

Student Protest Then and Now

On September 24, 2015, more than 100 students gathered on the University of Missouri campus to call attention to a series of concerning events.¹ The students had seen their cultural center littered with cotton balls, a black student body president had slurs yelled at him while walking alone on campus, and, only the day before, a young girl and her friend called the n-word in broad daylight.² The discriminatory attacks had shaken the black student community but, from their perspective, it seemed like no one else was listening. The protest, which they titled “Racism Lives Here,” not only succeeded in changing their campus culture, it also managed to inspire a wave of similar student demonstrations across the country.

In recent years, we have seen students organize around racial justice, sexual assault, climate change, the Second Amendment, and student loan debt, among other issues. Today’s activism builds on the work of past generations of students who used their First Amendment freedoms to hold power accountable. Some of the most influential examples of student protest took place in the 20th century. During this period, students stood up to political orthodoxy, challenged unjust laws, and spoke out against restrictive speech codes. In doing so, they often had to fight for the basic right to protest in the face of restrictions on speech imposed by their universities or the government.

Protests Against McCarthyism

Take, for example, the period after World War II when a senator named Joseph McCarthy led a national campaign to rid the United States of communism. Taking advantage of the public’s fears of Soviet influence, McCarthy used the federal government to investigate private and public institutions across the country for signs of communist propaganda. Many state and local governments followed suit, firing public employees who were suspected to be affiliated with the communist party and encouraging others in their community to do the same.

Though McCarthy’s actions threatened a variety of institutions, they posed a specific kind of existential threat for universities, which had traditionally enjoyed intellectual and academic autonomy from the government. And so, when the Indiana Textbook Commission announced in 1953 that it was banning the story Robin Hood from all public K-12 schools due to themes they thought supported communism, a group of college students decided they had to act decisively. Using a sack of chicken feathers from a local farm and green dye, the students pinned the feathers to their shirts, in symbolic protest of the book ban.³ News of the “Green Feather Movement” spread across local and college newspapers throughout the country and spurred similar demonstrations at Harvard University, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, Purdue University, and the University of California, Los Angeles. It even inspired an opposing “Red Feather Movement” at Harvard and the University of Indiana made up of pro-McCarthy students, though their efforts were short-lived.⁴

Private colleges were also susceptible to government scrutiny during the McCarthy Era. At Sarah Lawrence College, a private liberal arts school in New York, a total of 18 faculty members were targeted by the government. Students published statements in the New York Times in support of their professors, while the student newspaper tracked

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and published information regarding the attacks on their academic freedom.⁵

In an era defined by collective silence and ideological conformity, these students chose to openly criticize government censorship. To break through the hush, the students during the McCarthy Era had to believe in the value of their ideas. In other words, they had to fear the consequences of silence more than the consequences of

the opportunity to deliberate new and creative political solutions to public issues, a role he and others eagerly desired.⁹ Though the movement involved more than free speech, the student's emphasis on the First Amendment and participatory democracy had a lasting impact on higher education.

Conclusion

Over the course of American history, students and faculty at colleges and universities have fought to protect their right to think and speak freely. They have played an important role in upholding First Amendment freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and petition. These individuals understood intimately that a healthy democracy rested on the ability and willingness of its citizens to hold power accountable. As you begin your first year of college, we want you to see yourself as part of this long tradition of student protest.

Instructions for a Student-Led Discussion

Consider using this module as a lead-in to a seminar-like discussion on the tradition of student protest. Have your student orientation leaders talk to small groups of students about their experiences with protest and their thoughts about the history of student demonstrations. Think about inviting student leaders from political and ideological student groups or your student senate to participate in the discussions.

The following questions may help to guide your discussion:

- Why do you think it's important for students to advocate for themselves, others, and their beliefs?
- Many of the student protests we just heard about are from periods when the American public was deeply divided. How do periods of political polarization affect people's right to protest as well as their level of tolerance toward others' viewpoints?
- What kinds of obstacles did past generations of student protesters face when organizing, and how did they overcome them? Do you still see these obstacles in current society?
- If you've ever taken part in a protest, regardless of the cause, how did that experience impact your view of your community?
- Even if students choose not to be politically active on campus, what lessons can they take from past student protest movements that apply to their everyday lives?

⁹ "Three Months of Crisis: Chronology of Events," California Monthly, February 1965, bancroft.berkeley.edu/FSM/chron.html.