

Kathryn Lynn Weiland, Amilcar Guzman, and KerryAnn O'Meara explore historical and contemporary student protest movements at three academic institutions and provide suggestions to educators on how to support students (and their learning) through their protest activities.

By Kathryn Lynn Weiland, Amilcar Guzman, and KerryAnn O'Meara

Politics, Identity, and College Protest: Then and Now

MORE STUDENTS THAN EVER BEFORE work while attending college, and the cost of college has never been higher. Both realities led us to question the similarities and differences in student protest in the 1960s and today. In considering the role of protest in 2011 and in 1968, we asked the following questions: Is protest still personal? Do the stakes seem as high? Who is participating? Given that protest is less the norm and more the exception today, what can be said about the topics that attract protest then and now?

It is a rainy Saturday morning in 1968. Across the country, students on college campuses are rising to get on buses, make signs, and organize for protest. Targets of protest include the Vietnam War and national policies of conscription for all men of college age, student voice and rights in institutional governance, and the push for increased ethnic representation for minority students, faculty, and administration. In most cases, the issues pulling these students toward protest

were personal and intimate, such as a lack of African American, Hispanic, and Asian American faculty or administration on campus; a brother or father away at war; a daily experience of discrimination as a minority; or the need for improved housing conditions.

The social and historical forces and contexts catalyzing student protests in 1968 were severe. While the Civil Rights Act of 1964 aimed to end racial segregation, it was still rampant across the country. According to the 1968 US Bureau of the Census (published by the US Department of Congress in 1969), out of 6.8 million students who were enrolled in college in 1968, African Americans constituted only 434,000 of these spots. In addition, the United States' involvement in Vietnam also spurred students across the country to engage in antiwar demonstrations. In his study, *The Scope of Organized Student Protest in 1967–1968*, Richard Peterson found that 38 percent of accredited four-year institutions had reported organized student protests, citing the Vietnam War

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as the most popular protest issue. College campuses found themselves suddenly entrenched in a social, political, and cultural revolution that caused students to begin to question their own identities. Minority students struggled to find faculty of color mentors on campus during this time period. In 1968–1969, black university faculty, which constituted the largest of the minority groups, represented only 2.2 percent of the professoriate in all two- and four-year colleges. Thus, in 1968, what pulled many students out of their dorms and homes to organize and participate in protest was intimate and tied to their identity. The stakes were high.

Turn the page now to a rainy Saturday morning in 2011. There are still students rising to organize and participate in protests, though the methods are different, the targets more varied, and the prevalence of protest diminished. In 2011, the student body is more diverse than it has ever been. The presence of minority faculty engaged in research, instruction, and service at two- and four-year degree-granting Title IV institutions has risen to over 18 percent, according to the US Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics) *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010*. Students now sit on boards of trustees and have a greater voice in institutional governance. Still, even as students are making advances in their representation and participation on campus, students of diverse identities

have coalesced to confront existing inequality and use their collective voice to overcome it.

This article examines protest in the 1960s and 1970s and in 2011 from three vantage points. The first is the social, cultural, and political contexts of the injustices faced by minority students at three universities during the 1960s and 1970s: Seattle Central Community College, the University of Washington, and Bowie State University. Asian American, Latino (for the purposes of this article, Latino and Chicano are used interchangeably), and African American students at each of these institutions felt an urgent need for change, due to being marginalized based on their small number on campuses and experiences of discrimination, and set out to achieve their goals through collective action and protest. The second juxtaposes the subsequent movements against modern accounts of protest at these same institutions in 2011. Finally, we consider how future educators and administrators might think about and support students engaged in social change. As spaces created to catalyze learning and contribute educated citizens to our democracy, colleges and universities have a special role to play in helping students discover how to use knowledge and passion for ideas in ways that improve society. Protest is one such place where this happens.

