Chapter 1
College Student Activism on Campus: Renewed Interest or Managed Learning?

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ABSTRACT
This chapter provides an overview of the definition of activism, highlighting the current national context for how activism is implemented and perceived, and then exploring how colleges and universities have begun to manage student activism, primarily in the interest of learning, but also in relation to risk management. The concept of managed activism tied to learning is explored against the background of college student development, and is also tied to public and institutional policy. The chapter concludes with a preface to the remainder of the book, noting the inter-relationship between activism and the larger world both on and off campus.

INTRODUCTION
A hallmark of democracy is the right and the ability of a citizen to voice an opinion in an effort to improve a quality of life. This vocalization has taken many forms throughout the history of the United States, ranging from armed revolution to silent sit-ins. This range of vocalization has been tempered by what is considered acceptable. At one time in history, for example, dueling to the death was an appropriate and
accepted method of conflict resolution. Throughout the twentieth century, vocalization
came activism in many forms, especially in-person protests. Whether advocating
for women’s suffrage or civil rights, protests involving blocking streets, boycotting
businesses, sitting on property, or marching to demonstrate were all common, with
major social events and attitudes driving the majority of activism.

Activism was not evenly distributed throughout the twentieth century, and its
manifestation was similarly erratic. Peaceful protests sometimes became violent,
planned demonstrations failed to materialize, and the essence of activism ebbed and
flowed with the importance of political and societal issues. Frequently, this ebb and
flow was most strongly felt on the college campus, as college students form their own
identity and frame their own lives against the backdrop of the world around them.

Protest as a form of activism was highlighted in several instances, including
the highly visible protest by University of Missouri student athletes. The result on
campus was an outpouring of support for racial equality and a strong, direct challenge
to the institution’s administration. When the administration failed to respond,
resignations and terminations by the governing board demonstrated little tolerance
for non-responsiveness. Similar types of protests as activism have been seen around
the United States, as students, faculty members, and even the general public have
taken over campus quadrangles to let opinions be known and action demanded for
topics such as high tuition prices, state funding for higher education, non-transparent
decision-making, women’s rights, sexual assault, curricular restrictions, etc.

College-aged students have typically been among the most sensitive to societal
issues and subsequently, among the vocal and active in seeking change and
recognition. Part of their sensitivity is their stage in life, where they are presented
with the challenges of coming into adulthood and determining who they are, what
they believe in, and what they are willing to take a stand for. Additionally, getting
involved in creating or demanding change carries a different weight and consequence
for a college-aged student, as to some extent, they have a longer future in front of
them in a society that tends to forgive the mistakes of youth.

Students engage in activism for a host of reasons, particularly driven by their
attempts to honestly improve some situation through a change of some sort. Other
students engage in activism for the appearance of wanting to be involved, to impress
others, to experiment with the process, to be different, and even, to fit in with
others. There is no single rationale for involvement of this nature, and institutional
responses have often been to incorporate activism into their educational programming.
Institutionally organized marches, sit-in’s, teach-in’s, letter writing, postcard mailing,
email sending, and rallies are all part of the educational process that institutional
leaders have incorporated into both the formal and informal curriculum.
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