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ARTICLE

Student Protests, Then and Now

From 'Hey, hey, LBJ!' to 'Black lives matter!'

By Angus Johnston | DECEMBER 11, 2015

Student protest is suddenly ubiquitous. Sit-ins and rallies are cropping up around the country, college presidents are stepping down, pundits and political candidates are opining. A website set up a few weeks ago features demands from students on more than 70 campuses in more than two dozen states. Student protesters are making national news on a scale they could only have dreamed of not long ago.

This fall's organizing hasn't arisen out of nowhere — campus protest has become considerably more common in the past few years — but it does represent a break from recent history. While it has roots in past student movements, it's genuinely new in a number of important ways, and observers on and off campus are struggling to comprehend it.

To understand how what we're seeing today fits into the history of American student protest, we need to tell a story that begins 50 years ago, when the last tidal wave of protest was rising. Tracking how the campus and the student body have changed in the past half-century can illuminate the relative calm we're leaving behind — and why that period has come to an end.



Illustration by Andrea Levy for The Chronicle
Review

An account of shifts in student activism properly begins with changes in demographics. In 1965, the year that Students for a Democratic Society began to build a mass base on campus, the American student body was still disproportionately drawn from social elites. That fall, it was 61 percent male (it's 57 percent female today) and less than 10 percent students of color (40 percent now). These days two-fifths of undergraduates are over the age of 25, while more than a quarter are parents — more than half raising their kids alone. In recent years, nearly half of low-income high-school graduates have enrolled in college, and more than half of students work at least part time. The stereotypical college student, living on campus while enrolled full time at a four-year institution, represents just one in six of today's undergraduates. Meanwhile rising tuition, increasing reliance on loans rather than grants, and a weakened job market have left students more anxious about their finances than their predecessors were, and more nervous about their ability to complete their degrees.

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It's not surprising, then, that we haven't seen a huge amount of student organizing in recent years. Part-timers and commuters are on campus less than dorm-dwellers. Students who support families or work long hours have little time to

attend, much less plan, rallies or protests. Those with high debt and meager job prospects are under more pressure than ever before to finish college quickly. And those with limited connections and experience in the professional world can't rely on friends and relatives to help them overcome blemishes on their academic records. Add it all up, and you have an inhospitable climate for student agitation.

Despite such barriers, though, protest never fully disappeared from the post-'60s campus. It entered a new, and in some ways more potent, phase in the early '70s, as activists emphasized electoral organizing and campus governance, and it flared up repeatedly in the decades that followed, with notable anti-apartheid organizing in the '80s, tuition fights and culture wars in the '90s, and anti-sweatshop campaigns in the early years of this century.

But none of those student movements attained the prominence or influence — on campus or off — of those of the '60s. To understand why, we need to look beyond demographics.

At the end of the 1960s, students began to demand and win stronger roles in campus governance — participation on hiring and curriculum committees, seats on boards of trustees, representation on disciplinary bodies, autonomy for student governments, control over student fees. The lowering of the voting age to 18 in 1971 gave students new leverage to inscribe some of the newly won provisions into law. In 1973, for instance, the Wisconsin Legislature granted public-university students "primary responsibility for the formulation and review of policies concerning student life, services, and interests." But recent decades have seen a rolling back of many of these gains.

As new student cohorts arrived on campus, and the battles of an earlier era faded from memory, administrators on many campuses were able to curtail students' institutional power. (A not unrepresentative example: When I arrived at the State University of New York at Binghamton as an undergraduate a quarter-century ago, my student government was responsible for regulating fraternities and sororities and setting the budgets for intercollegiate sports teams. By the time I graduated, both roles had been taken over by the administration.) And it's not just on the campus level that student power has been circumscribed. Student lobbies, once a significant force in dozens of states, have come under sustained attack — most recently in Arizona and Wisconsin, where legislatures this decade voted to shut down student funding for two venerable statewide student associations.

One other development must be mentioned in any discussion of recent trends in campus activism: the criminalization of protest. When students began staging building occupations around six years ago — primarily in California's public universities, but also at elite private colleges like New York University and the New School — administrators quickly demonstrated that they were more willing to call in the police than were their predecessors during the waves of sit-ins in the 1980s and 1990s. When

students occupying campus buildings were subjected to mass arrest, serious disciplinary charges, and some physical violence, that organizing tactic faded.

But if all those factors — demographics, declining student power, active suppression — do much to explain the dampening of activism in recent years, they also go a long way toward explaining its current resurgence, as well as the character, goals, and tactics of today's student movements. Contemporary student protest has arisen in response to myriad issues, both local and national, but three main topics stand out: racial discrimination, sexual assault and harassment, and rising tuition and student debt. In each case, longstanding grievances of traditionally underrepresented students have been brought to a crisis.

