Activism on college campuses in the United States is a long-standing phenomenon rooted in the counterculture movements of the 1960s. Today, local, regional, and national issues and sociopolitical influences remain closely aligned with activism in higher education, with contemporary issues shaping student activism efforts on campus. College student activism ranges from organized marches and protests to more widespread social media campaigns, targeting issues ranging from inclusion and diversity to sexual assault and intimate partner violence. Involvement in activism can influence the mental health and overall wellness of college students who engage in these activities. This chapter focuses on contemporary activism in higher education, specifically as related to the potential impact of activism on the mental health and wellness of college student activists. Also discussed are implications for student affairs professionals, university-based mental health professionals, and higher education administrators.
In higher education, student activism has served as a driving force for boosting inclusivity and democracy on campus (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017). The organization of students toward a common social goal is the backbone of activism (Barnhardt, 2014), with objectives typically reflecting the current sociopolitical climate (Lantz, Fix, Davis, Harrison, Oliver, Crowell, & Mitchell, 2016). Through power in numbers, students express a collective voice to influence positive changes on a campus (Rojas, 2006).

Three primary objectives are associated with the current chapter: an overview of contemporary student activism in higher education will provide context to the complex nature of student involvement in activism, particularly as related to individual identity development and personal experiences with discrimination and oppression. Second, the relationship between involvement in activism and mental health will be discussed, with a focus on the application of an empirically-supported wellness model. Finally, suggestions will be provided to campus officials for fostering and supporting student activist efforts in higher education.

BACKGROUND OF THE DISCUSSION

Contemporary Student Activism in Higher Education

Path to Activism

In examining the trajectories of activism in higher education, it is clear that student involvement in activism often reflects their personal experiences with marginalization, oppression, and/or exclusion (Rhoads, 1997; Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, & Newman, 2016). Student activist causes have ranged from campus racial integration in the 1950’s and 1960’s (Caple, 1998) to inclusivity and safety for LGBT students in present day (Santos & VanDaalen, 2017). Scholars suggest that the socialization process for activism occurs early in life, and that many college students learn to become activists from parents, other early influencers, or possibly from painful personal experiences (Kimball et al., 2016). Students personally touched by issues such as racial discrimination, sexual assault, or potential deportation are often driven by their painful experiences toward collective action to address social and political inequalities, and to perhaps seek self-healing through their involvement.
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