Facilitating Student Autonomy, Navigating Community, and Advancing Social Justice on Campus

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This article is written by two student affairs administrators and a senior at an elite, small private colleges in southern California. Their perspectives are shaped by their multiple and intersecting identities, which include trans, queer, African descent and social justice educators.

This article is written with intention and purpose for people who work at colleges (administrators, staff and faculty) and other interested parties. As lifelong learners, freedom of speech has shaped the authors' lived experiences within and beyond academia. The contexts, interventions, and guidelines below explore when students come forward to articulate their grievances with colleges and universities through protest and resistance. This collaboration offers evidence of and insight into the power of coalition building after campus actions.

Introduction

Disruption and failure often mark the institutional view of student activism on today's col-

lege campuses. As faculty, staff, and administrators: lists of demands, sit-ins, and boycotts can be seen as antithetical to the meaningful, learning environments and community we hope to provide our college students.

In this essay, we hope to review the historical and social role of student activism in creating more just and equitable institutions, highlight the opportunities and challenges of accepting student activism as an expected and constructive product of college learning, and offer a reframing of our administrative approaches to student activism. Accepting student activism as an evitable response to injustice, and a product of college-level critical thinking, we examine the role of free speech, current political and social contexts, and opportunities in college practice and policy for responding to student unrest. We offer practices and framing, based in restorative and transformational justice, to guide more sustainable and community-informed ways to answer students' call for more inclusive, just, and equitable college campuses.

Historical Perspective on Student Activism

History shows that when speech restrictions are put into place, they are typically used by the most powerful people on campus toward the most marginalized.
—Penny Rue[1]

The histories of student leadership and activism are long and storied, frequently coinciding with

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social civil rights movements in society.[2] From Civil Rights and racial discrimination, to the gender equity and disability rights movements, college campuses have been the contested ground upon which social and political ideologies have been tested.

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As referenced in Robert Rhoad's *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity,* student demonstrations have strong roots in the 1960s, with attention to the Free Speech Movement and other significant civil rights issues. They also continue to transform colleges and universities, as marked by the book's account of 1990s student protests that were responsible for establishing ethnic studies programs, the overturning of a board of trustee's decision to change Mill's College from women's only to co-education, and better programming and policies in general for students of color facing institutional racism.[3] Incidents like this led to colleges and universities creating the cultural and identity resource centers we have today, for students who made it to college campuses in spite of social barriers.

In the wake of the national Black Lives Matter movement, fall 2015 marked the rise of this generation of students (predominantly racially marginalized students) on college and university campuses protesting negative treatment, micro- and macro-aggressions, and a general lack of inclusion in their higher education communities. Perhaps most notably, students at University of Missouri (Mizzou) protested after then Student Government President, Payton Head, spoke out about racial discrimination, as well as about trans and queerphobia, at the school, and administrators allegedly did not do anything to address the concerns (Pearson, 2015).[4] These protests sparked widespread discussions about student inclusion, freedom of speech, and institutional responsibility on college campuses.

With the goal of maintaining order and structure in an educational environment, many college staff and faculty see student activism, particularly that which is focused at the administration or institution itself, as a disruption, proof that something is not working. However, we posit that students who are using their voices and speaking their truths are actively engaged in their educational experience to directly address instances of institutional oppression. They are synthesizing ideas and perspectives that they learn through their courses and co-curricular programming.

Current Landscape

The landscape around civil discourse, social justice, and college student expectations has certainly shifted in the last decade—with the introduction of social media, meme culture, and what we are calling "snippet scholarship."

Prior to the boom of social media, when students had grievances that went unheard, they would protest and create pressure for the ad-

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[2] Martha E. Casazza and Laura Bauer, "Oral History of Postsecondary Access: Martha
Maxwell, a Pioneer," *Journal of Developmental Education*, 28, no. 1 (2004): 20-26.
[3] Robert Rhoads, *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[4] Michael Pearson, "A Timeline of the University of Missouri Protests," *CNN*, November 10, 2015,
https://www.cnn.com/2015/11/09/us/missouri-protest-timeline/index.html.

