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A Decade of Dissent: Student Protests at the University of Michigan in the 1960s

INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, college campuses around the country became sites of fervent change. Universities were no longer insular ivory towers but rather hot spots of student political activity. The University of Michigan was no different, and found itself on the forefront of this student activism.

[John F. Kennedy's](#) midnight speech at the Michigan Union on October 14, 1960, in which he proposed what would later become the Peace Corps, proved to be a catalyst for student empowerment. Students rallied behind the idea, excited to do their part to help the global community. This enthusiasm spread to concerns in the United States, concerns that ranged from local campus issues to US foreign policy. This online exhibit hopes to explore these issues and the protests that resulted from them.

The exhibit will concentrate mainly on the late sixties, the time period when most of the student protests occurred at the University of Michigan.

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This online exhibit was created Fall 2006 by Glenda Insua and Teresa Hebron, graduate students at the University of Michigan School of Information.



Students gather on the University of Michigan's Central Campus to protest the Vietnam War. From UM News & Information Services collection, Box E-5



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TEACH-INS

In March of 1965 a group of professors decided to cancel class to protest the US occupation of Vietnam. The professors faced hostility from both Governor George Romney and University President Harlan Hatcher. In addition to opposition from the administration and state government, not all faculty agreed about striking. After a series of meetings, however, the majority of the faculty agreed upon the strike option.



Students at the Drugs Teach-in, January 7, 1968, ©Andrew Sacks.

An announcement was sent to the press, intensifying the tension between the administration, the faculty, and among the faculty themselves. The faculty senate considered censuring strike supporters. In this heated atmosphere, Arnold Kaufman called for a meeting at his home on the night of March

17. Professors at this meeting tried to think of alternatives to the strike that would both send a clear message regarding their feelings on Vietnam and allow them to save face for going back on their strike plans. Marshall Sahlins of the Anthropology Department finally suggested that professors teach their classes that day but continue teaching all through the night. This teach-in would not be a discussion about the pros and cons of Vietnam, but rather "constitute a clear factual and moral protest against the war."¹ A final meeting was held the next night, where the teach-in idea was brought to more of the faculty and agreed upon.

The teach-in on March 24 and 25 consisted of guest speakers, seminars, and films. Over 3,000 students attended and 200 faculty members showed their support. Although the teach-in was momentarily disrupted by a bomb scare, it proved overwhelmingly successful. Other schools across the country started using teach-ins on their own campuses, and at Michigan teach-ins were subsequently held on a wide range of topics such as the environment, drugs, and women's issues.

1. Jack Rothman to William Haber, 1972, pp. 11-12, Teach-in Vertical File, Bentley Historical Library.

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DRAFT CLASSIFICATION

During the Vietnam War, the Selective Service Office of the United States requested that colleges and universities rank their male students to determine their eligibility for the draft. This was a system used during the Korean War, and participation was not mandatory. In



©Andrew Sacks

fact, a formal request was not made until March 1966. Women's grades were not considered in the ranking process.

All freshmen were automatically classified as "1-A" until the completion of their first year of study. After that time, those students in the lower half of their class retained the 1-A ranking, while those in the upper half were reclassified as 2-S, and therefore received student deferments from the draft. Additionally the lower third of the sophomore men and the lower quarter of the junior men retained the 1-A status.



©Andrew Sacks

In October 15, 1965, a group including many University of Michigan students staged a sit-in at the Selective Service office in Ann Arbor. The protestors were arrested, charged with trespassing, and subsequently convicted. Although they were given 15-20 day jail sentences and fines, the university reclassified 14 of the students as 1-A in apparent retaliation for the sit-in.

While many appealed their sentences, one student, Bill Ayers, served his time and wrote an account of his tenure in jail, which was published in two installments on January 7 and 9, 1968 in the *Michigan Daily*.

A group of teaching fellows from the Department of Economics issued a statement opposing the student rankings, citing the inflation of the importance of grades and the discrepancies in grading practices between professors and departments as two of the many reasons why grades were an inappropriate measure of a student's eligibility for the draft. These fellows proposed that no grades be submitted for male students until the university ceased the rankings so that their grades would not be used for these purposes.