MOVEMENTS DURING THE 1960s AND 1970s

AMIDST THE MANY STORIES OF PROTEST, demonstration, and social action in the 1960s and 1970s, three groups fought for their rights on college campuses and, as a result, formed new collective identities. At Seattle Central Community College, the Asian American student population advocated for a more diverse college administration. Latino students at the University of Washington mobilized to advocate for the rights of local workers. At Bowie State, African American students were outraged at their living conditions. Although different in scope, each narrative is linked together by one commonality: the role of identity development in pulling students toward social action.

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Asian American Sit-In at Seattle Central Community College

On March 2, 1971, the Oriental Student Union (OSU) at Seattle Central Community College (SCCC) organized a demonstration targeted at college administrators for their lack of racially diverse hiring practices. They demanded that five additional Asian administrators be hired at the level of dean or higher. After months of fruitless meetings with school leadership, students decided to take matters into their own hands. Modeling their approach after the campus Black Student Union (BSU), which, in 1968–1969, had successfully used direct action protests to demand the hiring of black faculty and staff, OSU students held a sit-in at the administration building to demand equal representation. In a video produced by the Seattle Black Panther Party History and Memory Project, Mike Tagawa, a former member of the Black Panther Party and founder of the OSU at SCCC in 1970, explains how the protesters learned their tactics: “The black power movement gave a lot of courage to people who would never have done anything. The Black Panthers showed the way that you have got to get in there and you’ve got to be physical about it.” Photographs taken by Ben Yorita and archived by the Seattle Civil Rights & Labor History Project show that students waved picket signs, strewn with phrases such as “SCCC is guilty of racism” and “Stop stalling, act now” in the faces of SCCC’s staff. Shortly after the protest, SCCC welcomed three Asian administrators to the school, one of whom was hired as campus president.

Chicanos at the University of Washington

During the fall of 1968, Chicano members of United Mexican American Students (UMAS) altered the financial landscape of the University of Washington (UW). The 1960s were a tumultuous time for organized labor in California, Oregon, and Washington. During this period, agricultural workers were disgruntled at their low wages and long work hours. In response to these abusive conditions, members of

the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) joined together to boycott food products at grocery stores across the region. In September 1968, after students realized that the deplorable conditions facing agricultural workers would not subside, members of UMAS knew that the only way they could make an impact was to threaten the university’s economic well-being by refusing to purchase certain produce on campus. As a starting point, UMAS distributed literature that called for a boycott of all grapes at UW. In order to achieve their objective, the group met frequently with the administration and implored officials to refrain from purchasing grapes for the campus. Members of UMAS exposed students to the realities of the agricultural industry with flyers, pamphlets, and films. By joining with UFWOC, members of UMAS felt a deeper connection to their Chicano heritage. Ultimately, the UMAS group was victorious in boycotting grapes from the entire campus. The success of the UMAS Grape Boycott of 1968 convinced Chicano students that they could join for a common purpose and achieve specific objectives. UMAS continued to bring together Chicano students for decades to come.

African Americans at Bowie State University

During the 1960s, the pervasive experiences of separate and unequal services and opportunities propelled African American students to advocate for their rights. Over the course of the decade, conditions at Bowie State University were deplorable. According to an article in the 1968 *Baltimore Sun*, more than three-quarters of the buildings at this historically black university were infested with termites, and paint and plaster were crumbling in dormitories around campus. These conditions demoralized the African American community, and after numerous futile attempts to peacefully reach a resolution, the students resorted to alternative methods. When the students protested at the school’s administration building, the university’s dismissal of their complaints increased the urgency

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of their struggle. As a result, students traveled to the Maryland state capitol to protest for better housing conditions, but Governor Spiro Agnew was unwavering in his response. On April 4, 1968, Agnew ordered Bowie State closed, and 227 student protesters were arrested. Although the students did not attain better housing conditions immediately after their protest, they set the groundwork for improved facilities for future students at Bowie State. Their sit-in and the actions of Governor Agnew ignited a firestorm in the state’s African American community that expedited Agnew’s decision to resign. The Bowie State protests were part of a larger group of community protests that paved the path for the election of future governors who would work to create a stronger set of facilities and opportunities for Bowie State students.