ministration. The institution then would create a bureaucratic task force, frequently consisting of the same student leaders, and then a natural break occurred (summer, winter, etc.), and the administration would feel no obligation to pick up the task force the students started for changing the system[5] (see Figure 1[6]).
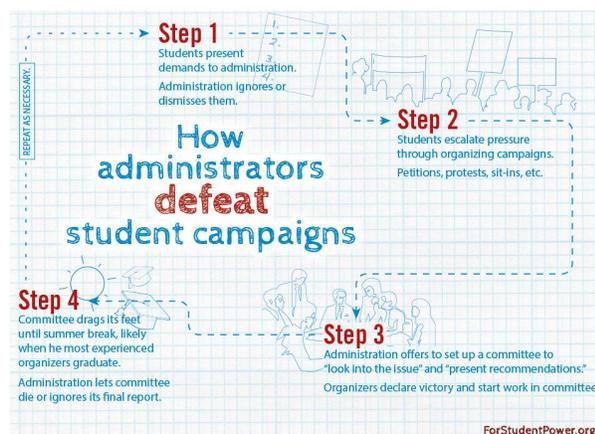
Currently, administrators feel frustration with student protesters because they participate in what appears to be "flash mob activism," activism that predominantly requires people to show up for the sit-in, the march, the walkout; take their selfies; then completely disengage, leaving administrators with a list of demands and few or no student voices.

While there is likely truth to this phenomenon, administrators would do well to remember that "a [protest] is the language of the unheard."[7] Our students are taking on the labor of pushing these conversations, but this task is the responsibility of our institutions. Students should be working on their academics, not fighting to help our institutions become mission aligned. Many administrators consider these protests to be a surprise, but if students are protesting, it is very likely that they have made requests or demands through the established administrative channels and failed to receive the requisite response they expected.

Instead of seeing the students as unreasonable for disengaging, institutions would be better served doing the work to ensure that students "trust the process." If students are expected to believe in the system, they need examples and evidence that the process by which their institutions are proposing changes will occur can be trusted.

Additionally, we have many students who are impacted by national and international news that they frequently feel powerless to intervene in. From Black Lives Matter and the concerns around police brutality and mass incarceration, to geopolitical issues regarding Israel and Palestine and endless global wars, our students are facing innumerable problems that they can do very little to nothing about. Conversely, a problematic program, policy, or department at their college or university is something that they can impact *today*—in a way that many of their national and global concerns simply cannot be impacted. Contextualizing students' critiques in the current social conversations about equity and justice can help us make sense of additional factors that impact students' activism.

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[5] "Durruti – Sandstorm @forstudentpower," accessed July 26, 2018,
https://twitter.com/forstudentpower/status/423222686953639936.

[6] "How administrators defeat student campaigns." Text Reads: Step 1: Students present demands to administration. Administration ignores or dismisses them. Step 2: Students escalate pressure through organizing campaigns. Petitions, protests, sit-ins, etc. Step 3: Administration offers to set up a committee to "look into the issue" and "present recommendations." Organizers declare victory and start work in committee. Step 4: Committee drags its feet until summer break, likely when he [sic] most experienced organizers graduate. Administration lets committee die or ignores its final report. REPEAT AS NECESSARY.

[7] Martin Luther King Jr., "MLK: A Riot is The Language of The Unheard," *CNN*, accessed July 26, 2018,
https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mlk-a-riot-is-the-language-of-the-unheard/.

Lastly, though we aspire to meet the missions of our institutions and frequently seek equity and justice, we must understand that colleges and universities are not immune from the social ills of the world and were built on them and to enforce them. Systems of oppression are like air pollution: no matter where you are or how safe you are, you are still exposed to the toxicity. Frequently, the toxicity of air pollution is unseen, poisonous, and ubiquitous.[8]

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Students are exposed to such endemic harm in the form of racism, sexism, ableism, and queer antagonism on our campuses. When students raise their voices claiming that a person, a program, or a practice is contributing to these systems, institutions would do well to reflect about the validity of these claims. Despite our best intentions, our programs, our people, and our practices are fallible and will contribute to these systems at some point. If we approach critiques with defensiveness and excuses, we will fail to grow closer to our stated values.

Student Activism as Freedom of Speech

The discourse around free speech that has been used to suppress or dampen student protest has really bothered me. It's the fall back idea that free speech trumps everything else. The space for ... all kinds of ideas. The idea of free speech outweighing harassment, outweighing commodification of people's cultures in order to wear whatever you want to wear on Halloween because that's somehow transgressive and liberating. I think that's a tension we need to constantly grapple with. Free speech for whom? For whom is speech truly free? And who has the power in determining whose speech is free?

