

The Student Voice:

A New Force



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STUDENTS have always been an unruly group, and universities have traditionally been centers of ferment. Yet never before has there been anything comparable to the current student rebellion. Considerable student thought and energy are being focused on intense political activity aimed at both the campus and greater society. The pulse of a generation of youth can be measured by this activity, which is challenging the existing order from campus social restrictions and course content to foreign policy and racial discrimination.

There is little public support for student complaints about the state of higher education and the state of society, but students in turn have little faith in public opinion anyway. Student unrest has developed from a sense of futility, a feeling that present institutions and ways of conducting the public business are frequently inadequate, insensitive, and hypocritical.

Student Unrest a Reality

The student movement is a real phenomenon in the minds and attitudes of many students, though it is most closely identified with an active minority. This fact in itself, that only a minority appears to be involved, is for some people enough to discount the validity of student protest. Many ask what has happened to "the great majority of Americans—the forgotten Americans—the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators." This question with its intended implications is historically gratuitous, for it is always the minority which shapes the course of events.

Large numbers of intelligent, critical, and articulate youth are concentrated on the campus, where they find easy communication with their peers and ready reinforcement for their ideas. And not having yet assumed the burdens and responsibilities of marriage, family, and occupation, nor having been debilitated by economic security, they have the opportunity to make their feelings known.

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The campus is, thus, no longer a playground for practice oratory but rather a real political arena. The stakes are high because the university is on trial as society's institution most immediately at hand. The merits of student power may be debatable, but that a kind of student power does exist and is being exercised is not debatable. It is a very real thing. Students have developed a voice apart from the rest of the academic community.

Many critics have tended to lump all students together, to attach one student-inspired incident to another, and to condemn them all. Yet it is essential that the distinction be made between those ideologically motivated students who seek to dismember our institutions and the much larger group of moderate students who view the shortcomings of our universities and society with less impatience but with genuine concern. However, the moderate students' commitment to the present order of things is tenuous, for they appreciate the message of the radicals if not their excesses. The central problem on today's campus is for the university to distinguish the moderates from the radicals.

The Student and Society

The student movement has implications far beyond institutions of higher learning. It was, of course, initially associated with the civil rights movement, but not until Vietnam emerged as the principal national issue did campus protest become a common occurrence. Large numbers of students, exposed to the history and political realities of Southeast Asia and acquainted with the problems of developing nations, have not subscribed to the blind patriotism that has characterized much of the general public. Though the war itself provided a stimulus for widespread student activity, it also served to dislodge other complaints about the present social order.

Students are conscious that though they enjoy the fruits of affluence, America has not honored its promise to all its people, that millions of poor Americans, black and white, are not sharing in the nation's wealth, that many Black Americans are still struggling for the most basic kind of human dignity. Thus students are not objecting to affluence itself but to the way it is being handled both domestically and in our foreign relations. They are equally concerned, perhaps more concerned, about a society, a social system in which the individual is losing his sense of identity in a great philosophy of consensus.

The university is no longer an isolated community of scholars; it is no longer immune from the society which supports it and which it serves. The day is over when men of prominence would "retire" to a university presidency. A partial explanation for this is that higher education is no longer a luxury within the reach of only an intellectual elite, but on the contrary a necessity for increasing numbers. Mass higher education has become an American ideal, and consequently the university has been inundated with hordes of youth for whom a degree is the ticket to success in middle class society, a society, ironically, in which they are not even sure they want to participate.

The university has more visibly become an agent of the status quo which trains rather than educates students in order to prepare them for assimilation into society at some point. It has, by design, cooperated with

business and government and thereby compromised its claim to political immunity. The university is, therefore, under attack for its readiness to bend to the will and to the standards of greater society and for its complicity with the established order.

Institutional Reform

Quite apart from student objections to the university's subservience to conditions outside the campus is a concern for the internal operations of the university itself. The central issue is one of democracy and the distribution of power. The drive for student power is not, contrary to popular contention, an attempt to establish total control over the university, but rather to redistribute power within the university. It is an attempt to redefine the legitimate scope of university authority in the nonacademic realm and to provide for a meaningful student role in the academic councils of the institution. Students are challenging the authoritarian structure of higher education which has long relegated them to a position of second-class citizenship within the academic community.

A great deal of time has been wasted and attention devoted to disputing nonacademic student-life regulations and their enforcement. It should be said here that in response to considerable student pressure the universities are increasingly abandoning their ludicrous babysitting function and that students will in time have absolute control over the conduct of their personal lives. Students have resented being treated differently from their counterparts who are working or otherwise pursuing careers, living independently, and enjoying freedom of movement and action. Unfortunately, the thrust for this kind of extracurricular freedom has obscured the issue and detracted from the main drive for institutional reform.

Though the student movement is many-faceted, at the very heart of it is an assault on the academic establishment itself, principally on the feudal authority of the faculty. Though students have frequently directed their attack against administrators and trustees, they are learning that it is really the faculty which holds the power over teaching and curriculum. And though the faculty is generally liberal in its politics, it becomes conservative in matters of institutional reform.

After the second world war, education became a prerequisite for successful participation in the affluent society, and those who could provide it were the hitherto inconspicuous college and university professors. At a time when enrollments were increasing rapidly, emphasis shifted even more strongly from teaching to research, and faculties in response have even more emphasized that part of academic endeavor which has its rewards, namely, research and its companion, publication. The opportunity to do research has become not only an academic right but a professional compulsion.

This attitude has redounded to the benefit of the graduate schools, which are by their very nature research-oriented. Dedication to one's discipline is the order of the day. The worth of the faculty is not measured in terms of what the faculty does for its students but in terms of its value in the academic marketplace. This emphasis on professionalism, for all its value, has prompted the amateurs of the academic world, the

undergraduates, to rebel. In the confusion, the undergraduate has lost faith in his faculty; he questions course offerings and their relevance to his world. Yet he does not, in the process, aim to destroy the abiding values of those courses in the liberal, humanistic tradition.

Led by those students who are genuinely bored in the classroom, this student generation has undertaken to challenge the state of undergraduate higher education. To be sure, many students are satisfied with the treatment they are getting and leave college with a degree and with no complaints. But those who have spotted the problems are explaining them to their less perceptive peers who vaguely sensed them anyway.

Nevertheless, student power is still largely illegitimate, that is, it is exercised *de facto*. Students are now seeking to formalize student participation in all aspects of university life so as to effect control over their personal lives and to have real rather than token influence in the development of course content and curriculum.

University Response

The student drive as it relates directly to the universities should be beneficial; in any case it cannot be ignored. American institutions of higher learning have a special responsibility to capture this intense feeling among the young, to refine it, to temper it, and to direct it toward meaningful ends.

American colleges and universities must submit to a rigorous self-examination; the student movement will not subside until they do. The university is a very special institution in a free society and, to the extent that it prostitutes its purposes and its intellectual resources to established economic and political institutions, it has failed in its mission.

The student movement is much more than a drive for institutional reform; it is a rebirth of humanism, of concern for the individual as a person, and of respect for diversity and pluralism. All of these qualities are consistent with our democratic tradition and are values to which the university should, by its very nature, be dedicated. □

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