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STUDENT UNREST: FROM HISTORIC INFAMY TO HUMANE INCLUSIVITY

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ABSTRACT

Infamous responses to historic student unrest clash with contemporary student affairs educators' desire for a humane, inclusive approach to student unrest. The authors detail two historic responses: the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre at the Universidad Autónoma de México and the 1970 Kent State University shootings. Like today, students expressed escalating dissatisfaction with social conditions and displeasure with official responses. To not repeat unrest becoming violence, authors introduce concepts for humanely and inclusively responding to student unrest.

INTRODUCTION

Student unrest is a global experience expressed in social media posts, informational pickets, occupying places, and confrontational protests that have become violent and lethal (Degroot 1998, Lipset, 1970, Van Dyke, 1998). Many instances of student unrest occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, and a new wave of student unrest has begun across the United States. To improve much younger student affairs educators' response to contemporary student unrest, two infamous, historic responses to student unrest are described: At the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 1968 and the United States' Kent State University (Kent State) in 1970, unrest led to students killed by government forces. Within those stories, there are factors contributing to student unrest, some parallel in contemporary United States higher education. We then introduce practical concepts for humanely, inclusively responding to student unrest.

UNAM AND KENT STATE

The Olympic Games took place in Mexico City in 1968: a first for any Latin American country. Though the Mexican government presented Mexico to the world as a strong, problem-free country, there was student resentment towards the government for changing so much of the country in order to host the Olympics (DeGroot, 2004). It invested hundreds of millions of dollars in the Olympics rather than attend to its people living in poverty for many years. Resentment about such social conditions erupted as a student movement at UNAM.

Justo Sierra, Secretary of Public Education, led redeveloping a national university "to stimulate debate and learning while giving coherence to higher education by creating a single institution with an arts and sciences graduate school as its capstone" (Mabry, 1982, p. 4). So, UNAM came to consist of multiple schools; la Escuela Nacional Preparatoria, la Escuela de Altos Estudios, and medicine and law schools. A rector governed the institution with input from faculty and directors of each school. As of 1960, UNAM had enrolled more than half of the

country's students since 1910 (Mabry, 1982), and its la Ciudad Universitaria campus was a hotbed for student movements, especially in 1968.

A fight between two UNAM controlled preparatory academies' student groups broke out in the summer of 1968. The fight sparked the conflict between the students and the state. Granderos (riot police), at the urging of the local residents, broke up the fight with tear gas, clubs, and invading and occupying the academies. Students became restless as "it was the arrogance of power, this belief that *anything* government forces did was legitimate, that angered students and non-students alike" (Mabry, 1982, p. 239).

The situation quickly escalated and student organizations arranged a protest against the use of extreme-force. Two accounts of the protest are available. One states protesters called for "urban guerrilla warfare and seizure of the schools to make them centers of opposition to the regime" (Mabry, 1982, p. 239) and then marched to the Zócalo. The other, the government stated that students vandalized businesses, burned a bus, and were from pro-Communist groups.

Student protests lasted all summer as soon focused upon larger issues related to the government and its relationship with the police. Their demands centered on six issues (Zolov, 2001): (1) freedom for political prisoners, (2) elimination of Article 145: an article that allows the government to detain people on charges of subversion, (3) abolition of the granderos, (4) dismissal of Mexico City's Chiefs of Police, (5) freedom for victims of government repressions, and (6) charges brought against those responsible for repression.

The government ignored the demands and protests increased, as did the overall number of protesters. As many as 100,000 people participated in a protest on August 5, 1968. As classes began in the fall, the Coalition of Secondary and Higher Education Professors of the Nation for Democratic Liberties (CMEMSPPLD in Spanish) joined the student movement and provided professional support (Mabry, 1982). Their handbills critiqued the government and called for a more "democratic government and equal distribution of wealth" (Mabry, 1982, p. 255). On August 13 300,000 people protested and on August 28 over 400,000 people protested.

