Promoting Student Activism among our Millennial Students

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Abstract

This comprehensive literature review investigates student activism to provide a generational backdrop to the varied types and methods of college student activism in the Millennial generation. After the explosive student uprisings of the 1960's and 1970's, it would be easy to deduce that in the absence of such high profile activities, student activism post-1980 is non-existent or insignificant. However, current literature suggests student activism is alive and well, although it often looks quite different. This makes student activism among Millennial students as important and worthy of study as any earlier generation. But to understand recent activism, one must be aware of the social context and players involved. What are the characteristics and activist tendencies of Millennial students in the context of higher education in the United States, and what can be expected from them? What is the role of higher education administrators in supporting the development of these students?

Promoting Student Activism among our Millennial Students

Student activism has been a well-documented part of colleges and universities since the beginning of higher education, most of which was dedicated to the civil rights, Vietnam War, student representation, and social revolution protests of 1968, or what is now known as the "Year of the Student" (Boren, 2001). Much has been studied and written about these student movements, particularly in the characters, issues, and activist strategies during this tumultuous period in history (Boren). As institutions and the larger society have changed since that time, the effort of students to have a voice on campus has changed as well.

Student activism has an identity problem. Multiple definitions and differing perceptions of what constitutes activism exist, making it difficult to illustrate prescriptively what kinds of activities are considered activist. For the purpose of this study, it is not so important to debate specific activities included in the definition. Rather, it is precisely the point of this study to identify how activist attitudes become manifest differently on campus, detailing specifically within the Millennial students generation. In order to be open to variations, the definition presented by Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, Lee, and Barnett (Student Activists, 2003) of student activism as "involvement in and commitment to social change or social justice" (p. 6) will suffice.

After the explosive student uprisings of the 1960's and 1970's, it would be easy to deduce that in the absence of such high profile activities, student activism post-1980 is non-existent or insignificant. However, student resistance is a continuous and global

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occurrence that is influenced by and interrelated to previous resistance movements (Boren, 2001). Millennium students are as important and worthy of study as any earlier generation of college student. But to understand recent activism, one must be aware of the social context and players involved. One must be able to answer the questions: What are the characteristics and activist tendencies of Millennial students in the context of higher education in the United States? In understanding these characteristics and tendencies, what kinds of activism can be expected by this generation of Millennial students? What is the role of higher education administrators in supporting the development of these students?

An exhaustive critical literature review through targeted educational and student development journals, as well as ERIC searches on key terms of student activism, higher education, millennial students, and social justice provided the history of student activism and the broad social values and behaviors of students of the previous and current generation. Web searches of institutional sites and direct communication with various professional student development staff gave insight into the current response of a few institutions in working with student activists.

Results

Millennial Students Defined
To fully understand recent activism, one must understand the Millennial generation of students. As a definition, Howe & Strauss (2000) identify Millennials as those born from 1982 to the present, showing up on college campuses in the year 2000. Howe and Strauss also assert the early Millennial generation is distinctly different from late Generation X students in terms of political and civic attitudes and actions. As such, the following descriptors and characteristics of the Millennial generation and its activist issues and approaches point to generalizations that may be helpful in understanding and working with them.

Millennial Student Characteristics
Howe and Strauss (2000) cite that, in contrast to the way and environment in which Generation X was raised, Millennials grew, and are growing, up in a time which emphasizes child and youth issues. The nation's fertility rate rose, and in turn the focus on children has become an important political issue in the United States. Instead of being expected to be independent, children of this generation were protected with attention and social marketing that convinced them to behave. The entertainment media followed suit and transformed the medium to include major offerings to children and youth, including a resurgence in Disney movies and an exploding children's book, magazine, and music industry.

