

A New Era of Student Unrest?

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Last month's Women's March, one of the largest demonstrations in American history, drew between three and five million people across [673 U.S. cities](#) and 170 cities internationally, according to a [Google Drive](#) effort to capture estimates. Since then, protests have continued in communities nationwide, including [a series of major demonstrations](#) in response to President Trump's [executive order](#) barring travel to the United States from seven predominantly Muslim nations, his [order to move ahead with the wall](#) along the Mexican border and the controversial [North Dakota pipeline](#).

Viewed as signaling white nationalism, racism, sexism and xenophobia, the election of Donald Trump has provoked strong and negative [responses among](#) students. The turbulent political atmosphere recently engulfed [the University of California, Berkeley](#), where students or -- according to campus officials -- [agitators from off the campus](#) violently interrupted what were to be peaceful protests and a speech by *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos. Student protests against Trump's travel ban have also occurred at [Ohio, American, Chapman and Rutgers Universities](#).

What do these events say, if anything, about activism on college campuses today? Have they sparked a new wave of student engagement? Or is it a momentary outcry?

If the former, it certainly wouldn't be the first time that students led the charge against the agendas and decisions of our nation's policy makers. Since our country's founding, college students have challenged the status quo and played a key role in movements for social change. Historian [David F. Allmendinger Jr.](#) reported that between 1760 and 1860, New England colleges experienced "the most disorderly century in their history." Quickly spreading to colleges in the South and Midwest, student "disquietude" (also called mobs, uprisings, riots, unrest, resistance, lawlessness, disorder and terrorism) challenged everything from [slavery](#) to [the quality of the butter](#) in the dining hall.

The next significant wave of student activism came during the Depression, when students challenged capitalism and wealth inequality in the 1930s and favored socialism, labor unions and public work programs. Snuffed by the McCarthy era and dubbed a "[forgotten history](#)," student unrest faded until the late 1950s and '60s, when anti-war sentiments and civil rights movements galvanized students. College activists successfully sought the closure of ROTC programs and catalyzed the establishment of interdisciplinary programs such as African-American and ethnic studies. Student protest also led to the ratification of the 26th Amendment, lowering the voting age from 21 to 18. In the 1970s, female students challenged sexism on campuses and throughout American society.

Student activism sporadically reoccurred until the 2000s, when, according to [University of Illinois Professor Barbara Ransby](#), students shaped "the conscience of the university" by raising awareness about racial inequality, sexual assault on campus, immigrant rights, homophobia and unequal rights for the LGBTQ community, as well as global issues such as the Palestinian crisis. And in recent years, students on campuses throughout the country have supported the Black Lives Matter movement and [protested over racism](#) in various forms.

Leveraging the Moment

So where are we today? Online activism has surged. In the weeks following the election, many virtual resources and communities of practice were created by people working together, sometimes anonymously, on distinct causes. Some of these come from colleges and universities (although, for most, the originator is hard to identify). Examples include [Post-Election Support Resources](#) (Stanford University) and [Election Clapback Actions](#) (CUNY). An assistant professor at Merrimack College, Melissa Zimdars, created [a resource for spotting fake news](#). Recent data suggest that digital platforms empower students and facilitate civic and political engagement. According to [a recent Educause study](#), around 96 percent of college students own smartphones. This enables communication and organizing capacity.

Colleges and universities will undoubtedly face more student unrest. How can educators leverage this historic opportunity and encourage constructive, inclusive political learning and participation? We offer some suggestions.

- Approach student activism with the right attitude. Student protest is not a bad thing, unless it is accompanied by violence or seriously disrupts the educational process. Student protest provides a teachable moment not just for those who are protesting but for the rest of the campus community. Consider it a timely opportunity for [problem-based learning](#).
- Provide students with opportunities to gather, identify the issues that concern them the most and identify their networks. This includes providing students with physical spaces to convene and connecting them with faculty members or people in the community who share their interest.
- Teach the arts of discussion. Your institution already has experienced facilitators among faculty members, administrators and students. Have them teach others to facilitate and engage in constructive discussions as a foundation to organizing. Many civic organizations provide training (see the resources section of [this publication](#)).
- Study, deliberate, study: don't let students go down some rabbit hole of alternative facts or myopic analysis. Insist that students answer questions, like what do we know about this issue? Is what we know reliable? How will we fill knowledge gaps? And most importantly, what are all of the perspectives on this issue, including unpopular ones unrepresented in this group? Weigh the pros and cons of different perspectives rather than dismissing them without consideration or, worse, denigrating the people who hold them.
- Help students think positively by envisioning "the mission accomplished." What will the world look like if their goals are achieved? The process of identifying a shared vision among group members is in and of itself a good lesson in framing, persuasion, collaboration and compromise.
- Teach the history and most promising practices of social change movements. There are thousands of well-researched publications to consider as text. We offer two very different resources: [*Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and Southern Christian Leadership Conference*](#) by David Garrow offers 500-plus pages of insight into the meticulous, long-game planning, as well as the strategies used to overcome unthinkable barriers, by leaders of the African-American civil rights movement. In her [research for the Ford Foundation](#), Hahrie Han, a political scientist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, outlines essential strategies, such as coalition building among civic organizations, political leaders and other potential allies.
- Emphasize the importance of voting and what's at stake when candidates have vastly different policy positions. Our National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement found that [only 45 percent of college and university students voted in 2012](#). And while we haven't analyzed all the final numbers for 2016 yet, as the election demonstrated, who turns out to vote matters.

Finally, college and university presidents have historically been hesitant to offer their viewpoints on political issues, but recent events, particularly on the issue of immigration and new border controls, have given rise to a series of [powerful statements](#) from presidents and [higher education leaders](#). We wonder what would happen if presidents who plan to make public statements about matters of public policy were to involve students in the discussion about that statement to take advantage of the educational moment.