Read Ayer's account in the *Michigan Daily*:

1. [The All-American Jail, Part 1](#)
2. [The All-American Jail, Part 2](#)

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BOOKSTORE CONTROVERSY

In the 1960s, students sought more control over campus life. Perhaps nowhere is this best illustrated than in their call for a student-run university bookstore. Many campuses across the country instituted these bookstores, but the University of Michigan was resistant. On January 21, 1966, Vice-President of Student Affairs Richard Cutler recommended to the University Regents to deny the request of some 3,000 students for a university-sponsored bookstore. He claimed that such a bookstore was economically unfeasible.

Outraged at Cutler's proposal and the Regents' refusal to seek student input, students protested outside the Administration Building. Bookstore committee members pointed to the success of Professor Shure's Student Book Service to argue that such a bookstore could be economically viable (*Michigan Daily*, January 21, 1966).



Students protest in support of a student-run bookstore. From, Vice-President for Development and Communication Records, Box 23.

As the years went on and little was accomplished, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) decided to take action. In September of 1969, they disrupted a Regents meeting and demanded that the Regents approve the bookstore. After much negotiation, the Regents finally agreed to fund a bookstore, but not to allow student control. Student groups across campus found this decision unacceptable, so SDS organized a take-over of the LSA building. Fleming decided to file a restraining order against the students but could not gain access to the building. Frustrated, he called in the police who arrested 107 students.

The students were furious about the police intervention. They refused to back down on this issue and subsequently gained victory when the Regents agreed to establish a student-run bookstore. Their only stipulation was that they not be held financially responsible if the bookstore turned out to be a failure.¹

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1. Peckham, Howard H. *The Making of the University of Michigan, 1817-1992*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

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WAR RESEARCH AND ANTI-RECRUITING ACTIVITIES

Prior to the 1960s, the research projects done by the Engineering Department which were sponsored by the US government and its defense contractors were moved out of Ann Arbor to Willow Run Laboratories in nearby Ypsilanti, MI.

Tensions over the university's involvement in secret war research culminated in October 1967, when hundreds of students occupied the Administration Building. They were opposed to the University's involvement in a Department of Defense project with the Royal Thai Armed Forces.



Protestors demonstrate against corporate recruiters with known war research affiliations, from Michigan Daily Photograph collection, Box 12.

In 1968, the Research Policies Committee (RPC) reviewed the issue of secret research and recommended that the university decline contracts that would ultimately result in human death or incapacitation.



Protests at a recruiting event by Dow Chemical, ©Andrew Sacks.

Another target of student protestors were corporate recruiters whose employers were known to be involved either in the war or other undesirable practices. Companies such as Michigan-based Dow Chemical (who manufactured napalm), Atlantic Richfield Company, Exxon, Hughes Aircraft and others were repeatedly interrupted during their efforts to meet with potential employees.

One protest of Atlantic Richfield in 1970 resulted in a 20-year old woman being charged with malicious destruction of property after she poured oil and feathers on the stairs of [West Hall](#), where

the Engineering Department was housed at the time.



Protests at a recruiting event by DuPont, ©Andrew Sacks.

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STUDENT HOUSING

Another local issue provoking university students was housing. Student housing choices were extremely limited and often undesirable. Rents were high, apartments were cockroach-infested, and landlords routinely failed to return security deposits. On January 25, 1968, *The Michigan Daily* reported that Apartments Ltd received the most number of student complaints, mainly regarding deposits not being returned, maintenance issues, and repairs.

In an attempt to help students with these difficulties, the Student Government Assembly and the Student Housing Association decided to institute an eight-month lease, thereby making it easier for students who left Ann Arbor in the summer. Apartments Ltd refused to use the lease, which only infuriated students more. In retaliation, the Student Housing Association named Apartments Ltd. as a boycott target.



Members of the tenant union atop their rent-controlled house. From the Michigan Daily Photograph Collection.

As the year went on, students frequently picketed the offices of Apartment Ltd. Students complained about high rents and unsafe living conditions, but to no avail. Apartments Ltd. may have been the catalyst for this student action, but they were by no means the only rental agency causing problems. Students saw this issue as a rampant, citywide problem. In 1969, over 1,000 students organized a renters union, one of the first of its kind. They received financial support from the United Auto Workers and were able to withhold \$100,000 in rent from their landlords. Some of their demands included reductions in rent, elimination of damage deposits, and immediate handling of complaints.