Howe and Strauss (2000) list seven common beliefs and behaviors for Millenials that distinguish them from previous generations. They are 1) *special*, where older adults have convinced them they are vital to the country and their parents; 2) *sheltered*, and are the benefactors of this country's largest youth and children's safety movement; 3) *confident*, with optimistic and trusting attitudes; 4) *team-oriented*, from children's television programming, team sports, and schools' emphasis on group learning, Millennials are

working better together and in teams; 5) *achieving*, with school accountability and an emphasis on educational standards they are likely to be the nation's most educated and best-behaved; 6) *pressured*, where they feel an obligation to push themselves to succeed and take advantage of opportunities offered to them; and 7) *conventional*, achieving great satisfaction in their positive behavior and feeling comfortable adopting the values of their parents, Millennials support social structures and rules. Millennials live in a well-connected world, whether that is socially or academically. They prefer to learn in teams and with structure, experiential activities and technology (Oblinger, 2003).

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), each rising generation rebels by attempting to change society in accordance to its values. Each generation "solves a problem facing the *prior youth generation*, whose style has become dysfunctional in the new era; corrects for the behavioral excess it perceives in the *current midlife generation*; and fills the social role being vacated by the *departing elder generation*" (p. 62). For Millennials, they solve the problems of the prior youth generation, the Generation Xers, of independence and organizational distrust by attempting to organize, form teams, and set high expectations in volunteerism. They correct the perceived behavioral excesses of the current midlife generation, the Baby Boomers, of argumentation over action, narcissism, and impatience by focusing on action over talk, valuing community, and displaying patience and trust. Finally, Millennials fill the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation, the WWII or G.I. generation, of the community leaders, team players, and builders of institutions (Howe & Strauss).

One of the more explosive issues protested in the previous two generations involved race relations. While these generations often had first-hand experience in the struggle for racial equality, Millennial students are politicized by what they are taught from educational influences (Hamilton, 2003). To Millennials, race has become less divisive given the many different variations of culture and skin color in today's society. To them, race has ceased to be very relevant, given the fluidity and complexity of today's racial makeup. They see less purpose in old racial struggles, as a result (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Instead of working on the racial agenda of the previous generations, their agenda is to strive for inclusion instead of focusing on separateness imposed upon them by previous generations. By the time their generation came along, the conversation of race represented the past rather than describing what they see as the present reality. While racial rights are important to them, other issues like literacy, homelessness, and sexual identity issues compete for their attention (Howe & Strauss).

Millennial Student Activism

How will these Millennial characteristics continue to manifest themselves as activism on our campuses? Early indications point to their support for institutions and structures, rather than a resistance to them (Howe & Strauss, 2000). When they disagree with an ideology or practice, they are more likely to work within the system to create change than to disrupt the workings of the institution. While it is important to recognize the presence, attitudes, and actions of other generations on our campuses, the bulk of them is, and will increasingly be for some time, Millennial students.

According to Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, and Barnett's (2003) study of students of this generation, activists articulate a desire for institutional leaders to explain the roles and processes through which students could become involved with decision-making. They

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desire clear guidelines for this involvement, largely due to their belief in the necessity of the system; however flawed it may be (Ropers-Huilman et al). They are eager to work through systemic channels to improve their lives on campus as well as to understand how institutional decisions influence larger society.

Howe and Strauss (2000) prefer the term "revolution" to "rebellion" in describing how Millennials push against the established order, valuing the idea of community over the individual. This starts by improving upon systems by communicating with those who govern them. Ropers-Huilman et al. (2003) found that student activists generally found institutional administrators as antagonists who were inaccessible and withheld vital information about campus issues. In response, the student activists desired regular dialogue with decision-makers, access to information about their function, and rationales for their decisions on campus issues so they could better understand the restraints of their job functions and to work more effectively with them. However, most of the activists understood the difficulty and limitations of administrators to create significant change from within the organization (Ropers-Huilman et al, Working the system).

Discussion

Overview of Student Activism

For the most part, student activism in the United States historically has not been respected. Students have been expected to engage in academic pursuits and not in illegitimate dissenting activities (Altbach, 1999). However, there are those in academia who believe student activism should not only be tolerated, but encouraged to help promote community improvement and instill civic responsibility in students. "The goal of democracy is not the creation of artificial homogenization or false harmony, and movements play an important role through fostering dissent and conflict" (Hamrick, 1998, p. 456). The presence of such activity can be viewed as evidence of a vibrant community in which democratic learning and civic involvement is not only allowed but encouraged (Hamrick). According to Pan (2002), higher education administrators need to come to a common understanding that universities should be the primary place in society for ideas that are contentious and controversial. Higher education not only has to embrace these differing ideas, but to lead society as promoter on dialogue of current issues, particularly of social justice (Pan).