MODERN CONTEXTS

THE YEAR IS 2011. THE ELECTION OF THE first African American US president in 2008 is one example of progress that has been made concerning racial equality since the 1960s. A 2011 US Department of Education report shows that minority enrollments in postsecondary education have experienced a continual increase, with African American students comprising 15 percent, Latino students comprising 14 percent, and Asian American students comprising 6 percent of college enrollees. In the years following the global recession of 2008–2009, the nation’s struggling economy has proved to be the most significant foe of college students across the country, spurring them to revert to acts reminiscent of the protest era of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 2008–2009, the United States experienced its most severe financial crisis since the Great Depression. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in January 2011 approximately 13.7 million Americans were without jobs, 15 percent of whom were adults ages 20–24. In such uncertain times, some familiar college campuses found themselves reverting to their protest-era roots by offering an environment in which citizens

can gather to peacefully chant, wield signs, and demand change.

Modern Protest at Seattle Central Community College

The “Occupy Wall Street” protests began on September 17, 2011, as an outlet for Americans to express their frustrations about the economic and political turmoil that has wreaked havoc on the nation in recent years. The website Occupy Wall Street (at www.occupywallst.org) provided a rallying call: “And if we ... screw up our courage and hang in there day after day, week after week ... then we just might have a crack at creating a decisive moment of truth for America, a first concrete step towards achieving the radical changes we all dream about.” Inspired by this message, students in cities across the nation engaged in their own “Occupy” movements in order to voice their collective frustrations with the current state of the nation. Seattle Central Community College became the official encampment of the “Occupy Seattle” movement in late October 2011. One of the major issues vocalized by college students was the rise in the cost of tuition across the country and the seemingly insurmountable levels of student debt that resulted. In other national movements, college students lamented the fact that they had poured thousands of dollars into a college education but had no job prospects to show for it. Engaging in the Occupy movement allowed students at SCCC an opportunity to gather, discuss current issues, and work to enact change in their community. By taking matters into their own hands, students learned more about the structures impacting high tuition costs while also doing something to sway Board members to address them.

Unfortunately, the use of SCCC’s grounds as the encampment for the Occupy Seattle movement did not last long. In early December 2011, less than two months after the protesters set up their camp, the SCCC board of trustees voted for their eviction. Since then, the protest lacks an official encampment but continues to function through weekly General Assemblies held at Westlake Plaza in downtown Seattle.

Modern Protest at the University of Washington

Latino students at the University of Washington today encounter struggles similar to those in the 1960s. According to an article by Juan Carlos Gil in the online publication *El Diablito: El alternative Latino*, in May 2010, Latino students in MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Aztlán) organized a protest against controversial immigration policies affecting the Latino community. As seen on the official national MECHA website, Arizona's intention in developing SB 1070: The Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act and HB 2281: The Ethnic Studies Act was to deter the presence and education of illegal "aliens" throughout the state. Specific provisions in these policies would prevent students and residents without proper documentation from working in skilled professions and also prevent public schools from offering a curriculum that is "designed for pupils of a particular ethnic group." Many Latino students felt this legislation labeled them and others like them as a social underclass of deviant "illegal" aliens. To demystify this negative perception, students believed it was necessary to protest against the damaging impact of these two policies.

On May 28, 2010, MECHA engaged in a day of action that expressed their dissatisfaction with the policies. According to the *El Diablito* article, around 100 students gathered on a rainy afternoon at the center of campus and chanted: "¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido! (A united town of residents will never be overcome!)" Through this protest, the members demanded affordable access to higher education and the boycott of Arizona products in Washington. During the rally, Maria L. Guillen Valdovinos, president of the group, said, "The issue here is not immigration, brothers and sisters ... this whole issue is an issue of power; it's an attack on everyone, not only on people of color but on white workers too" (p. 1). The protest unified the community by advocating for the rights of students, community members, and the elderly working-class Latino population. This movement also harkened to the days of the labor movements of the 1960s. In advocating for the rights of Latinos across the country, students at UW found solidarity with

each other and community activists off campus as they lobbied for the economic and social well-being of all Latinos.

