Chapter 11
Faculty and Student Activism: Parallel Courses or Divergent Paths?

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities can be important social drivers in the functioning of society. Through their efforts and activities, they can educate an electorate and teach behaviors that ultimately benefit the society in which they work. Additionally, students can learn from their faculty mentors not only academic content, but important behaviors about how to be involved activists in seeking change. This chapter explores how faculty and students are activists, how they learn and interact with each other, and ultimately, what impact this has on the operation on individual higher education institutions and the higher education industry at large.

Activism is an important part of American society. Through personal, and group decisions, pressures are exerted on the American political complex that can result in significant changes in both policies and practices. This pressure is often something that is learned and constructed to be part of an individual’s identity, and ultimately, this learned engagement becomes a personality characteristic.

Learning to be engaged with social issues can often be attributed to life-course theory, where an individual’s home life couples with a time in history to result in a need, or belief, in activism and social engagement. At times of great economic uncertainty, for example, such involvement might be seen as a luxury afforded to those with the time and resources for the greater good rather than the immediate self. During times of economic prosperity, conversely, engagement might look very different, possibly allowing youth to take on larger societal concerns such as civil rights and social justice issues. These are but examples, and economic-driven thinking might also guide individuals to take action, or inaction, for the complete opposite reasons.

There is a segment of the population, however, that has historically taken on a larger role in social engagement, and those are the most educated members of society. These are the individuals who due to their education, understand the socially expected roles of individuals and their personal responsibilities. This education can come from many different places and experiences, but is generally seen as being the result of a postsecondary education.

Postsecondary education can take many different forms and is framed in many different experiences. The phrasing of ‘postsecondary education’ can mean participation in a community college to earn a certificate or diploma, it can mean completing a career education training program through a proprietary online institution (Cottom, 2017; Donoghue, 2008), or it can mean moving to a distant college-town to enroll in full-time study for four years while cheering on a football team in the fall. Such a range of possible experiences makes it difficult, at best, to relegate learning about social responsibility to any single sector of postsecondary education, but for the purposes of this chapter, will focus on the traditional, four-year college experience.

The foundation of the four-year college experience is rooted in both the formal and informal curriculum, whereby individuals seek to learn a ‘formal’ program of study resulting in some level of expertise while also challenging their own personal thinking about who they are, who they want to be, and how they see their own world. Miller and Nadler (2016) stressed the power of the informal curriculum, also referred to as the ‘hidden curriculum’ as being the psychological world around a student.
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