—Sumun Pendakur[9]

Many administrators and faculty feel that educational spaces should be those where we have the free exchange of ideas; where two or more equally positioned people come together and speak about their positions in an academic and logical way.

Many college students, particularly those who have oppressed identities and experiences, challenge the notion that all ideas are equal or deserve equal treatment. Students claim that they know how to debate and discuss a number of topics, and are calling for a moratorium on certain types of conversations:

> Debate and discussion have happened even in the most insidious circumstances. It's not that college students today are unaware of the potentials of compromise or are ill-equipped to constructively engage with people whom we vehemently disagree with, but that we are rejecting the idea that our humanity is a subject worthy of legitimate debate.[10]

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[8] Kathleen Yep, "Introduction to Mindfulness," Pitzer College, May 23, 2018.

[9] Sumun Pendakur, "Where Do We Go From Here?." https://www.naspa.org/about/blog/complimentary-resources-available-on-student-activism-and-social-justice.

[10] Aleo Pugh, "On Free Speech, Discourse and Opinions," *Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity*, http://urge.org/on-free-speech-discourse-and-opinions/.

For example, when students disrupt a speaker and refuse to allow them to share their ideas without rebuttal, they are informing the speaker and their communities that these ideas are unacceptable and are potentially (and frequently already are) dangerous. It is important that we recognize that when a speaker comes to a college campus, they are practicing their freedom of speech, but these students *also* have the right to freedom of speech, including challenging those ideas. For many of our students, these speakers are presenting ideas that have an impact on their sense of belonging, their sense of self, and their sense of safety in the college community, as well as the world.

When these disruptions occur or are planned, we should think about the place of student autonomy, community, and social justice in developing justice-centered responses to campus protests. As administrators and educators on college campuses, the call to protect the ideal of academic freedom and free speech can feel counter to examining language that poses a direct threat to a student's sense of self or belonging regarding their marginalized identities. PEN America's[11] "And Campus For All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech at U.S. Universities," suggests that "[f]ree speech advocates face an urgent task of articulating how to reconcile unfettered expression with acute demands for greater equality and inclusion and, indeed, how both goals are mutually complementary and reinforcing."[12]

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[11] PEN America is an organization whose mission is to "unite writers and their allies to celebrate creative expression and defend the liberties that make it possible."

[12] PEN America, "And Campus for All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech
at U.S. Universities*," Pen America*, https://pen.org/wp-con-tent/uploads/2017/06/PEN_campus_report_06.15.2017.pdf.

Facilitating Student Autonomy

This is what we want our students to do.
—Mike Segawa[13]

As stated above, college administrators and faculty frequently seek to maintain order and structure in the educational environment and view protests as disruptions to that order. It is important to note, however, that college student activism is no new thing and will likely persist for the foreseeable future. College administrators and faculty would do well to recognize the value and impacts of student activism and consider the public demonstrations as a continuation—not the start—of student requests for changes in the institution.

William Perry's theory of intellectual and ethical development provides us a lens through which to view student cognitive development, as well as their approaches to activism. In his theory, he posits that students have dualistic ways of engaging with ideas, meaning that they first rely on what others, "the authorities," say is right and wrong. Later, they may distinguish that *some* authorities have the right answer and others are wrong.

This dualistic view of the world is one that many of our students are experiencing as they are entering our colleges. Though they may show the ability to have complex and nuanced perspectives on a range of topics, the dualism our students experience can also be situational.[14] We caution administrators to avoid dismissing student concerns as "dualism," *and* recognize that Perry's theory provides a great

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[13] J. Michael Segawa, (Vice President for Student Affairs, Pitzer College), discussion with Pitzer Diversity Committee, May 2018.

[14] William G. Perry, Jr., *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

framework to contextualize how, though administrators and faculty stay the same, students are consistently cycling through our institutions. We must, therefore, have patience with their learning processes.

