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# Look What's Happening Out In the Streets

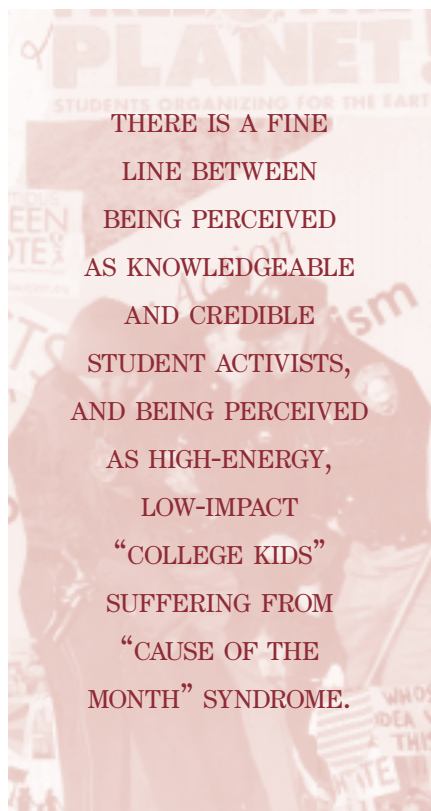
## Student Activism Makes a Comeback

MARK MAGUIRE

Nine a.m. on a chilly Saturday morning in February, and Manchester, N.H., is buzzing with reporters and television crews covering the 2000 presidential primary to be held the following Tuesday. The tone is decidedly calmer at the Holiday Inn, where candidate Gary Bauer is addressing a large group of citizens. Suddenly, the calm is broken by the chant of: "Hey Candidates, Take a Stand/Global Warming, What's Your Plan?" Cameras turn and reporters fumble for their pens as a group of 40 or so determined protesters approach the hotel lobby.

The protesters are college students from Campus Green Vote and Ozone Action, two national organizations trying to persuade candidates to take a position against global warming. The group is led by "Captain Climate," sporting bright purple tights and a fluorescent cape. Their smokestack-shaped hats, a protest against corporate polluters, tower over the crowd. Eventually, hotel staff ask the students to leave, and Bauer slips out a back door. For Captain Climate and crew, it's off to another political rally, this one for John McCain.

Who says student activism is dead? A popular annual survey of attitudes among U.S. college freshmen suggests that the commitment to activism among first-year students has been falling. The survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) suggests that the percentage of freshmen who feel it is essential to "influence social values" fell to 36 percent in 1999, its lowest



point since 1986. Interest in becoming community leaders or participating in community action programs is also dipping, according to the survey, though community service at the high school level continues to increase, sometimes as a school requirement.

But if the survey findings have you thinking that the new century is beginning where many commentators insist the last one left off, with college students characterized by greed and apathy, some hard evidence from the campuses suggests otherwise. Some even wonder if the 21st century might more closely resemble the 1960s when college students marched, withstood tear gas and shut down campuses for economic, environmental and social justice.

### **Rising up**

The late 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle signaled a sort of coming out for a new generation of activists. The Seattle demonstrations attracted not only local troublemakers, as the national media suggested, but also a

variety of activists who see the WTO as an international cartel of corporate polluters. It wasn't opportunistic Seattle hoods who blocked conference center entrances, screaming, "Mobilization against Globalization," but rather activists representing grassroots organizations and environmental coalitions.

Moreover, the WTO protesters had a new potent organizing tool. Real-time Internet accounts of the WTO protests created solidarity among far-flung activist groups. This direct line of communication allowed activists nationwide to circumvent a biased or uninterested media.

Seattle is not the only evidence of an upsurge in activism. Across New England and the nation, college students are bird-dogging presidential candidates, holding vigils and mobilizing young voters in the name of causes as local as campus security and as global as sweatshop labor.

The anti-sweatshop movement has been particularly prominent on activist agendas. Brown University is among the pioneers. In 1998, after negotiations between student groups and Brown product licensing officials, the university agreed to require all manufacturers who supply products with the Brown name or university logos to adhere to a code of conduct that respects labor law, worker rights, environmental preservation and a high standard of business ethics. Since then, students on campuses regionwide and nationwide have pressured administrations to fully disclose the origin of caps, sweatshirts and other apparel with college logos and to adopt codes of conduct to make sure the clothing isn't made with child labor or under otherwise unfair and unsafe working conditions. Now students are pushing administrators to ensure compliance by dropping out of the Fair Labor Association, a monitoring group with heavy apparel-maker representation, and joining a student- and labor-backed alternative called the Worker Rights Consortium.

The relative success of the anti-sweatshop movement has served as a catalyst for other campus campaigns, presenting would-be activists with a menu of causes and a reason to believe they can influence change.

- In February, a group of University of New Hampshire students and fellow members of the Student Environmental Action Coalition protested Occidental Petroleum's plans to drill wells on sacred tribal land in Columbia by rallying outside the offices of one of the company's big shareholders, Boston-based Fidelity Investments.

