1994

American college student activism during the 1980's

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Abstract

American college student activism is best known for the part it played during the turbulent 1960's. Many were surprised when it ended abruptly in the early 1970's and students returned their focus to academics and other personal issues. However, the 1980's brought about levels of campus unrest that had not been seen since the late 1960's and early 1970's (Altbach & Cohen, 1989). The purpose of this paper is to analyze the student movements of the 1980's giving attention to the tactics student activists used to achieve their goals. Specifically, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Central America and the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Peace Movement during the 1980's will be reviewed.

AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENT ACTIVISM DURING THE 1980's

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

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by

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May 1994

This Research Paper Presented by: Christopher Rolwes

Entitled: American College Student Activism During During the 1980's

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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5 April 1994
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Date Approved

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American college student activism is best known for the part it played during the turbulent 1960's. Many were surprised when it ended abruptly in the early 1970's and students returned their focus to academics and other personal issues. However, the 1980's brought about levels of campus unrest that had not been seen since the late 1960's and early 1970's (Altbach & Cohen, 1989).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the student movements of the 1980's giving attention to the tactics student activists used to achieve their goals. Specifically, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Central America and the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Peace Movement during the 1980's will be reviewed.

To provide a context, the political, social, and economic environment of this decade will be discussed and recommendations for administrators and student service professionals who desire peaceful campus demonstrations will be suggested.

The 1980's: A Context

American college student activism in the 1980's has its roots in the political, economic, and social attitudes that were prevalent during this time. A

conservative Republican President, Ronald Reagan, was elected to two consecutive terms while Congress was controlled by the Republican Party for the first four years of the decade. Some of the policies advocated by this administration eventually were responsible for fueling some of the student unrest of this era.

Tax-cuts helped to stimulate the sluggish U.S. economy which in turn created a positive job market for many recent college graduates. Many Americans took advantage of easy credit extended to them by lending institutions and purchased consumer items whether they could afford them or not.

Students on campus began to look at their education as a ticket to a high-paying job and financial security. Alexander Astin's 1984 survey of American freshman indicated that 71.2 percent said "being very well-off financially" was an important goal (U.S. News & World Report, 1985). This type of attitude seemed to define this decade as one of consumption and immediate success.

Socially, 1980's America reflected what was happening politically and economically. The term "yuppie" became synonymous with any individual between

the ages of 20 to 40 who saw their work as extremely important and were looking for advancement. These individuals wanted to own the best and were willing to pay top dollar for it (Huntley & Bronson, 1984). Business and law departments thrived on many campuses, as these majors became the careers of choice for many undergraduate students (Altbach & Lewis, 1992).

A social consciousness was revived during the middle to late 1980's as Americans began to become concerned with social injustice, poverty, and world hunger. Organizations such as USA for Africa, and Feed the Children, gained members and contributions as they attempted to fight starvation. These concerns eventually spread to college and university campuses as students used their business and organizational skills in support of various causes. Administrators at the University of Colorado (Williams et. al., 1985), and Williams College (Maloney, 1984) in Massachusetts, both remarked about how civil and well organized demonstrators were at their respective institutions.

Student protestors of the 1980's may have learned from the activists of the 1960's that civil disobedience is not always the best mode of protest.

These lessons were put to the test during the next few years as students became involved in movements against South African Apartheid, American involvement in Central America, Central Intelligence Agency recruiting, and the nuclear weapons build-up of that era.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement

The South African governments' policy of segregation, Apartheid, sparked student interest in the early to mid 1980's as it was discovered that many colleges and universities were contributing to this policy. Colleges and universities across the country had made it common practice to invest portions of their endowments in corporations that were doing business in South Africa. The key to the sudden student interest in this issue was the activists' ability to convince other students that actions on their respective campuses could lead to changing this situation through active demonstration (Countryman, 1988).

The demonstrations that followed were the largest since the 1960's, as protests occurred on over 60 college and university campuses (Altbach & Cohen, 1989). The protestors lobbied for the full divestment

of holdings in companies doing business in South Africa, claiming it was morally wrong for an institution to financially back companies who were conducting business in a country with a repressive government (Wiener, 1986).

The tactics used by the protestors to achieve their aims included 1960's style sit-ins with a 1980's twist. These included scheduled rotations so no one would miss class (Williams et. al., 1985). What brought about the most controversy, and went on to become the symbol of the movement, was the construction of shanties on campuses nationwide. These make-shift structures disrupted the campus landscape, often upsetting administrators and right-wing students who tried to remove them. At Yale University, President A. Bartlett Giamatti ordered campus police to tear down the structures, which resulted in 78 arrests. At noon the next day, 1500 people joined in a similar protest and 150 more arrests were made (Wiener, 1986). Actions such as these by students nationwide forced administrators to listen to the reasoning of the activists.

