Chapter 7

Student Activism at the Urban Community College

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ABSTRACT

Historically, activism has long been a vehicle for student voices to be heard on the American college campus. Specifically for community colleges, student activism dates back to the early 20th century, throughout the 60s, early 70s, and continues today. Most recently, there has been a wave of student protests at community colleges in urban settings, including El Centro College in Dallas, Texas, where a sniper eventually opened fire on on-duty police officers at a rally. Student activism at urban community colleges are plausibly more expected because of the many controversial issues that urban environments produce, including issues around race, gender, crime, and socio-economic inequities. This chapter explores student activism on the urban community college campus during periods of heightened unrest in the United States, and will include an examination of the paradigms that have influenced working with students during these experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The American college campus is in the midst of a challenging cultural shift. Though not as intense as the 1960’s and 1970’s, when civil unrest was dominant across the United States, the country today still wrestles with issues of genderism, classism, globalism, sexism, and racism. From Hollywood to politics, all are catalysts for disruption, disagreement, and division, have cultivated into a platforms for activists to fight, and protest against policies and laws. Perhaps no other place in the United...
States can a location be so easily used as a platform to voice concerns about these issues than that of the American college campus. Inside and outside of the classroom, faculty and students are able to learn and discuss opinions on some of the America’s most challenging and divisive problems, and do so within what they consider to be a ‘safe space’ for agreement, disagreement, and debate.

The conflicts that result from these conversations and debates are sometimes most troubling, and college leaders continue to work to identify best practices to provide safety for faculty, students, staff, and the overall community to express themselves. Also, avoiding the prevention of free speech is at the heart of these administrative approaches. Faculty are often seen as the cornerstone of the college campus, students represent the life blood, and staff are the nuts and bolts. The urban community college has been especially unique to this because it serves the some of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States (Hirose-Wong, 1999). Many of the society’s most challenging issues have occurred in major cities.

Urban community college students are some of the most underrepresented, marginalized, and diverse students to the point of this being norm (Deil-Amen, 2011). Many come from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and are often first-generation students. Community college students have made up approximately half of college students (Cox, 2009). In many cases, today’s community college student face challenges such as poverty, food insecurity, dearth in viable transportation options, and lack of academic preparation to be successful in postsecondary education (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). This is particularly important to highlight as higher education as an industry is riddled with immense fiscal competition and constraints, and calls from external stakeholders to see an increase in student success metrics.

URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Specifically among public institutions, many community college students are people of color, or come from underrepresented backgrounds. As of 2014, 44% of community college students were Black/African-American, 56% were Latino/Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islander and White/Caucasian students were less likely to be among this demographic, and more likely to attend four-year institutions (Ma & Baum, 2016). These statistics reflect the shift in college attendance among students of color, and depicts a picture that students of color not only desire to attend college, but also, they want to attend affordable institutions in their community. In many cases these students do begin at two-year institutions that are near them because not only are they inexpensive, but students are able to work, help support their families, and stay connected to them. Approximately two thirds of community colleges students attend a community college in an urban or suburban area. The enrollment