Modern Protest at Bowie State University

Since the 1960s, students at Bowie State have seen many improvements in facilities and educational opportunities; however, like many students, Bowie State students face obstacles in securing employment upon graduation. Bowie State has transformed itself into a student-centered university with a nurturing environment, offering residential facilities for all students. Despite progress in the facilities and climate of the campus, there remains a sense of student dissatisfaction with the administration.

Students have expressed increased displeasure with Bowie State's efforts to ensure that students find suitable employment upon graduation and that they complete degrees in a timely manner. According to the US Department of Education's Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), only 37 percent of students who matriculated at Bowie State in 2004 graduated within six years. A recent *US News & World Report* article, "Bowie State University: Paying for School," shows that in 2011, 76 percent of graduates from Bowie State borrowed money to finance their education and owe an average of \$24,291. Given that a majority of Bowie State students are financing their education through loans, and these loans must be repaid starting shortly after graduation, it has been particularly distressing to Bowie State students not to have adequate assistance with job placement.

As reported in HBCUBuzz, students rallied to support Bowie State's dean of student support services in May 2011. According to the Bowie State website, the dean, Robert Batten, provided a vital service to students by helping to identify potential careers, offering résumé and cover letter assistance, and helping to secure internships and professional opportunities. Students cited a potential cut in salary as a reason for Batten's intended departure from the institution. His intention to leave Bowie State and the potential further reduction of career services led to the reemergence of

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campus unrest. On May 4, 2011, students gathered in front of the university's main administration building to advocate for Batten, who not only provided career services to students but also helped African American students at Bowie find their identities on campus and in society. Through signs such as "Keep Batten" and "We Love Dean Batten," students expressed their opposition to reducing his salary. One student remarked, "Dean Batten was the first administration staff that showed me how much of a family this university can be." Through a telephone conversation with Robert Batten on October 9, 2012, we learned that after the protest, students continued to pressure university officials in hopes of ensuring that Batten would receive fair compensation and thus remain at the university. In the end, university officials met with Batten and implored him to remain at Bowie State to support students on their path toward graduating. Although he now serves in a different capacity at Bowie State, the students' protest succeeded in sending a message to the administration that Batten was an integral figure at the university and deserved to continue his service.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

UPON EXAMINING THESE TWO TENUOUS junctures in history, it is clear that just as in the 1960s, protest is still a method employed by college students to express their displeasure with organizational decisions and social issues. However, the positive impact that participation in protest can have on students' personal growth and development is equal to, if not more important than, the cause itself.

Students enroll in college to learn in the classroom; however, much of what they learn about themselves takes place outside of a lecture hall. The campus environment can be a natural incubator for protest; students are away from home for the first time, living together in close quarters, and experimenting with new ideas and ways of being. It is this setting that allows students to freely engage in deep discussions about identity and real-world topics. Often times, their eyes are opened for the first time to cruelty and injustice, and they assume an optimistic "take on the world" attitude. Students experience the self-discovery that

through collective protest they can exact change in society. This is the first step in developing habits that create an engaged citizenship for the future.

Although nearly half a century has passed, students wielding picket signs on campus lawns have not disappeared, although a majority of their counterparts are now more likely found protesting via Facebook instead of in the field. The technology boom has allowed students to spread their views and calls for protest much more quickly. Rather than walking all the way down to the student union to show support, students merely click their mouse a few times and they have joined the fight. However, this change in methodology can not only impact the message of the protest, but also the development of students themselves. Although convenient, point-and-click does not stir up the same passion as engaging in a heated group face-to-face discussion. It is often the sight of a group of people brandishing signs, standing in solidarity, and reciting slogans that is likely to grab the attention of other students, as well as the broader community. While the message might go out to more people, the plea to sign an online petition will not stir the same emotions as an in-person protest. Technology-based protest is also affected by the fact that the Internet is not confined to one campus. Although student "online" protest may minimize the number of physical gatherings, students benefit from the interaction and knowledge shared around the world. The potential to get a message out to millions of people in a matter of days is a realistic feat that would have been impossible 40 years ago.