Students at Harvard attempted to expand their base

of support by enlisting the help of the Harvard Alumni Association. This led to formation of the Harvard Alumni Against Apartheid (A.A.A.). This group was successful in helping to elect a pro-divestment candidate to one of the governing bodies of the University. This important development was instrumental in forcing Harvard to fully divest its holdings in later years (Hartman, 1987).

The 1985-86 academic year was the best year for the divestment movement, as the University of California Board of Regents voted to sell $3.1 billion of its stock in companies that did business in South Africa (Wiener, 1986). Colleges and universities across the country followed suit in the next few years. Oddly enough, this spelled doom for the movement. Activist Matthew Countryman (1988) noted that activists failed to diversify their movement. Divestiture protestors focused so intensely on this goal that sustaining student involvement in other anti-apartheid issues was almost impossible.

However, student divestment protestors in the mid-1980's achieved what no previous generation of campus activists had ever managed: they created a mass student

movement during the term of a conservative president that achieved results (Altbach & Cohen, 1989). The demonstrators also forced college and university administrators to have some knowledge about the type of companies they were investing in, so that future investments were in line with institutional mission statements.

Central America and the CIA

At approximately the same time, a student movement against the United State's role in Central America was gaining strength. In 1979, Anastasio Somaza was overthrown as dictator of Nicaragua, and a pro-communist government seized control of the country. The Reagan administration initiated a counter-revolutionary movement which was led by Nicaraguan National Guardsman. These Soldiers, called Contras, were based in El Salvador and Honduras and received military and financial assistance from the U.S. government.

The Contras were responsible for terrorism in their own country, while thousands of El Salvadorian citizens were killed by government-backed death squads. As students were made aware of this, trips to the area

were organized by student groups to see first-hand what was happening. Three groups, the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, the Nicaraguan Network, and the Latin America Solidarity Committee, were chiefly responsible for organizing student trips and providing national unity for the movement (Vallela, 1988). News reports and government statements often confused and clouded the issues, but first-hand accounts from fellow students helped to build the movement on the national level.

In 1984, protests were held across the country as President Reagan campaigned to the chants of "No Draft, No War.... U.S. out of El Salvador" (Vallela, 1988). The movement achieved some success as the Boland Amendment was passed by Congress in 1985 to stop funding for the Contras.

Since the war in Central America was considered a low intensity conflict by the U.S. government, it took many different tactics by students involved to get their message out. This included holding fun runs, concerts, dinners, raffles, and letter-writing campaigns, all designed to directly benefit the people of Central America and bring attention to their

problems. This type of protest attracted the type of campus activist who was less likely to blockade a building or take part in other acts of civil disobedience (Vallela, 1988). By expanding the base of protestors, more concern was created across the nation's campuses and it became more difficult for elected officials to ignore their constituents concerns.

This movement was built on a strong foundation, as students aligned themselves with church, labor, humanitarian, and other groups. This type of networking assured the movement some longevity, and was in part responsible for its success (Vallela, 1988).

In conjunction with the opposition to the United States' Central American Policy, a movement against the recruiting activities of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on college campuses developed. The CIA was responsible for much of the funding and training of the Nicaraguan Contras and had mined the harbors of Managua, Nicaragua, in 1984. Protestors believed that CIA recruiters should not be allowed to recruit on campus because of these alleged undemocratic activities.

What followed were attempts to limit CIA access to potential employees on U.S. campuses. Students accomplished this through sit-ins, forming human chains in front of campus offices, and by conducting citizens arrests. This tactic was introduced at Brown University, and later was used at institutions across the country, as students accused agents of violating domestic and international laws (Joselyn, 1988).

This action grew as the CIA's role in the Iran Contra affair was revealed. Students at the University of Colorado at Boulder issued a proclamation accusing the CIA of assassination, rape, torture and attempts to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. They then met with the local district attorney and demanded that he indict the CIA recruiters for war crimes. If he refused, they would attempt to perform citizens arrests. After blocking the recruitment effort, 478 students were arrested (Vallela, 1988).

At other colleges and universities, students continued to stage sit-ins, protest rallies, educational campaigns, and petition drives to counteract CIA recruiting. For the first time in 17 years, state police and attack dogs were called onto

the University of Massachusetts at Amherst Campus. Media attention was generated, as those arrested included former first daughter Amy Carter and veteran political activist Abbie Hoffman. These arrests led to the "CIA on Trial" project, aimed at preventing the CIA from recruiting at the University of Massachusetts. Much media attention was focused on this trial, as both CIA officers and opponents testified. The basis of the students' defense lay in an institutional policy that allowed for use of campus facilities only by law abiding groups or citizens (Vallela, 1988). The protestors on trial were later acquitted, as attention was focused on the actions of the CIA against the Central American people. The CIA chose not to recruit any longer on the University of Massachusetts campus and students came away with a feeling of victory.