Most landlords did not recognize the union and treated the strike with indifference. After several months, however, they started turning off heat, threatening students with eviction, towing away cars, and even calling students' parents. Ann Arbor Management took the strikers to court, but the strikers won a significant victory. They were forced to pay back-rent to their landlords, but the amount they owed was drastically reduced. Most importantly, the court did not forbid the union from striking, so they continued to withhold rent.

Seven other landlords filed suit against what they deemed the "so-called tenants union" alleging that the strike involved conspiracy to violate existing and future leases and that the ultimate goal of the strike was not to improve living conditions but to attack the notion of private property. The strikers filed a countersuit, claiming that the landlords had violated the terms of their leases.

As the strike went on, the students received more and more support. The Ann Arbor City Council supported them and in October of 1969, McKinley Associates became the first agency to enter into talks with the tenant union. The strike did result in rent reductions and in repairs by some landlords, but it was not fully resolved until 1971. Unfortunately, several of these issues would arise again in the late seventies and 1980s.

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RESERVE OFFICER TRAINING CORP (ROTC)

The Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) has had a presence on University of Michigan's campus since 1916, when the university accepted a War Department proposal that an ROTC be established at all universities. During the 1960's, the ROTC became a target of student protests for reasons similar to the objections to war research done by universities. As one SDS publication succinctly states, "By its maintenance of war research and war recruiting as well as ROTC, the university actively supports large-scale murder in defense of economic exploitation."¹

Beginning in 1967, students at universities and colleges across the United States mounted campaigns against ROTC. This led to several universities making ROTC participation voluntary; other schools chose to deny academic credit for ROTC classwork. Both of these changes hurt ROTC enrollment.



Students protesting outside of North Hall, home of the ROTC. From News and Information Services, Box E-5.

The University of Michigan had already begun a faculty review committee of the university's relationship with ROTC in the spring of 1969. In September 1969, anti-ROTC protestors at University of Michigan occupied North Hall, hoping to draw the attention of the authorities. President Robben Fleming's request that the police leave the back door unlocked and unguarded (so as

not to provoke a confrontation) was honored, and the protestors left in the night. Their actions proved ineffectual, as the Regents did not change the university's long-standing arrangement with the military.

In December 1969, the review committee presented its findings to the Board of Regents. Despite earlier inclinations to recommend restrictions that would effectively hobble the ROTC and force the Defense Department to withdraw altogether, the ultimate recommendations were quite close to those made in the Benson Report, an October 1969 document produced by a Defense Department committee. (This committee was convened to investigate ways of making ROTC more attractive to students.) The University of Michigan's committee proposed that 1) ROTC no longer hold departmental status, 2) ROTC personnel no longer hold academic titles, 3) the university stop its annual subsidy for the program, and that 4) a committee be formed to oversee ROTC to improve the quality of instructors and course offerings.

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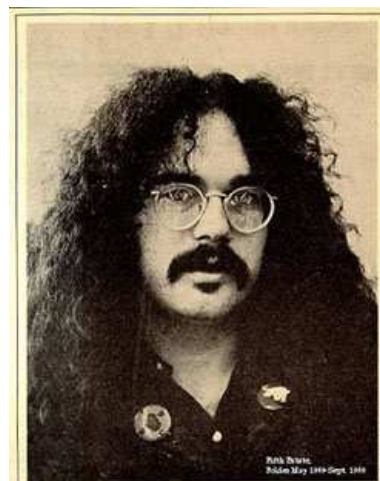
JOHN SINCLAIR

John Sinclair, a Michigan native and alumnus of the University of Michigan- Flint, was an influential leader of the 1960's counterculture. Sinclair was heavily involved in the Detroit music and art communities, first helping to found the Detroit Artists' Workshop and later, the Wayne State University Artists' Society. These organizations worked to produce concerts, poetry readings, and avant-garde publications.