Student concerns are a part of a larger systemic response to their voices being unheard. Though sometimes students can seemingly protest out of nowhere, what it is important to understand is that what we see is likely simply the "tip of the iceberg."[15] Whether those issues are internal, external, national, global, college-affiliated, or family-driven, students are working with and through a great deal of things and their protests are in response to many things, though often the issues boil down to safety and a sense of belonging.[16]

When we are considering what our role is in facilitating student autonomy in campus activism, we should think about it in four parts: history, framework, tools, and skills. Our role as educators should always be to first approach these conflicts with a goal to educate the student. They are on our campuses to learn and we are the ones entrusted to educate them. We must do the work to know the histories of oppression on our own campuses, on the land, in the nation, and in the world in which we live. We also must educate our students about those histories and the ways that their struggles are a continuation of the myriad struggles prior to them.

Administrators and faculty should also provide a framework or a structure to help students understand the boundaries of effective

protest and organizing.[17] By suggesting that institutions should help instruct their students in effective protest and organizing, is not to suggest that students cannot think of creative ways to engage in resistance. Instead, we posit that we should be willing to aid in their exploration so that they can develop interventions that are effective and based on praxis. We should also give them the tools to be successful. If we know that a specific form of protest will have a specific outcome—suspension, expulsion, etc.—we have a duty to ensure that students know this before and during the disruption.

Lastly, students need to learn the skills necessary for sustained engagement in these struggles. This includes self and community care, continuing to pursue their academics with intention, creating communities of accountability, and planning for roadblocks with secondary and tertiary desired outcomes.

Working Towards a Community of Learners

Students of marginalized identities often face challenges in finding a sense of belonging and validity on college campuses that were often "not built for them." To respond to these challenges, students seek affirming spaces and people in the institutional structure that can provide them with a sense of community, such as multicultural and social justice offices, and identity-based clubs and organizations.

However, in the age of online communities paired with students' critical understanding of institutional oppression, many can see even the multicultural offices as tools of the system, rather than liberatory spaces. Students may then turn to online communities and social media.

[15] Constant Foreigner, "Edward T. Hall's Cultural Iceberg Model,"
https://www.spps.org/cms/lib/MN01910242/Centricity/Domain/125/iceberg_model_3.pdf.
[16] Joshua Moon Johnson, "The Birds and the Bees of Belonging: Building Communities Where ALL Belong" (CHAS Conference, Claremont, CA, June 23, 2018).

[17] See: Si Khan, *Creative Community Organizing: A Guide for Rabble-Rousers, Activists, and Quiet Lovers of Justice* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2010).

Such spaces often do well in representing their underrepresented identities, but are often marked by anonymity, a lack of real-time or tangible consequence for actions, a culture of "calling out," and the disposability of others who do not agree with the beliefs of respective online communities. Here, students are able to be the experts of their own experiences and are not necessarily encouraged to seek nuance in understanding others' experiences.

Such virtual communities are seemingly antithetical to the campus communities we hope to build, having no investment in student development, sustaining relationships, or in growth as a learning community. Rather than building with fellow students and other members of their institution, students may disengage, isolate, and distrust others, resulting in a heightened campus climate, and unwillingness to engage in the institutional responses to protests. Consequently, engaging in restoration and healing as a larger campus community can prove difficult or short-lived.

With this in mind, alongside minding our responsibility as educators, we are called to see the pain, struggle, and difficulty that lie just below the surface of "calling out" and disposability politics, and with which our students challenge us through protest and demonstration. We offer that, as administrators and faculty, we must first examine and suspend our initial reaction to dismiss our students, become defensive, and maintain the status quo. These feelings often lead to demonizing or dismissing students, rather than calling us to do the difficult work of examining how we might be participating in oppressive systems or practices. This work requires us to guide our campus community through the process of deconstructing outdated practices and policies, and rebuilding campus cultures of intention, integrity, and care.

Restorative and transformative justice initiatives provide a strong framework for developing the types of communities that are built on intention, validation, support, and accountability. Restorative justice is "a powerful approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm through inclusive processes that engage all stakeholders. Implemented well, RJ shifts the focus of discipline from punishment to learning and from the individual to the community."[18] In this regard, restorative justice practices seek to build a relationship among all stakeholders when a "criminal behavior" occurs. Rather than focus on punishment for a crime, restorative justice seeks to understand the context in which the behavior occurs, the harm done to the holistic community, and rebuilding and reintegrating the community that is impacted.

