

SPECIAL REPORTS

Student Activism Is Often Uncivil. We Can Change That.



Alex Williamson for The Chronicle

By Amy Binder and Jeffrey L. Kidder |

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American colleges are embroiled in political controversies in ways not seen since the 1960s. Administrators declare their institutions to be sanctuary campuses in response to presidential threats to ban immigrants. Legal scholars debate the boundaries of free speech in classrooms.

State legislatures cut funding for institutions they deem indoctrinating. Professors are caught up in viral tweets.

But no group has received more scrutiny than students, whose disruptive, even violent, protests have repeatedly been the stuff of headline news over the past several years. The lead-up to the 2020 presidential election will very likely bring more unrest.

Those trying to give meaning to these contentious campus events have struggled to do so. Journalistic accounts tend to ignore the underlying context of student protests and treat isolated incidents as representative, while social scientists frequently rely too heavily on survey data instead of on-the-ground research to understand student attitudes and political behavior.

What is being overlooked is how organizational structures and culture fundamentally shape college students' politics. Understanding that is key if our goal is to lead students toward constructive political engagement.

In our research, we have seen how students are channeled into different types of



Diversity of Thought

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activism through forces operating both inside and outside their universities. On the right, there is a constellation of outside organizations promoting a variety of activism styles — from Turning Point USA's unsubtle provocations to the cerebral approach of the American Enterprise Institute. Differences aside, distrusting higher education is a common theme within what we call the "conservative channel for student activism." Within this channel, members are told time and again that their professors and administrators have a left-wing bias and deserve skepticism.

Although there is little evidence that right-leaning students are discriminated against in academe, it is true that they often find college life isolating. As a result, they come to rely on outside organizations to sponsor their political activities. In turn, these organizations offer conservative students abundant opportunities to attend conferences and network with movement leaders and peers from across the nation. Further, viable career options — including paid internships, summer jobs, and other résumé-builders — can be forged out of student activism on the right. For those in this channel, membership today can lead to a paycheck and political influence down the road.

Students on the left, meanwhile, cannot rely on a vast infrastructure of outside organizations to support their activism, because it simply does not exist. Neither the Democratic Party nor any other major organization has built up an apparatus like the right's. Instead, liberals and leftists are pulled further inside their universities through student-affairs offices, multicultural centers, and academic disciplines that promote a progressive worldview.

Left-leaning students can find faculty, staff, and administrators supportive of their demands for greater racial diversity, gender inclusiveness, environmental sustainability, and other issues. This is the "progressive channel of student activism," and it has a symbiotic relationship with many college officials' priorities within higher education. However, this channel offers far fewer viable networking opportunities or career paths, because organized leftist activism on campus mostly does not extend beyond the university.

These separate conservative and progressive channels are decades in the making, and students are inclined to build on the directives and resources the structures make available to them. As a result, politically engaged students become more polarized, much like the rest of the nation. But those of us working within the academy can help our students chart better courses through these channels by encouraging productive forms of discourse and political styles.

First, faculty members should act as a model of civility and refrain from making offhand, often scathing, comments about the right. Moreover, professors in the social sciences and humanities should do more to consider teaching conservative thought in stand-alone seminars or as part of their current curriculum. In our discipline, sociology, for example, greater efforts could be made to include the right in our classes on social movements or education.

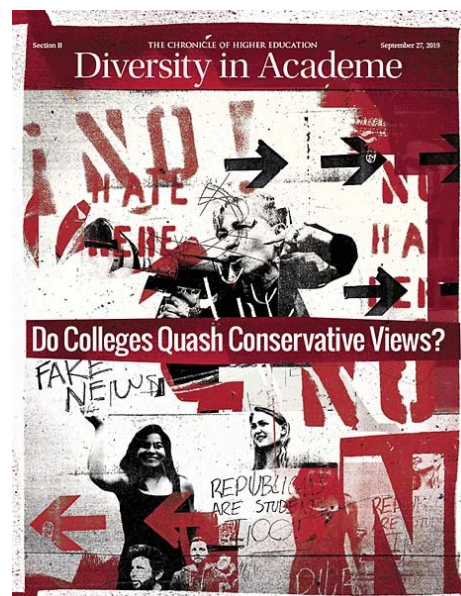
Beyond individual courses, more academic departments could embrace the complexity of intellectual ideas by hosting colloquia where students can see scholars with conflicting worldviews take part in reasoned discussions. These types of events already exist in many pockets of academe, but we could use a lot more of them that include undergraduate participants.

Administrators and staff also need to take a clear-eyed look at their roles in both the progressive and conservative channels. Colleges hold precious few events with serious conservative thinkers — meaning those who have a right-leaning point of view and wish to present it in a civil manner. This opens the door to firebrands like Milo Yiannopoulos, whose allure comes not only from students who want to provoke fellow classmates but from students who believe they lack better alternatives.

At the same time, many college officials play into the hands of such provocateurs by taking a carte blanche position on free speech. This only deepens a sense of marginalization for minority students and incites the ire of those on the left. Greater efforts should be made, both in classrooms and co-curricular activities, to explore with students the principles and limits of free speech.

We do not envy the difficult choices that college leaders have to make as they are buffeted by the currents within these highly polarized channels of student activism. But, just as professors and their departments can encourage forums for intellectual discussion, colleges can also foster transpartisan dialogue among their students. At the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, on whose advisory board one of us sits, attempts are being made to do that. Fellows this year will be working on such things as bringing student activists together to practice confronting common free-speech situations, like what to do about disputes among student groups; and creating learning communities that focus on improving listening and communication. One of the most striking things we have found in our research is a desire on the part of some students across the political spectrum to reach out to the other side.

As it stands, bridges across ideological divides are often absent. But the institutional infrastructure for a more tolerant collegiate culture can be built. It will not be easy work, and we have no single blueprint for creating civil discourse. True inclusion of all



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viewpoints, though, is a worthy goal. Nurturing dialogue between factions will — hopefully — de-escalate some of the distrust and animus now upending American universities.

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