

Proposal for an AALAC Faculty Workshop

Student Protest and the Liberal Arts

Primary contact:

Linus Owens, Associate Professor of Sociology, Middlebury College (lowens@middlebury.edu)

Other Organizers:

Catia Confortini, Associate Professor, Co-Director Peace and Justice Studies, Wellesley College, (cconfort@wellesley.edu)

Marc Steinberg, Professor of Sociology, Smith College, (mwstein@smith.edu)

Potential participants based on expressed interest:

- Thomás Summers Sandoval, Associate Professor of History and Chicano/a Studies, Pomona College
- Piya Chatterjee, Dorothy Cruickshank Backstrand Chair of Gender and Women's Studies, Scripps College
- Jamie McCallum, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Middlebury College
- Sujata Moorti, Professor of Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies, Middlebury College
- Nancy Whittier, Professor of Sociology, Smith College
- Laura Grattan, Associate Professor of Political Science, Wellesley College
- Eve Dunbar, Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies, Vassar College
- Anson Koch-Rein, Visiting Assistant Professor of Gender, Women's, and Sexuality Studies, Grinnell College
- Debra Minkoff, Miriam Scharfman Zadek Family Professor of Sociology, Barnard College
- Greggor Mattson, Associate Professor of Sociology, Oberlin College
- Karni Bhati, Associate Professor of English, Furman University
- Lee Smithey, Associate Professor of Sociology, Swarthmore College

Dates: Spring 2018

Schedule:

Friday:

- 1) Travel day
- 2) Keynote speaker 1
- 3) Opening night dinner

Saturday:

- 1) Breakfast
- 2) Session 1: Student activism: goals, targets, and tactics

- 3) Lunch: keynote speaker 2
- 4) Session 2: Institutional responses
- 5) Break
- 6) Session 3: Protests and the media
- 7) Break
- 8) Dinner

Sunday:

- 1) Breakfast
- 2) Session 4: The future of protest
- 3) Travel return

Workshop Description

Student protest is front-page news again. The increased attention to resistance in today's political climate, combined with ongoing campus tensions between inclusion and exclusion, tolerance and intolerance, have made colleges visible flashpoints of protest and dissent. And student protests don't just involve students; researchers, faculty, administrators, and journalists are all trying to make sense of this dynamic phenomenon. This workshop invites faculty from many different institutions and across disciplines to engage with current student protests, contextualizing them within a longer history of student activism, the shifting political and media landscapes, and the changing institutional conditions of liberal arts colleges.

What makes student activism worthy of study at a workshop? Two reasons: one intellectual, the other institutional. First, student activism has its own character, following from the political role of both students and colleges. Student protest has its own history – a history that colleges themselves are not always good at maintaining – with political issues evolving over time, moving from anti-war, to divestment, to anti-sweatshop, to inclusivity around issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The popular image of the student protester is similarly shifting, from the countercultural rebel of the 1960s to the precious snowflake of the 2010s. This workshop will explore three issues affecting student activism today: narratives, disruption, and institutional outcomes. Narratives focus on protesters' and institutions' ability to tell their stories, and how that depends on and is complicated by current media practices, both social and mainstream. Disruption can be key to successful protest, but also comes into direct conflict with college policies for speech and conduct, raising difficult question about how activists and institutions balance these opposing demands. Finally, outcomes matter; it is important to explore what works and what doesn't, from both the perspective of protest tactics and institutional policies.

Secondly, as faculty at liberal arts colleges, student protest is a frequent part of the everyday life of our communities. A liberal arts education, in particular, seems to foster activism. Protest is not just political, but also a pedagogical. Our mission to teach critical thinking and engaged citizenship can inspire students to want to change the world. Moreover, our small size and the emphasis on students as full community members can encourage and empower them to act in the face of injustice, particularly when found on their own campus. But when student activism turns towards the college, it can conflict with other institutional values, such as tradition, stability, and good public relations, as well as students' own knowledge of how the institution works. These conflicts have heightened as liberal arts colleges work to promote student diversity and inclusivity, often opening gaps between the community promised to students and the experiences they are delivered. These contradictions spark misunderstandings and divisions on campus – not just between students and administration, but also dividing students from students, faculty from faculty, students from faculty, and everyone from the administration. Media coverage tends to exacerbate divisions, while ignoring the specific local context of the initial grievances and protest. A successful response to protest is not the same as an effective response to the coverage and interpretation of protest; solutions for one may not work for the other, and can sometimes make things worse. Colleges often struggle with this situation, pointing towards the need for a more informed and engaged group of faculty on this topic.

We believe building networks of expertise on this topic will have numerous intellectual and institutional benefits. First, we anticipate producing an edited monograph sharing the products of our conversations. Second, we will build local expertise on student protest, informed by a broad comparative exchange of experiences and insights across many campuses. This expertise can inform not only our teaching of relevant subjects, but also in providing guidance during times of student political activity, as well as creating a network of experts prepared to speak with media on this currently topical issue.