests (Martin, 2007).

Beginning in the 1990s, campus activism often centered on issues of promoting diversity, group identity, and multiculturalism. During the National Day of Action, on March 14, 1996, college students on the nation’s campuses joined together to protest for a number of causes: increased access to education, the rights of immigrants, affirmative action, and better campus climates for students of color and the LBGT community. Recalling the methods of the 1960s, students held rallies, teach-ins, and marches. The event was followed by a National Week of Action, from March 27 to April 2. During that week, at Oregon State University alone, 1,800 students rallied against racism on campus; students at the University of New Mexico demonstrated to express their concerns that tuition hikes would hinder college access for low-income families (Rhoads, 1998).
Campus Activism in the 21st Century

As students engage in activism in the 21st century, they are building upon tactics and traditions that have existed throughout the history of American higher education. Although students are using new forms of technology, such as social media, to engage in activism that extends beyond traditional forms of protest (Biddix, 2010), they more commonly utilize such long-practiced tactics as marches, sit-ins, teach-ins, and street theater to further their agendas. For example, when the DREAM Act—five undocumented students attempting to bring attention to the importance of immigration reform—took part in a sit-in of Senator John McCain’s office in 2010 (Corrunker, 2012), they replicated a form of protest first popularized in 1960. Each time students engage in performative forms of activism, detailed by Penny A. Pasque and Juanita Gamez Vargas in this volume, they are further cementing ties to methods of protest pioneered and perfected some 50 years earlier by the Yippies.

More than the tactics employed, students are often fighting for causes that mirror those existing since the colonial colleges first opened their doors. When students of color (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) community (Renn, 2007), and females (Vaccaro, 2009) encounter hostile climates on their campuses and unite to change their environments, they are continuing battles that have existed for generations. At the turn of the 21st century, both the unionization of graduate students feeling exploited by their campuses (Julius & Gumport, 2003) and growth of the student antisweatshop movement (Bose, 2008) illustrate a concern for the plight of workers first promulgated by the socialist student groups a century earlier. Calls by University of California, Berkeley students, who were upset with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, for their campus to divest in two companies doing business in Israel (Hallward & Shaver, 2012) are similar to demands by students in the 1980s regarding apartheid. Views by activists that campus administrators are part of a greater power system in higher education that subjugates students (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005) eerily echoes sentiments made by Mario Savio during the FSM in 1964. Regardless of the time period, the tactics employed, or the causes fought for, one commonality exists among student activists: They are trying to change the world. That world might be as small as their campus or as large as humanity itself, but each student, each group, each movement, is moved in some way to better society.

References


**CHRISTOPHER J. BROADHURST** is an assistant professor of higher education at the University of New Orleans.