We make three observations about protest then and now that we hope will be useful to professionals in student and academic affairs, as well as faculty working with students interested in protest today. First, in both periods of time students were called into action by issues that were personal and important to them. In 2011, students at the SCCC "Occupy Seattle" movement were personally afflicted by the harsh economic conditions that impacted their future aspirations. For Latino students in 1968, it is likely that the emotional ties to their own families provided motivation for their involvement in the local community. In their book *Research with Hispanic Populations*, authors Gerardo Marin and Barbara Vanoss

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Marin discuss how this sense of family, or *familismo*, is an important cultural value among Latinos in the United States and embodies strong feelings of loyalty, responsibility, and solidarity with the family “unit.” Second, students need real knowledge of the organization and issues they seek to change and powerful allies to be successful. They need to understand who has the authority to make decisions in the areas they want changed. Inspired by such past civil rights leaders as César Chávez, who led several successful grape boycotts in the late 1960s, students at UW revitalized similar tactics that had proven effective in achieving equal rights. The inspirational role that Chávez continues to play is evident in the October 2012 proclamation that President Obama would establish the César E. Chávez National Monument in California. Third, students should be encouraged to work for small identifiable wins as well as long-term goals, so they can see the fruits of their labor and grow their movement. Had the students in the Occupy movements across the country set forth smaller demands such as a modest decrease in student fees, they might have more tangible outcomes to their success in increasing awareness. Such incremental successes could have spurred further smaller wins that eventually contribute to significant change.

This examination of campus protest over time provides educators with a number of recommendations to improve student learning and development. Student affairs administrators and faculty advising students who want to become involved in protest are in an enviable position. They have students who are engaged and feel a sense of civic agency to become involved. As facilitators of student learning and development, our role is to help them gain the knowledge and skills they will need to make an impact. Many students interested in protesting an issue will come to us with well-developed skills in the use of social media and communication. What is less clear is whether they will have (a) connected the issue to broader social, political, economic, and historical trends and contexts; (b) interrogated who has the authority to make the changes they seek; (c) developed skills in navigating systems and bureaucracies to get information; (d) mapped out potential allies; and (e) considered potential short-term as well as long-term wins.

Student affairs administration and faculty can be natural allies and facilitators of learning in these ways.

They can help in the formation of civic agents who are not only passionate, but also well informed and strategic and can use the knowledge and skills developed in college for their cause.

CONCLUSION

IN THE 1960S AND 1970S, RACIAL INEQUALITY AND THE VIETNAM WAR spurred protests on campuses across the country. Today, a number of social and political issues, such as the current economic climate and divisive state policies, drive students to engage in similar tactics. A common thread linking these two eras of protest is the attempt by students to assert their collective power in the hopes of influencing their institution, government, and corporate entities. Through these struggles, students gain a deeper understanding of their place in the world. More importantly, it is during such experiences that students take some of the first steps in developing their identities. Not only does their involvement in such movements pave the path for their continued civic engagement, but by participating in protests, students also lay the groundwork to remain connected to issues of personal importance. One of the best things about higher education is that it provides an opportunity for students to become knowledgeable about issues that they will later encounter as citizens, workers, and family members. Through protest, students not only learn about such issues but also discern ways to exert their will on outcomes. They move from simply knowing about injustice to doing something about it. Educators have a role in helping students through this progression. By learning more about the issues driving students, these dedicated professionals can help students grow in civic agency. By facilitating student interaction and engagement in protest, educators not only help students gain a better sense of self, but also strengthen our democracy as a whole.

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