

## Student Activism

### 1. Note recent Chronicle article

- ...suggests that student activism peaks in 15 year cycles...and the 1990s will be such a time
- ...also suggests that universities should prepare for this now
  - ...increasing student voice in government
  - ...new opportunities for community service to channel idealism
  - ...better campus communication

### 2. Michigan Experience

The 1980s were a relatively quiet period  
 ...at least compared to the turbulent  
 1960s and 1970s

Always a background of the usual issues
 

- ...military research on campus
- ...gay rights
- ...women's rights

However in the late 1980s, a new spirit of  
 activism managed to coalesce

- i) racial politics
  - ...first South Africa and divestment
  - ...then "racism" on campus
  - ...now Black Power and ethnic politics
- ii) international politics
  - ...Latin America
  - ...Palestine-Zionism
- iii) gay rights
  - ...ROTC
  - ...recruiting on campus
  - ...domestic issues
- iv) local issues
  - ...campus police
  - ...student nonacademic conduct code

### 3. Some observations about the nature of this activity

- i) There is a hard core of several hundred students...
  - ...majoring in student activism or politics...
  - who can be found involved in all of the above.

- ii) These tend to be more nihilists...anti-authoritarians than idealists...and seize upon any issues they can find to achieve visibility. In fact, intuition suggests that many militant students are really less politically than personally alienated...products of divorce, suburbia, fragmented families, failed schools, children of the "me" generation.

Can see this by the great increase in substance abuse.

But also a certain number are just enraged at authority.

- iii) Some are trying to recreate what they hear were the "golden years" of the 1960s radicalism...although they clearly don't understand most of the issues and the techniques. (Note: Many of our faculty are from this generation, and hence are somewhat ambivalent in how they approach this activism.)
- iii) Their real strategy is always to coalesce several issues in an effort to bring together various groups...e.g., "oppressed third world people of color"...Blacks, Palestinians,...
- iv) Regardless of motivation, many of these students are quite sophisticated politically...they know the way to state capitals and handle the media with ease

#### 4. Some particular concerns:

- i) The degree to which such activism can distract the leadership of an institution...prevent you from keeping your eye on the ball...the real strategic issues
- ii) While most issues can be handled in a matter isolated to the campus, some such as racial politics are strongly coupled to the outside world and can be very disruptive...particularly due to the media
- iii) Polarization of the campus, since such activism generally reflects the views of small minorities of special interest groups...and disenfranchises the "silent majority" of moderate students.
- iv) Note the Harvard Assessment Study concern about the degree to which a small group can really

dominate communications and color campus climate.

5. Other Issues

- i) Freedom of speech vs. civility
- ii) Balancing rights and responsibilities
- iii) Increasingly pluralistic campuses...  
...multicultural communities
- iv) And perhaps this is the bottom line...as pointed out in the Carnegie Report...how to build communities on our campuses...how to instill in our students the values of civility, responsibility, compassion, respect, when other social institutions have failed in this effort.

Some questions:

- 1. What is the experience on other campuses?
- 2. Are you seeing more activism?
- 3. If so, what kind?
- 4. Is the movement growing?
- 5. Around what issues?