

## Moral Politics and the University

by David S. Busch

Reading popular media interpretations and social commentary on campus activism since the 1960s leads one to think that student activists have always been wrong. In the 1960s, student activists became too radical and their ideas didn't fit the American experiment. In the 1980s, student activists did not understand the intricacies of investment strategies and their calls for divestment from South Africa were naïve and ill-advised. Today, the argument goes, student activists are delicate and unable to deal with controversial issues and engage with individuals that hold different political beliefs. Student activists, in other words, are either radical, naïve, or delicate. But never are they sophisticated, intelligent, and courageous, or that their actions and ideas have had any influence on civil society or the university.

Like other eras of student activism, commentators today have misread activists' underlying argument about the university: that the university is different kind of institution, that it shouldn't just reflect the norms of society, and that it should live up to higher moral ideals. Put another way, student activists' arguments about the university connect with three key principles of American higher education: a belief in social egalitarianism, critical reflection on how universities create and apply knowledge, and the importance of community as the determining factor of budgets, rather than narrow economic arguments or corporate interests.

Perhaps no moment better captures the energy and vision of student activism than the 1960s. Popular memories of the 1960s tend to evoke pictures of campus protests and building takeovers. Such imagery, however, masks student ideas and the ways their activism have transformed elements of American higher education. Take, for example, community service and service learning. Whether at religious institutions, liberal arts colleges, public universities or the Ivy League, educators and administrators have come to widely praise community service as an important campus activity and key part of a students' undergraduate experience. The Campus Compact, an initiative in the 1980s that expanded community service in American higher education, now lists over 1,000 institutions in its membership. Community service and service learning has come to be celebrated across American higher education.

We forget that student activism of the 1960s carved out a campus space for these programs. Inspired by their political experiences in the civil rights movement, the Peace Corps, and other community oriented activist and volunteer organizations, student activists pushed American universities and colleges to become more concerned and engaged with pressing social and political issues. In the American South, black students within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped develop a work-study program at Tougaloo College that connected the classroom with student-led voter registration drives.

The SNCC-Tougaloo program was but one of many efforts by students to reorient the university. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) drew on the organizing tradition of SNCC and created the Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP). This project engaged college students in community organizing efforts in urban areas and set up community centers that connected the campus and local community. The Northern Student Movement developed a tutorial project that linked the campus to local schools. Over the course of the 1960s, the tutorial project operated in 5 cities and helped provide supplement educational to close to 5,000 students. And volunteers in the Peace Corps during the 1960s, a decade cohort that still accounts for close a quarter of all volunteers in the agency's history, laid the social foundation for community

service and service learning on college campus. Returning from their service abroad, returned volunteers pushed academic leaders and educators to recognize the social and educational value of community involvement, at home and abroad. All of these examples point to the ways that students connected the pursuit of knowledge to a moral vision and direct action in the world.

In response to the activism of the 1960s, educators and administrators supported and expanded community service and other opportunities on campus. In 1968, the Commission of Academic Affairs of the American Council on Education and the National Service Secretariat did a postcard survey of 2,106 colleges concerning the institutional support for a service-curriculum. The survey found that 43 percent of those colleges and universities surveyed had created new programs or courses that allowed students to connect the classroom with social issues off campus. Student activism in the 1960s, one could argue, was successful.

But, this is only one half of the story. Student activists in the 1960s believed an education rooted in social and political experiences off-campus would shift the organizing principles of the university. Most of these programs, however, are marginal activities on campus. Even today, with the expansion of community service, most programs operate as extra-curricular activities and are treated as supplemental to what most perceive as more important academic goals of higher education. These programs, in other words, map onto the university's division between fact and value: knowledge pursuits are in the curriculum and politics and morality are an extra-curricular activity. As student activists learned in the 1960s, bridging the two is a difficult task.

Student activists today have continued that struggle and are forcing us to confront the same question: the role of morality on campus. The key issue isn't about free speech, or as some commentators crudely misinterpret, as the "coddling" of students. The issue, as it has always been, is about the moral position of the university. As students at the University of Minnesota make clear: "We demand the university fundamentally reorganize its goals and priorities to include access and justice for local communities."

Can the university be a higher moral institution? It's a difficult question. One that requires different ways of thinking about the relationship between knowledge and moral claims about the world. To do so is a very messy prospect, wrought with religious, subjective, and political values. But, perhaps activists today like those in the past, are forcing us to reconsider our own roles, the idea of the university, and the relationship between knowledge and morality. It makes us uncomfortable. It should. But, we should listen because the best kind of scholar and teacher is one who is open and willing to learn, especially from their students.

Perhaps, even, students are already one step ahead of us. Inspired by the legacy of the civil rights movement, [Freedom University in Georgia](#) was established in 2011 by a coalition of undocumented students, immigrant rights activists, and four professors at the University of Georgia. These student activists and faculty members have created an educational space that makes real abstract ideas of civic engagement, democracy, and morality. On the fifty-sixth anniversary of the Greensboro sit-in, these students walked onto three public campuses in which they were banned and conducted a class. As a powerful form of civil disobedience, they challenged a morally bankrupt and unjust law in the state of Georgia. In doing so, they also made their education relevant, to themselves, to each other, and to the world they inhabit.