Student Activism on Christian Campuses

Despite the volumes of work dedicated to student activism, past and present, there has been a dearth of material dedicated to how student activism is manifested on evangelical Christian campuses. By design, these types of institutions are fundamentally different than their public and private secular counterparts, in mission and practice (Holmes, 1987). One feature of these colleges is an emphasis on personal "fit" within the campus culture. Parental influence and student perceptions of these colleges being safe and moral places, as well as being tied to a specific sponsoring faith denomination, contribute greatly in admissions decisions (Piper, 2002). With a relatively like-minded student body, one might conclude that the amount and nature of student activism would

be different than other institutions as a result. Student activism on these campuses would therefore more likely take the form of the mobilization of students around a social issue external to the campus community, such as a mission trip, support of local service agency or in response to a natural disaster, than organized dissent over a campus policy or institutional program.

Much emphasis and energy is focused on leadership development at Christian colleges and universities. However, the culture and climate at these institutions often does not welcome student leadership when it contradicts the established order or institutional policy. What is appreciated and encouraged is leadership in the reinforcement of established campus and social norms, as well as consistency with the theology of the institution's sponsoring or affiliated church denomination. Instead of the viewpoint that an activist activity could further leadership development of the individual and be a learning experience, the insurgency is often seen as a threat to the campus and those involved are often subject to the college or university's disciplinary process.

Institutional Support for Student Activism

Sax (2003) asserts while Millennials work well in teams and have shown increases in volunteerism, this has not translated into a generational commitment to social activism, although interest in political interests has increased since the contested 2000 presidential election and the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 . There have been declines in student participation in environmental concerns, community leadership, and racial issues since 1992. Instead, Millennials prefer to avoid difficult situations and people and work to improve their communities within a cooperative and structured environment (Lowery, 2004). While past generations of college administrators have sought ways to manage and suppress student activism, today's institutional leader could do well to intentionally promote such activism with well-designed programs and staff who directly advise students.

If one were to agree that student activism is a positive outgrowth of a maturing civic attitude and a personal and corporate investment in social justice issues, it is important to understand how higher education administrators and faculty can best support it. To do so, it is important to understand the characteristics of the students they work among. The bulk of students currently in college are the Millennials, with unique interests and strategies to create change. With their consumer-oriented outlook and ability to work well in teams and within social institutions they trust, it is imperative that a relationship is built that empowers the students as adults, and prioritizes them above all else (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Nemeth Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005). An open and constant line of communication is needed to be open to minimize problems and encourage student growth. In the study by Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, and Barnett (Working the system, 2003), they found that student activists' main purpose was not to challenge the institutional system, but rather to be democratic participants in it. Ongoing communication with administrators and other members of the system was the only way they felt this could be accomplished.

One institutional administrator with direct contact with the students is the student affairs officer, who assumes a role as advocate and friend to the student (Gaston-Gayles, et al., 2005). This role provides students a person within the decision-making authority structure with whom to share ideas, dissatisfaction, and struggle. While it is sometimes difficult to balance the perceived needs of the students and the institutional mission, the trust built among the students is valuable in providing them an outlet for their frustrations.

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This interaction also gives the students insight into the inner workings of the system, and how change is best enacted (Gaston-Gayles et al.). However, a more powerful role of student affairs, as well as faculty members, is initiator and change agent in building and supporting socially-conscious programs.

Reason and Broido (2005) express that it is not only beneficial for the student affairs professional to be involved in the institutional and cultural change process, it is a responsibility. These professionals have the best position to work with directly with students and help foster an environment conducive to such change. Some effective strategies for student affairs administrators in creating environments that support change are promoting diversity amongst the student body, staff, and faculty; helping to create safe campus environments; advocating for social justice courses that reflect the larger curriculum and co-curriculum; helping to abolish unjust policies, laws, and practices; understanding the campus decision-making structures and processes; patronizing establishments that support social justice and boycott those that do not; and persevering through the absence of immediate results, as change is often slow in higher educational institutions (Reason & Broido).