The anti-CIA movement forced agency representatives into changing their recruitment plans, or canceling them all together on campuses across the country (Joselyn, 1988). However, the activists biggest accomplishment was their ability to shed light on the activities of the CIA, and then force university officials to engage the students in debate over the

issue. This type of activity helped students and administrators enact policies that would correct the situation to everyone's satisfaction.

Peace Movement

Another student movement that also ran in conjunction with the larger movements of the decade was the peace movement. As the military build-up of the 1980's increased, so did opposition. Lawrence Maloney (1984) noted that many students were angry and frustrated at world leaders, who they felt, were not doing enough to defuse the nuclear threat. Students and faculty on campuses across the country combated this build-up by forming groups such as the United Campuses to prevent Nuclear War (UCAM). One of the vows made by both students and faculty was that neither group would participate in research that went towards the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), more commonly known as Star Wars (Vallela, 1988).

In 1983, seminars on defense issues were held on over 100 campuses as UCAM attempted to motivate student activists through education. Another tactic that was utilized paralleled the divestiture movement, in that peace activists suggested that institutional

administrators not invest in companies that "engaged in production or sale of components for nuclear weapons" (D'Souza, 1988, p.1012). UCAM also held a lobby day each year in the 1980's, which lobbied Congress to support nuclear disarmament. This continued until it became a reality that the United States and the Soviet Union were serious about nuclear disarmament. The movement subsided later in the decade as students became involved with other movements, and it became apparent that the Soviet Union was dissolving as a nation.

As the 1980's came to a close, it was simple to see that student activists had achieved some success in convincing administrators, the public, and the government that their causes were just and important. They also disproved the notion that the student of the 1980's was apathetic to what was happening around them. Countryman (1988) noted that students seemed to come out of the woodwork to support the divestment drive; this helped to prove that students had some interest in affairs outside of the college environment.

The protestors also did an excellent job of varying tactics so that their movements would appeal to

more students. Violent protest and demonstration does not appeal to everyone, but other avenues of protest such as letter writing and fundraising caught many students attention during the 1980's. Computer networking came of age in the 1980's, and this allowed student activists to stay in touch on the latest protest developments (Williams, 1985). Student activists' organization and creativity helped to further their movements and in the end, brought them success.

The student protests of the 1980's proved that students can mobilize into a force that can achieve results. Although there was some dissent and complaints of disorganization, the movements of this era involved students, faculty, and administrators working for and against various issues. Violent protest manifested itself at times, but students relied on tactics that could lead to change in a peaceful matter.

Recommendations

It is important that administrators and student service professionals understand the nature and causes of student activism. Often, these movements disrupt

academic life and lead to changes in institutional policy of various kinds to satisfy students' demands (Altbach, 1989). This type of reactive approach took place during the divestiture movement and forced many institutional officials to change their investment policies.

Institutional policies that include clear written rules of assembly for protest are important to allow students to voice their concerns in a peaceful, organized manner. These policies should be made available in the student handbook and should include information pertaining to the length of a protest, number of students that can be involved, and conditions that would warrant involvement of law enforcement officials.

As for the future, there are indicators pointing to continued college student activism. Arthur Levine and Deborah Hirsch (1991) surveyed college students at five different institutions across the U.S. and found that a significant increase of students on these campuses were participating in community service programs. A transition toward greater social activism appears to be occurring as students become more aware

of social and economic inequities. This may be true as diversity and race relations have become hot topics of debate on campuses nationwide as students are trying to become more aware and sensitive to other cultures.

Student service professionals have a chance to respond to this type of activism through residence hall programming, student activities, and through student government. Efforts to provide opportunities to students who are interested in becoming more socially involved may have a positive impact on campus.

It would be helpful to be able to predict when and where student activism is likely to start again. Philip Altbach (1989), noted that student movements seem to go through cycles of activity. That assertion may be true as student activism was more prevalent during the 1960's and 1980's. Perhaps the only way to really understand and predict future activism is to be aware of the beliefs and values that students hold.

Alexander Astin's freshman surveys as well as individual campus surveys of attitudes and beliefs, may be useful in helping to predict what may catch students interest in the future. In turn, this may help the institution become more responsive and proactive in the

eyes of student activists. This would be a welcome shift to that of the traditional reactive stance that colleges and universities have used over the years when confronted with campus unrest.

Finally, the activism of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's should have taught administrators and student service professionals that open lines of communication between all parties involved may be the best way to keep student protests from becoming violent. Hearing out student demands and treating the situation as a time to educate all involved is the perspective that should be taken. Training in conflict resolution could be helpful, as well as being available to meet with groups of students who have concerns.

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