As the summer was coming to a close and Mexico began to become a world stage, the government developed a zero tolerance for the protests. The army took over UNAM on September 18. Ten days before the Olympics, disturbances increased and there was a dramatic turn for the worse. Students began to assemble in La Plaza de las Trés Culturas (the Plaza of Three Cultures), a culturally significant area that contains the remains of Aztec temples, Spanish Churches, and Mexican buildings. Thousands of students mobilized there, not knowing troops and police surrounded the area and snipers overlooked the plaza. The granderos, police, and army disguised themselves in the crowd while wearing a single white glove or bandana, to indicate that they were government forces.

The government stated that students began to fire on the troops, so the troops returned fire, killing students. The students stated that the police started firing for no reason. Soldiers killed and wounded hundreds and arrested thousands, and the government acknowledged 53 dead (a disputed number as witnesses stated bodies were placed in their vehicles before the Red Cross and Green Cross were allowed access. The 1968 student movement in Mexico ended as their unrest was responded to with violence and, as Liebman (1970) stated, "students neither won their struggle nor gained virtually any of their stated demands" (p.169).

Throughout the 1960s Kent State had numerous opportunities for campus unrest. Heineman (2001) stated Kent State was destined to become a symbol for campus unrest because of the student demographics (primarily first generation), proximity to other cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, and its bar and musical scene. For example, on May 1, 1970 a

fight broke out at a Kent bar and this small event turned into a riot as more than 400 students and out of town visitors smashed windows and ravaged the town.

In April 1970, President Nixon declared that the United States would begin bombing Cambodia: Immediately, political student activists across the country began to protest. Recent years had been marked by increasing student unrest and activism as the Cold War, Vietnam War, and Civil Rights movements intersected with an increase in enrollment on American college campuses that led to a perfect storm for campus activism (Broadhurst, 2014). Kent State students were primed to engage one day after the riot.

May 2 the ROTC building was set on fire and firefighters were attacked as they attempted to extinguish the flames. The ROTC building was targeted because it appeared to represent the university's support of the Vietnam War (Kentstate1970.org). The Ohio National Guard was brought to the campus; however, they were unsuccessful in an attempt to end the protesting. Governor Rhodes held a press conference in Kent on May 3, condemning the protestors, and the university distributed over 12,000 flyers detailing the curfew hours and state of emergency set forth by the governor.

Events took a dramatic turn for the worse on May 4, as students mobilized across campus. The National Guard attempted to disperse the crowd, but the students fought back with rocks, bottles, and other flying objects. In response, the National Guard shot tear gas canisters into the crowd. The students picked up the canisters and threw them back at the National Guard. There are various accounts of what happened next at Kent State University, but one fact remains clear: the National Guard fired shots for 13 seconds, killing four students and wounding nineteen (Michener, 1971).

In reaction to the Kent State shootings, organized, public student unrest over social conditions and the violent official response to it came to an apex. Over a million students protested the shootings on over 1,000 campuses (Heineman, 2001). On May 15, in the shadow of Kent State, Jackson Mississippi city and state police shot students at the historically black Jackson State College, killing two and injuring 12. It has been said that May 4, 1970 was the final day of the American student movement rooted in dissatisfaction with social conditions; because, the official response to student unrest was death.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO STUDENT UNREST

A cross case comparison suggests four potential contributors to student unrest at UNAM and Kent State, factors paralleled in the new wave of student unrest. While each factor has the potential for great celebration, each contributes challenges that can intersect with concern for social conditions and student unrest. As such, consider increased access to higher education, strained town-gown relations, outside influence, and intense social change.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an increase in access to higher education. From 1965 to 1970 UNAM's enrollment grew 34.6%, and by 1976 UNAM enrollment grew 223.3% and degrees awarded by 91% (Mabry, 1982). American Baby Boomers entered college and enrollment almost doubled from 1960 to 1969 (Heineman, 2001). Access in the United States also increased for women, persons of lower socioeconomic status, and persons of color who were struggling with oppressive social conditions. Access continues to increase to more students with increasingly diverse and wide-ranging life experiences, varieties of contrasting cultural and religious and political norms, and perspectives on local-to-global social conditions.

