

Chapter 37

Activism and College Student Mental Health: A Wellness Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Activism on college campuses in the United States is a long-standing phenomenon rooted in the counter-culture movements of the 1960s. Today, local, regional, and national issues and sociopolitical influences remain closely aligned with activism in higher education, with contemporary issues shaping student activism efforts on campus. College student activism ranges from organized marches and protests to more widespread social media campaigns, targeting issues ranging from inclusion and diversity to sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Involvement in activism can influence the mental health and overall wellness of college students who engage in these activities. This chapter focuses on contemporary activism in higher education, specifically as related to the potential impact of activism on the mental health and wellness of college student activists. Also discussed are implications for student affairs professionals, university-based mental health professionals, and higher education administrators.

ACTIVISM AND COLLEGE STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH: A WELLNESS PERSPECTIVE

In higher education, student activism has served as a driving force for boosting inclusivity and democracy on campus (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017). The organization of students toward a common social goal is the backbone of activism (Barnhardt, 2014), with objectives typically reflecting the current sociopolitical climate (Lantz, Fix, Davis, Harrison, Oliver, Crowell, & Mitchell, 2016). Through power in numbers, students express a collective voice to influence positive changes on a campus (Rojas, 2006).

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Three primary objectives are associated with the current chapter: an overview of contemporary student activism in higher education will provide context to the complex nature of student involvement in activism, particularly as related to individual identity development and personal experiences with discrimination and oppression. Second, the relationship between involvement in activism and mental health will be discussed, with a focus on the application of an empirically-supported wellness model. Finally, suggestions will be provided to campus officials for fostering and supporting student activist efforts in higher education.

BACKGROUND OF THE DISCUSSION

Contemporary Student Activism in Higher Education

Path to Activism

In examining the trajectories of activism in higher education, it is clear that student involvement in activism often reflects their personal experiences with marginalization, oppression, and/or exclusion (Rhoads, 1997; Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, & Newman, 2016). Student activist causes have ranged from campus racial integration in the 1950's and 1960's (Caple, 1998) to inclusivity and safety for LGBT students in present day (Santos & VanDaalen, 2017). Scholars suggest that the socialization process for activism occurs early in life, and that many college students learn to become activists from parents, other early influencers, or possibly from painful personal experiences (Kimball et al., 2016). Students personally touched by issues such as racial discrimination, sexual assault, or potential deportation are often driven by their painful experiences toward collective action to address social and political inequalities, and to perhaps seek self-healing through their involvement.

Impact of Identity

The demographics of student activists have shifted with national trends in college student demographics. Compared with students half a century ago, the average contemporary college student is more likely to be a female, racial minority with a family to support, all of which can reflect novel stressors on student activists (Ruff, 2016). The historical notion of the typical college campus as an ivory tower for the elite is no longer accurate, and in fact, is imperative to abandon (Ruff, 2016). As college campuses in America become more reflective of societal demographics as a whole, it becomes critical to examine trends in college student activism through the lens of the multifaceted and intersecting identities held by the average contemporary college student.

One important objective in higher education entails facilitating students in developing an orientation toward activism (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Activism can serve as a developmental learning tool, providing students with the opportunity to engage in the democratic process on campus (Biddix, 2010). Student involvement on campus contributes to increased retention rates, as well as stronger academic performance and overall satisfaction with the college experience (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013). Activist causes can serve as a means of campus involvement that may be personally meaningful to the student. Scholars have expressed that activism is often driven by a greater sense of purpose, which develops in late adolescence. Purpose entails a drive to reach objectives that transcend the self, and may

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