Racism is, of course, most obvious. Trayvon Martin was 17 when he was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in early 2012. Michael Brown was a year older — and just days away from his first college class — when he was killed by Officer Darren Wilson in 2014. The two people whose deaths helped spark the Black Lives Matter movement were thus the generational peers of today's college students. They were also, as young black men, members of one of the most underrepresented demographics in higher education today. Given that, it should not be surprising that while last year's most common antiracist protest tactic was to stage die-ins against police violence, this semester many of the same protesters have turned their attention to the university as an institution.

A similar sharpening of focus can be seen in recent student protests against sexual violence, as Take Back the Night marches, long a campus fixture, have paved the way for more-confrontational organizing against sexual assault and harassment. In recent years, as Title IX complaints about colleges' handling of sexual-assault cases have quintupled, calls for reform in reporting and adjudication practices have grown more urgent. At the same time, feminist activists have taken aim at pedagogy, highlighting sexist language in the classroom and calling for the adoption of trigger warnings and other mechanisms for redressing faculty-student power imbalances.

Simultaneously, the decades-long trend of substituting tuition fees for public investment in higher education has finally grabbed the public's attention. The passing of the \$1-trillion milestone for aggregate outstanding student debt in 2012 helped push the issue onto the political agenda in that year's presidential campaign, and since then we have seen a reinvigorated national debate on higher-education funding. Student protests against tuition hikes and mounting debt, scattered (if intense) half a decade ago, have become commonplace.

These three focal points of protest serve as a rebuke to the ways in which universities as institutions have failed to adapt to demographic changes in their student populations. And while economic precarity and a hollowing out of student involvement in governance helped to tamp down such protests for a time, that period of relative quiet now appears to be over.

So what comes next?

To begin with, the current wave of activism is unlikely to be contained by arrests, punitive disciplinary action, or shows of police force. While the public largely looked the other way during the crackdowns of 2008-10, the use of pepper-spray against peaceful protesters at the University of California at Davis in 2011 brought new scrutiny to such draconian tactics. Moreover, while protesters during the earlier crackdowns — often, though not always, disproportionately white and male — were routinely rebuked as privileged and petulant, that caricature is now harder to sustain, leaving administrators with fewer palatable options.

Consider the outrage that would follow if campus police in riot gear were caught on video tomorrow manhandling anti-rape protesters or beating Black Lives Matter activists with batons. Students, too, have become more sophisticated in their tactics — several of the campus sit-ins of recent weeks have been confined to buildings' regular opening hours, and none have seen the deployment of the barricades and chains that were briefly in vogue a few years ago.

The harsh criticism that activists have received in some quarters is also unlikely to quell the protests. Many of the current movement's critics have been quick to dismiss student dissent as "bullying" or "censorship," accusing it of blunting the impact that more thoughtful engagement could

have. But in recent weeks, such intemperate attacks have themselves provoked a growing backlash, with prominent faculty members and off-campus figures raising their voices in support of student organizers, followed by administrators meeting some student demands.

Today's students are also unlikely to be bought off with symbolic gestures or limp "diversity" initiatives. The origins of today's student complaints are deep and in many cases intractable, and the more accustomed activists become to protesting, the more readily they will mobilize in response to new provocations. And while some of the recent demands have seemed haphazard and ill-conceived, in the past few weeks we've seen a growing sophistication in students' messaging, with more and more protesters pushing for substantive changes in university policy — and increasingly for seats at the governance table. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, activists' demands have included voting seats for students and faculty, staff, and community members on the Board of Governors. At Amherst College, where protesters were harshly criticized for stances seen as hostile to free expression, activists withdrew their early demands — and won pledges of reform to increase the staff for diversity training and campus mental-health programs, and to improve the recruitment of faculty of color.

It is, of course, possible that this fall's campus unrest will simply burn itself out, though precedent suggests that's unlikely to happen before summer. More likely there will be flare-ups and lulls over the next few years, with a new baseline that resembles this fall more closely than it does the autumn of, say, 2013.

And history tells us that as student movements mature, they become more ambitious and more aware of the dynamics of institutional power. The activists of the '60s and '70s, confronting universities that were hostile to their values and ideals, launched a movement that remade American higher education in their own image — not completely, and perhaps not permanently, but in significant, lasting ways. Today's activists may yet articulate — and enact — a similarly far-reaching agenda.

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