The Center for Justice and Reconciliation states that restorative justice consists of four pillars: "inclusion of all parties, encountering the other side, making amends for the harm, and reintegration of the parties into their communities."[19] We pose that utilization of restorative justice initiatives based on these pillars are more powerfully able to assist in institutional change than punitive models of justice. Restorative justice brings change that addresses the causes rather than the symptoms of institutional oppression, and also places value on rebuilding the overall community. Drawing a stark contrast to punishment-based approaches to student activism where individual behavior is reprimanded and sometimes demonized, restorative justice practices offer much promise

[18] "Lesson 1: What Is Restorative Justice?," *Restorative Justice*, http://restorativejustice.org/restorative-justice/about-restorative-justice/tutorial-intro-to-restorative-justice/lesson-1-what-is-restorative-justice/#sthash.NNLlmbd7.dpbs.

[19] Larry Ferlazzo, "Response: How to Practice Restorative Justice in Schools," *Education Week—Teacher Beat*, February 10, 2016, http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2016/02/response_how_to_practice_restorative_justice_in_schools.html.

in holding all stakeholders—students, administrators, and faculty alike—accountable to co-creating sustainable and impactful change towards a liberatory learning environment for the whole community.

Administrators implementing these programs as proactive measures ahead of the next campus protest could lead to great community investment in understanding what harms have occurred, and in what ways individuals, communities, and the institution can address these harms and avoid future harms. This type of program, with the proper institutional support, could ensure that when students *do* protest, they are willing to sustain their relationship to the matter and help collectively imagine solutions that are feasible to implement.[20]

Advancing a Social Justice-based Approach

Just because it isn't perfect, doesn't mean it has no value.

—Sumun Pendakur[21]

Advancing a social justice-based approach is not always an easy task for administrators, faculty, or students. Still, faculty and administrators must create spaces where we can ensure students are acting through a lens of critical and nuanced thinking, extending to their actions as student organizers.

If students are considering a campus action where they are chalking the campus, they should consider who must clean the chalk—frequently the groundskeepers who may share the same oppressed identities as those they are trying to address. Additionally, administrators may want to consider the impact of clearing the action: is it something the rain can take care of? Are there ways to keep the flyers and posters up without violating fire code? We must think about why we want to clear these actions and how quickly this should be done. If we clear the action prior to addressing the concerns, it will simply decrease student trust that they are being heard.

Sometimes our students speak out about institutional or systemic issues and their demands are individual. For instance, sometimes students demand that an administrator resign due to a larger problem on the campus (e.g. students of color lacking a sense of belonging). While that administrator may be a part of the problem, sometimes when helping students drill down into what the actual concern is, past the tip of the iceberg, it can become clear that the issue is about larger structural and systemic issues (e.g. a sense of belonging on campus) and not specifically that person.

Faculty and administrators can often feel frustration and defensiveness when students protest the institution for a lack of inclusion

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[20] Lindsay Pointer, "Building a Restorative University," *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Administration*, No. 50, October 2017, https://janzssa.scholasticahq.com/article/2618-building-a-restorative-university.

[21] Sumun Pendakur, (Chief Learning Officer, UCS Race and Equity Center), discussion with Nick Daily, Claremont, CA, 2017.

efforts because they frequently remember when it was worse, and sometimes students can seem unaware of just how many inclusion efforts are occurring on a campus. Still, campus leaders must accept their roles as leaders, and this means volunteering to be held accountable.

Some theorists have described systems of oppression as a moving sidewalk at an airport. Active oppressive behavior "is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt ... Passive [oppressive] behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway ... Some of the bystanders may ... choose to turn around ... but unless they are actively [working to undo systems of oppression] they will find themselves carried along with the others."[22] Many of our campuses have turned around on the walkway, and some have even begun walking against the direction of the conveyer belt.

However, our students are asking us to actively move against the walkway, in order to challenge these systems in a speed faster than the conveyor moves. This request is one that imagines the world we aspire to is attainable in individual students' time at the institution. It may not be attainable in that timeframe, but students remind us that we must be intentional about our efforts to challenge these systems and recommit ourselves to shifting them.

A Snapshot and Advice from a Student's Experience

I entered college in the fall of 2015 as Black students at Mizzou ignited a national student

movement.[23] In the span of weeks, students of color across 86 campuses wrote lists of demands centered on racial justice and the failures of their colleges' and universities' administrations to foster environments where students of any race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, level of ability, sexuality, religion, or citizenship status could thrive.[24]

National pundits of both liberal and conservative orientations denigrated the next iteration of student protests. Student conduct codes threatened disciplinary sanctions that stifled student organizers' rights to protest.