- In March, colleges students from across New England and the nation converged on Boston for "BioDevastation" a protest against genetically altered products timed to coincide with the largest biotechnology conference in history.

- In April, Harvard students staged a sleep-in at Harvard Yard to protest low wages among the university's food-service and other hourly workers. Says Boston University student government leader Fouad Pervez: "It's an exciting time to be a college student."

### **Getting organized**

Yet organizing full-time college students is a difficult logistical task, even when the level of interest in an issue is high. Movements necessarily lose flow from year to year as student leaders take a semester abroad or graduate. Fresh recruits may lose interest before they become fully familiar with a movement and its goals. In addition, the UCLA survey finds many freshmen are "stressed out" even before they encounter college courseloads, part-time jobs and sports commitments on campus. Student involvement in activist causes tends to wane over the course of a semester as coursework piles up and exams approach.

Off-campus activist organizations (often staffed by freshly graduated activists) provide some relief for student organizers on campus. Groups such as the Center for

Campus Organizing (CCO) and Campus Green Vote collaborate with specific activist organizations and unite campus groups focusing on similar issues. Public Interest Research Groups, or PIRGs, in each state also rely heavily on student activists to fight an array of progressive political battles.

A new organization in the Boston area, the Campus Action Network (BostonCAN), seeks to bring together activist organizations at Boston-area colleges to improve communication among students working toward similar goals. Among other things, BostonCAN maintains a citywide activist calendar, so students at Emerson College, for example, can consult one source to find out about, say, a gun control rally at Brandeis, or a town meeting on recycling at Northeastern.

### Local focus

Some New England students are applying their activist drive to long-neglected local politics. In an effort to promote environmental protection and encourage students to vote in local elections, the Boston Area Student Environmental Coalition last year “rated” candidates for Boston City Council on local environmental issues such as water runoff and park management. The effort ran into the usual logistical problems: The coalition managed to present its findings in several newspaper articles, but time constraints did not allow for completion of a green voter guide which would have been distributed to city residents.

Still, the initiative reveals a new pragmatism among activists. “Students tell us they’re more interested in their local communities where they feel they can make a difference, as opposed to the national political scene where they feel powerless,” says UCLA Assistant Education Professor Linda J. Sax, who worked on the freshman attitudes survey.

Media coverage of the UCLA findings contrasted supposedly lagging

student interest in activism with rising student involvement in local community service. Indeed, a recent U.S. Education Department study finds that more than 70 percent of high schools organize community service activities for students, while 46 percent offered “service learning” combining community service with classroom instruction. Programs such as City Year, a Boston-based community service program of the national AmeriCorps initiative, have become widely popular among high school- and college-age students. Some students even take semesters off to work in soup kitchens and clean up city streets.

While community service may lack the political angle of activism, its proponents claim equal means of achieving social progress. As James Bernard, founding editor of *XXL* and *Source Magazine*, wrote recently: “Generation Xers do demonstrate their social values. They just prefer to do it through volunteer and charity work rather than at a rally. Perhaps they’re not so cynical after all.”

### New acceptance?

The university “corporation” was a target of much student activism in the ’60s, and often for good reason. Community service, however, is easily embraced by university leaders, especially as a surrogate for activism. As BU President Jon Westling noted in an interview with the student paper, the *Daily Free Press*, “There are different ways of being active. One of the ways I think that BU students stand out is by their involvement in community service and volunteer causes.” Westling goes on to describe such activity as “a hands-on way to change the world.” Many student activists say it’s not enough—that while a day of teaching disadvantaged children how to read may have a profound impact on those directly taught, it neglects the larger question of why the young people are illiterate to begin with.

Activism, questioning the underlying issues, and community service, acting upon those ideals, “would be dynamite

together,” says Zelda Gamson, the former director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education who is now a CCO trustee.

Gamson also suggests that today’s college administrators better understand the issues and appreciate the activists’ new sophistication. They are “interested in an interesting student body,” she says.

The global warming activists in New Hampshire captured headlines with their purple tights and smoke-stack hats, but the fight for change, is more complex and sometimes more mundane. For example, more than a few anti-sweatshop protesters handcuffed themselves to the administration’s office furniture, but their classmates who labored over lengthy codes of conduct did as much if not more to advance the cause.

Indeed, there is a fine line between being perceived as knowledgeable and credible student activists, and being perceived as high-energy, low-impact “college kids” suffering from “cause of the month” syndrome. It’s a line the mainstream media has struggled predictably to examine.

ABC News recently editorialized: “It feels like the ’60s [with] students occupying administration buildings—actual campus protests on a matter of principle.”

Veteran Boston television reporter John Henning summed up a clip of the New Hampshire protesters, “It’s tough to tell if they actually made any difference either to the voters or candidates today, but they had some fun.”

In its account of recent demonstrations against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the *Boston Globe* sniffed: “On Monday, Kate Purdy was saving the world from globalization. But Tuesday was the hard part: returning to Hampshire College to be a normal sophomore.”

Maybe saving the world *is* normal.

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