

A Student's View Of Campus Unrest

The following view on campus unrest is adapted from a report just made by the Student Advisory Committee to the Illinois Board of Higher Education.

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"Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us."

—Walt Whitman (1871)

"There used to be a dream for America."

—James Simon Kunen (1969)

By Robert Weinburger

We college students today look at the world around us and see poverty amid affluence, urban decay, social injustice, racial strife, pollution of our environment, and a decline in the quality of our life and our efforts to improve it.

Many of us have known no war other than Vietnam. We have seen it eat our nation's blood and treasure, destroy land and people, delay our progress at home, destroy our credibility abroad, and produce an Orwellian logic to justify error and deception.

There is a widening distance between what our nation preaches and what it practices, between the American dream and America's reality.

We see the institutions of our country—the political system, the economic structure, the social agencies, the universities and the government—incapable of responding to the deepest needs of our citizens.

If we are impatient, it is because we sense that our leaders are not responding with the speed or effectiveness that the crises demand. We fear for the future of our country.

Our colleges and universities at times seem equally unresponsive to the needs of their constituents. Threat and fear dominate the academic atmosphere of many of our schools. The goals of education, learning and enlightenment are often lost in the pursuit of grades, exams, and degrees.

Gamemanship

The academic system we encounter places a premium on gamesmanship rather than learning.

University governance substitutes supplication for participation. Trustees by age and occupation are out of touch with the thinking of students. Many administrative officers have no credibility among students.

Tenure has frozen many incompetent professors into our colleges, and others seem less interested in teaching than in research

and publications. Our schools have proved too often resistant to needed change and reform.

The conditions existing in our world and on our campuses are the causes of much student unrest.

Many students view the nature and purpose of a college or university quite differently than would many of the most vocal critics of student activism. Differences in philosophy about the nature of a college are at the root of some misunderstanding of recent events on the campus.

The first of these views is the contract or business enterprise theory of education. It sees higher education as a privilege. Students pay their money, work and behave, accept the knowledge imparted and if dissatisfied, leave.

In this view, the college or university is a kind of

service station where the student fuels himself with knowledge and drives on.

Scholarly View

A second and opposing view is what we would call a modern community of scholars. It sees education as a joint product of learners and teachers, in which knowledge is not only dispensed but also evaluated and related to the student's own experience.

Education is less a handing down of eternal verities than it is a process by which students learn how to use knowledge and to think and act for themselves.

Under this model, policy is made by students and faculty, the learners and teachers. Administrators are involved in non-policy, executive functions.

Competence and the quality of one's contribution to the process, rather than one's status in a hierarchy, are what qualify individuals to make policy.

The committee accepts the second of these views as the more desirable and valid one today.

But it is important to understand our view of the nature and purpose of a college, to understand that students may be talking about quite a different thing, when they speak of their college, than are other commentators.

We believe the contemporary college must exhibit concern about the surrounding community. But we recognize the danger in asking the college or university itself to take a position on current social issues.

We know this may involve a far different result in Alabama or Mississippi than in New York or California.

At the same time that we recognize these dangers, we think it is important to explode the current myth of the university's neutrality. Our colleges and universities, even as they profess non-partisanship and neutrality, are highly partisan and political.

Myth of Neutrality

By refusing to take positions on current public issues, the college or university implicitly supports the status quo.

By refusing to favor change in the established order, the college or university supports that order. They accept the priorities of society, of the government, and of others who pay the bill and use the products.

As a result, most of our institutions have developed a kind of marketplace morality. Many of their decisions are based on anticipated political approval or disapproval, and their administrators cater to our political leaders with great, if quiet skill.

There is an argument to be made for the neutral university. Our point is that it does not now exist.

Since universities are partisan, whether by default or design, they should play a more constructive role in solving national problems and in exposing national shortcomings without falling prey to the dangers of becoming completely political.

Past Protests

Another area of misunderstanding about events on the campus results from a failure to place campus protest in proper perspective. Much public condemnation of campus unrest has, we believe, been unfair.

Present day student unrest is a consistent part of our nation's social and political fabric. There is a clear analogy to the labor movement and the civil rights movement.

Then, as now, techniques used by protesters were regarded as inappropriate if not illegal. Police were used to repress protesters. The protesters were regarded as a militant minority while the majority remained silent and unorganized.

Today we are witness to middle class and professional groups employing some of the same tactics. Teachers, doctors, nurses, clergymen, mailmen, and staffs of law enforcement agencies have used demonstrations and strikes as political weapons and bargaining tools.

We have learned some basic lessons about how democracy is practiced:

- That institutions and bureaucracies often respond to pressures but not to needs.
- That conflict is often a prerequisite to change.
- That people will not accept as legitimate those decisions which they had no representative role in making.

System of Power

The American political process is one of power organized and exercised.

We cannot ignore the lessons around us. Recent hospital, mail, transportation, and garbage strikes were all started by adults in defiance of institutions supposed to arrange peaceful respect for authority. It is hardly confined to the young. It is symptomatic of a larger crisis of confidence in all our institutions.

The authority of government, the family, and the

church, as well as that of the university, are all under challenge.

And it cannot be denied that defiance and sometimes disorder are the principal factors in creating the tension that produces sought-after change.

We are not happy that power and pressure produce results when rationally expressed needs and legitimate grievances do not. But while we worry about this developing trend in our society, we believe we should not pretend it does not exist.

Instead, we must ask how the rational alternative to power politics can be made operative on the campus. The answer is not to be found in the nostrums of repressive legislation. Nor will it be found in revolution.

Widening Gap

We believe it will be found in the reform of the governing structures of our colleges and universities. Institutions must be responsive to the people they serve if they are to be respected and obeyed. And reform which leads to respect, loyalty, and obedience is the prerequisite to ending campus disorder.

The escalation of protest to property damage at some of our campuses is evidence of the growing intensity of student feelings and a growing belief that more moderate forms of behavior produce no response from our institutions of government and education.

We do not seek to justify property damage but to explain it.

Why, students wonder, are adults silent at the violence and injustice in the world around us but moved to wrath by broken windows?

Too often our news me-

dia have succumbed to a modern Gresham's Law: bad news drives out good; violence is more interesting than peaceful activity.

Partly as a result, those in our country who are not college students have a distorted picture of the American college student today. Typically, he is serious and responsible and trying to find his own identity at the same time he is educated.

We should reject the voices of those who prey on public fear and misunderstanding, those who pander to our baser instincts, those whose apocalyptic

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S. F. Sunday Examiner
& Chronicle

view of the world is akin to demonology and who see a Communist behind every tree and a conspiracy behind every disorder.

Public officials who speak of campuses with invective and hyperbole contribute neither to understanding nor solving problems.

We must speak honestly about the campus today, and listen to what many young people in America are saying.

It would be tragic if the message can be found in the songs and music of the young.

It is a message of building bridges over troubled waters, of love and beauty and brotherhood and peace. It is a message of judging men not based on the length of their hair or the color of their skin but on their qualities as human beings.

It should not be ignored.