In 1967, Sinclair co-founded Trans-Love Energies Unlimited, a group of like-minded individuals whose main philosophy included self-reliance and community responsibility. Originally located in the Warren Forest neighborhood of Detroit, the group was forced to relocate to 1520 Hill Street in Ann Arbor, following two fire-bombings of the group's original location.

Sinclair also co-founded the White Panther Party, along with Pun Plamondon, in November 1968. Influenced by leaders of the Black Panther Party such as Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, the White Panthers advocated economic and cultural freedom.

In July of 1969, Sinclair was sentenced to 9 ½ to 10 years in prison for possessing two marijuana cigarettes. While in prison, he wrote extensively about the counterculture movement and became one of its national symbols. A two-and-a-half year legal battle culminated with a massive Free John Now Rally at [Crisler Arena](#) on December 10, 1971. The rally was attended by some 15,000 people, headlined by musical artists like John Lennon, Yoko Ono, and Stevie Wonder, and featured speakers such as Allen Ginsberg and John's wife, Leni Arndt. Three days later, the Michigan Supreme Court ordered Sinclair be released and later overturned his conviction.



Crowd at the Free John Now Concert, at Crisler Arena. ©Andrew Sacks.



John Lennon performing at concert. © Andrew Sacks

SOUTH UNIVERSITY PROTESTS

During the summer months of 1969, the stretch of South University Avenue between south Forest and Church Streets was the scene of repeated gatherings of groups comprised of Trans-Love Energies, White Panther Party members, and university students. The groups advocated the permanent closure of this section of the avenue in favor of a pedestrian mall, an idea that was presented to the City Council.



©Andrew Sacks



©Andrew Sacks

The gatherings took a violent turn on June 17, 1969 when the local, county, and state police used force to clear some 1,500 protestors from the area. The following day saw similar police action against an estimated 700 people gathered in the ten-block area around South University. The Washtenaw County Sheriff, Douglas Harvey, provoked outrage in the university community with his aggressive handling of the gatherings and his criticism of University of Michigan President Robben Fleming's reluctance to involve the police.

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CIVIL RIGHTS

Civil rights became another important issue on campus, especially after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. On the morning of King's funeral, April 9, 1968, a group of African-American students took over the Administration Building, chaining the doors and preventing anyone from entering except President Fleming, whom they had called to hear their demands. Fleming heard their demands and planned a subsequent meeting, leading to the development of a Martin Luther King Scholarship and Professorship. The students were also concerned with the lack of African-American professors and students, and Fleming vowed to work to recruit both groups.



Police try to enter the Administration Building on April 9, 1968.
©Andrew Sacks

Although the university had pledged to increase minority enrollment, the lack of change by the late sixties resulted in the formation of the Black Action Movement (BAM).

Formed by various student groups, BAM's aim was to assist minority students and to increase minority acceptance at the university. In March of 1970, when the Regents would not pledge to meet BAM's goals, they called for a campus-wide strike.



Students support BAM strike.
©Andrew Sacks



Students support BAM strike.
©Andrew Sacks



The strike was one of the most successful in campus history. Over three hundred professors and teaching assistants cancelled classes and many departments were shut down. After eight days, the university gave approval to the essential demands of increased minority aid, services, and staff, and agreed to work toward a goal of 10% African-American



enrollment by 1973.

Ann Arbor Police blockade street during
BAM protest. ©Andrew Sacks



A young strike supporter. ©Andrew Sacks

All photos on this page, ©Andrew Sacks.

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Black Action Movement BAM
Committee to Free John Sinclair
Teach Ins. Vietnam
University Cellar. Student Bookstore, 1969-1987
VOICE

UNDERGROUND NEWSPAPERS

The Ann Arbor Gazette
Ann Arbor Resistance Newsletter
Black Journal
Burning Spear
The Campus Voice: The Official Newsletter of Voice Political Party
Ephus
Grossout commix

Guerrilla
High School Free Press
In a Dark Bag
Michigan Daily (not underground)
Michigan Movement: People's News Weekly
Me
Radicals in the Professions Newsletter
Scopp-hitta
Something else!
Spectrum Left
The Student Liberation Front
Sun
Sun/dance (White Panther Party)
Venceremos
Up Against the Wall Street Journal
US (Ann Arbor, Mich)

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