Town-gown relations contributed to student unrest at UNAM, the *granderos* being called to disperse the fight between two high school rival gangs because residents were “tired of suffering from these altercations, which often meant vandalism, neighbors and merchants pleaded with the police to do something” (Mabry, 1982, p. 237). Residents experienced a similar environment with Kent State students; bonfires built in the streets, cars stopped, store windows broken, and bars forced to close early. Today, town-gown relations continue to have an impact on student unrest; especially, through service learning and civic engagement, and in communities experiencing challenging social conditions such as race, poverty, and policing.

At UNAM and Kent State, there were agitating outside influences. The government blamed the large UNAM demonstrations on communists, foreign nationals, and the Central Intelligence Agency who wanted to disrupt Mexico’s Olympic spotlight. In the United States, no one knows who started the disruptions on May 4 that catalyzed the Kent State students’ unrest; but, in fact, the American student movement was often infiltrated, informed, and inspired by itinerant non-students. Today’s outside influence is more likely persons and organizations disseminating information, voices, and activist strategies related to numerous social conditions. As today’s students are “digital natives,” most outside influences engage via the Internet.

Described above, UNAM and Kent State happened in a time when each country was experiencing intense social change, accompanied by heightened dissatisfaction. Today’s students face polarizing social changes that challenge and divide America and the world; renewed and expanded issues related to oppression and justice, religion, terrorism and war, climate change, distribution of wealth, etc.

The four potential contributors to student unrest at UNAM and Kent State are factors paralleled in the new wave of student unrest; increased access to higher education, strained town-gown relations, outside influence, and intense social change. Each factor can contribute to a destructive or to a humane, inclusive response.

HUMANE INCLUSIVITY: ANOTHER RESPONSE TO STUDENT UNREST

From the historian’s vantage point, we can describe the failures and successes of certain responses to student unrest. However, because student unrest is unique to a given campus’ internal and external environments, the persons and power involved, the timing and sequence and predictability of events, and the affective aspects of participants, there is no prescription for formulating a response to student unrest. Yet, we believe there are practical concepts for humanely, inclusively responding to student unrest; captured with the notions prioritize, humanize, and democratize, or “PHD.”

Prioritize (P). Value student unrest as a risky means to important student and organizational learning, development, and civic outcomes that, as such, merit humane, inclusive responses. *Plan* in order to meet the outcomes and risks in humane and inclusive ways; be alert to current and potential social issues, anticipate forms of and responses to unrest, and plan how to achieve positive outcomes. *Prepare* everyone to value humane and inclusive responses to unrest in every way and with every reasonable detail of the plan, and with regular information. *Practice* with table top and live drills, including the community, so that humane and inclusive response becomes first nature.

Humanize (H). *Help* students who are fellow humans dissatisfied with social conditions; be kind, give water and food and shelter, love them as hurting people, and remember soft answers turn away wrath. *Hear* them; ask for their story in their voices and for their needs, listen

in person and via social media, show that you seek to understand regardless of your perspective. *Hang-in*, giving students lots of your time in their presence, engaging them with great patience.

Democratize (D). *Do democracy*; include all of the voices of all of the students and members of the campus, make peace everyone's goal, and model civility. *Debrief* after the fact, asking everyone, "What did we experience, accomplish, and learn?" *Develop*, continuously, beyond what you experienced; improving policies, procedures, the climate, and the people throughout the campus and into the community where it is likely there still exist social concerns.

CONCLUSION

American campuses are encountering a new wave of student unrest, expressions of escalating dissatisfaction with social conditions and displeasure with official responses. They are in an environment of increased access, strained town-gown relations, outside influence, and intense social change; factors that have sometimes contributed to student unrest. It is incumbent upon all student affairs educators and campus leaders to learn from the failures and the successes of past responses to student unrest. However, it seems more important to prioritize, humanize, and democratize responses to student unrest that are more humane and inclusive.

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