

# Chapter 64

## College Student Activism on Campus: Renewed Interest or Managed Learning?

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter provides an overview of the definition of activism, highlighting the current national context for how activism is implemented and perceived, and then exploring how colleges and universities have begun to manage student activism, primarily in the interest of learning, but also in relation to risk management. The concept of managed activism tied to learning is explored against the background of college student development, and is also tied to public and institutional policy. The chapter concludes with a preface to the remainder of the book, noting the inter-relationship between activism and the larger world both on and off campus.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

A hallmark of democracy is the right and the ability of a citizen to voice an opinion in an effort to improve a quality of life. This vocalization has taken many forms throughout the history of the United States, ranging from armed revolution to silent sit-ins. This range of vocalization has been tempered by what is considered acceptable. At one time in history, for example, dueling to the death was an appropriate and accepted method of conflict resolution. Throughout the twentieth century, vocalization became activism in many forms, especially in-person protests. Whether advocating for women's suffrage or civil rights, protests involving blocking streets, boycotting businesses, sitting on property, or marching to demonstrate were all common, with major social events and attitudes driving the majority of activism.

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## ***College Student Activism on Campus***

Activism was not evenly distributed throughout the twentieth century, and its manifestation was similarly erratic. Peaceful protests sometimes became violent, planned demonstrations failed to materialize, and the essence of activism ebbed and flowed with the importance of political and societal issues. Frequently, this ebb and flow was most strongly felt on the college campus, as college students form their own identity and frame their own lives against the backdrop of the world around them.

Protest as a form of activism was highlighted in several instances, including the highly visible protest by University of Missouri student athletes. The result on campus was an outpouring of support for racial equality and a strong, direct challenge to the institution's administration. When the administration failed to respond, resignations and terminations by the governing board demonstrated little tolerance for non-responsiveness. Similar types of protests as activism have been seen around the United States, as students, faculty members, and even the general public have taken over campus quadrangles to let opinions be known and action demanded for topics such as high tuition prices, state funding for higher education, non-transparent decision-making, women's rights, sexual assault, curricular restrictions, etc.

College-aged students have typically been among the most sensitive to societal issues and subsequently, among the vocal and active in seeking change and recognition. Part of their sensitivity is their stage in life, where they are presented with the challenges of coming into adulthood and determining who they are, what they believe in, and what they are willing to take a stand for. Additionally, getting involved in creating or demanding change carries a different weight and consequence for a college-aged student, as to some extent, they have a longer future in front of them in a society that tends to forgive the mistakes of youth.

Students engage in activism for a host of reasons, particularly driven by their attempts to honestly improve some situation through a change of some sort. Other students engage in activism for the appearance of wanting to be involved, to impress others, to experiment with the process, to be different, and even, to fit in with others. There is no single rationale for involvement of this nature, and institutional responses have often been to incorporate activism into their educational programming. Institutionally organized marches, sit-in's, teach-in's, letter writing, postcard mailing, email sending, and rallies are all part of the educational process that institutional leaders have incorporated into both the formal and informal curriculum.

All of these dimensions are considered throughout this text, including the liability of organized and informal activism on the college campus. This current, introductory chapter, was developed to provide some initial parameters to the discussion of college student activism, including attempting to define activism, how it is currently situated, managed, and institutionalized through policy and practice. This introduction concludes with a broad discussion of the future of activism and guiding thoughts for reader of this text.

## **DEFINING COLLEGE STUDENT ACTIVISM**

A critical, founding ideal of the United States was that individuals have a voice, say, or vote in how their society is operated. The evolution of Jeffersonian democracy highlighted the need for ordinary Americans to be able to speak their mind and determine not only their own destiny, but that of their community and larger society. Within this framework of participatory society, individuals have formal and informal routes to participation, including voting, convincing others to and how to vote, holding office, and pressuring those who hold office. Non formal methods of exerting pressure might also include personal

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