Simultaneously, white students utilized the popular, anonymous, location-based messaging app Yik Yak to inundate students of color with racist messages. On several campuses this harassment escalated to death threats against vulnerable students. Public and uncensored racist remarks defined my first semester at Hamilton College. The Movement for Black Lives had uncovered racial tensions that exposed students of color across college campuses to the same sentiments that would soon elect the 45th President of the United States.

Despite widespread reports of abuse and harassment on Yik Yak, all affected universities remained stagnant. Yik Yak employed students on college campuses to promote an app that offered a platform for uncensored, anti-Black racism and other forms of harassment. Presidents responded to calls to remove Yik Yak with appeals to absolute notions of freedom of speech. Students of color received less protection than the white supremacists who regularly threatened and harassed us.

Free Speech activists of the 1960s' bold calls for global freedom created new academic

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[22] Beverly Daniels Tatum, "Defining Racism: Can We Talk?" in *Race, Class & Gender in the United States,* ed. Paula S. Rothenberg, 100-107 (New York: Worth, 2001), http://www2.humboldt.edu/education/images/uploads/documents/10._Defining_Racism_by-_Beverly_Tatum.pdf.

[23] This section of the article was written by Victor Ultra Omni who attended Hamilton College until December of 2016 when they transferred to Pitzer College.
[24] Black Liberation Collective, http://www.blackliberationcollective.org/our-demands/.

disciplines and access to higher education for underrepresented students. Speech protections set out to empower voices from below to enter academia for the first time. Freedom of speech advocates should place their protection of speech in relation to overall freedom. In her 1974 lecture, "Black Women in America," Dr. Angela Yvonne Davis argued that freedom of speech should logically expand freedom for all. She highlighted the fundamental "contradiction for someone to have the freedom to advocate for the genocide of a people."[25] Freedom means little if it oppresses others. Universities replicate this contradiction in their contrived dedication to protecting white supremacists, while governing their campuses in ways that simultaneously push out and punish students of color.

Administrators across various academic institutions must trust the experiences of students of color. This means governance on college campuses should consider the rights of students of color through a shift towards a historically-informed understanding of freedom of speech. Historically-informed policies of freedom of speech acknowledge the confederate histories of the United States and their afterlife in the lives of Black students today.

Hyper-surveillance and scrutiny of Black, Muslim, and other minoritized communities extend from the CIA's COINTELPRO program to today's prosecution of "Black Identity Extremists." Absolute notions of freedom speech dependent upon rhetorics of potential censorship fail to acknowledge the continued state-sanctioned silencing of various communities. Historically-informed notions of freedom of speech call for policies that consider and protect the rights of all vulnerable students.

Student protests that shut down invited speakers show an awareness for the role of academia in legitimating the production of knowledge. Meaningful engagement with student organizers prior to the invitation of these speakers establishes a baseline of trust and equity, and demonstrates that students of color exist as stakeholders in an intellectually rigorous community.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are seeing a new crop of student activism and protest on their campuses and are trying to make sense of how to navigate student activism, free speech, and social justice.

To be sure, institutions have been the training ground for activist movements since at least the 1960s justice movements, and now is no exception. Our institutions would be best served by thinking about how they empower students to use their voices to effect change and put into practice what they learn in their courses and co-curricular programming.

Faculty and administration should work to ensure that our students are both right (morally and behaviorally) and effective (in persuasiveness and thoroughness) as agents of change, as they leave our institutions.[26]

Additionally, exploring the role of community and belonging on a campus through a restorative or transformative justice lens may support the entire campus in addressing harm that has been caused through individual, interpersonal, or institutional oppressions.

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[25] Angela Davis, "Black Women In America" (UCLA Black Women's Spring Forum, April 12, 1974), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ks5aVAjyrNk&feature=youtu.be.

[26] Vince Greer, (Associate Dean of Students for Diversity, Inclusion, and Residential Life, Claremont McKenna College), discussion with Nick Daily, Claremont, CA, 2016.

Lastly, understanding the role of social justice in all of this can help us get closer to our aspirational mission and vision statements.

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