It seems one of the best positions within the student affairs hierarchy to support student activism would be through the student activities office, specifically the advisor to the student government. This person often interacts with other campus groups and special interest clubs and could be an instrumental role model in educating students about effective change processes. This hands-on professional is often in the prime position to communicate regularly with these students, but is low enough in the institutional hierarchy not to feel direct pressure or influence from upper administrators about the nature and content of these student interactions. This role could also be filled by a staff or faculty advisor to officially-recognized clubs. At Christian and other faith-based colleges and universities, often the campus ministries office fills this role in providing opportunities to participate in service and social justice.

Institutions can also create or dedicate specific personnel to engage students in civic and campus activism. In the summer of 2006, Northwestern University created such a new position, the Coordinator of Student Organizations for Social Justice, to work with such groups as the College Democrats, College Republicans, Greens, Feminists, Amnesty International, as well as groups concerned with HIV/AIDS, the environment, and global peace (D. Dirks, personal communication, January 12, 2007).

Institutions can also accomplish this by creating institutes and departments that focus on engaging students in community involvement, such as the Office of Community Engagement at Rollins College. Created in 2001, this department focuses on "global citizenship and responsible leadership" by providing a variety of programs, service opportunities, and courses to foster a "lifelong commitment to social justice, civic engagement, and social responsibility." Rollins supports this department with a professional staff, undergraduate and graduate student assistants, and a faculty visionary board to help provide Rollins students with an opportunity to serve and engage in community change processes during their time on campus (Office of Community, n.d.). The creation of such departments and institutes, as well as staff positions, dedicated to educating and guiding budding student activists seems to be a worthwhile investment for institutional and student affairs departmental funds, staffing, and programming energy, in order to create well-informed and civically involved students.

Future Research

A limitation of this study is the lack of empirical data associated with the attitudes and actions of the Millennial generation. Being only seven years into this generation, there have not been many scholarly studies published to this point. While it is interesting to investigate the general nature of differing generations and their influence on higher education, it is an inexact science. To project how a new generation will respond to dissatisfactions on campus or in the broader community based on a few isolated activities and a limited scope of opinion of their generational characteristics leaves much room for differing interpretations. While these studies are a good starting point, it is necessary to continue the work of empirically studying the Millennial generation, as well as their activist tendencies on higher education campuses.

A good starting point would be an empirical study to collect information on the known occurrences of activism on campus, particularly at Christian institutions. Analyzing individual campus issues, as well as each step in the student response to them, would give insight in how the Millennial student activist process works in the face of real issues. It would also be advantageous to interview students and administrators who were directly involved in that process to glean perceptions and attitudes of these participants. After this data is collected, perspective could be gained by a comparison with the current body of work of student activism of previous generations.

Further research in how departments of student affairs address and support student activism is also needed to identify what is currently being done on our campuses. While there are some formal structures at some institutions to support student activism, the level and type of guidance varies among institutions, ranging from a support function written into a staff or graduate student job description, to an unspoken or informal relationship with a staff or faculty advisor that supports the notion of student activism. Until it is clear how student activism is currently being supported researchers cannot determine what is working and what is not. Additionally, it is also important to determine how this effectiveness will be measured.

Conclusion

Student activism has taken many different forms since the inception of the first modern higher education institutions. This groundwork was important as students tackled large social issues, such as slavery, wars, civil rights, and environmental concerns. Each generation's characteristics and environment helped shape the prevalent issues at time, and the methods of protesting to create change.

To help higher education administrators understand and work with these occasions of activism, it is imperative that they understand the nature of characteristics of their current student body. How an administrator would work with the Millennial generation, with attitudes of teamwork, trust and optimism of social institutions and a desire to participate in the government of them with an open dialogue with policy-makers, is much different than working with previous generations. Higher education administrators, especially student affairs officers, whose heightened professional prestige is largely due to a response to student activism during the civil rights era, must become scholars and experts of the current generation's students in order to effectively promote community improvement and civic responsibility.

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