

Is Freedom Enough?

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Although political formation is one of the traditional aims of a liberal arts education, it does not fit comfortably with the modern ideal of freedom. Political education almost inevitably involves some form of advocacy, and advocacy can easily devolve into indoctrination. Indoctrination contradicts the openness we try to cultivate in our students and violates the professional norms expected of faculty. Can we engage in some form of advocacy without walking over the line into indoctrination? Given this danger, it is not surprising that some of our colleagues balk at adopting curricula designed to enhance civic engagement. They ask whether it's appropriate or necessary. Perhaps, they argue, giving students freedom, letting them do what they will do and educating their minds to think critically, will lead them to be good enough democratic citizens.

This is a reasonable position, but not one that we have enough information to either definitively support or refute. First, we do not have agreement on what is a "good enough" citizen. A person who votes? Who reads the newspaper? Who knows the names of their elected representatives? Who volunteers for political causes? Who has firm opinions on important public issues? Who does not have firm opinions but instead evaluates the opinions of experts and leaders? Second, we do have a clear picture of what kind of political education is offered to colleges students today. The dominant form of political education of the mid-20th century, the Western Civilization course that relied on a consensual and indirect approach, was undermined by campus protests of the late 1960s. These ushered in more direct forms of political education such as black studies and women's studies but also eliminated general education requirements. Thus students chose whether or not they took courses with political content. Only a small portion of students took courses offered by new programs such as black studies. Although over the past decades there have been efforts to restore general education programs on campuses, a new common "core" curriculum has not been established across institutions. While we know that students today enjoy a great deal more personal and curricular freedom compared with their counterparts in the 1950s, we do not know much about the political education that they are exposed to.

Finally, we simply do not have enough evidence about the outcomes of educational practices to draw firm conclusions. People who argue that freedom is enough do have some powerful evidence on their side. Studies of college students find that they do change throughout their four years in college. On aggregate, college students become more liberal through their time in college. They increasingly support positions that are on the liberal side of our current political spectrum, they become more liberal in the sense of becoming more open to other people's ideas, and they become more tolerant and respectful of difference. In addition, there are studies of the American population that find that college graduates are better informed politically, more tolerant, more likely to read the newspaper, and more likely to vote than their fellow citizens with less education. Some researchers maintain that college graduates' increased verbal skills explain some of these political differences. We might conclude from these studies that simply educating

students, without an explicit focus on their political development, is enough.

But these studies also have found that increases in college attendance have not resulted in overall increases in political participation. Researchers have argued that verbal skills may account for changes in political attitudes, such as greater tolerance of differences, but not in political behavior, such as voting or contacting elected representatives. Participation in these types of activities may reflect people's proximity to powerful people. In addition, studies indicate that peers may be the most potent influence on changes in students' political views. The studies of the effects of direct forms of political education, such as women's studies and ethnic studies, are mixed. Some find perverse effects, such as a multicultural curriculum producing greater racial prejudice, but others find courses producing increased understanding of social issues and greater commitment to political action and social justice. And the research in this area is not developed enough to answer basic questions about the relation between different approaches to political education — consensual versus pluralistic, direct versus indirect, or even exposure to any kind of political education versus exposure to none — on students' subsequent political behavior. We do not know if the college graduates who are more politically active and more politically informed were exposed to any political education, much less what form it took.

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While we do not know enough about educational practices and their outcomes to determine whether freedom would create good enough citizens, we can know something about the historical motives and consequences of granting students more freedom.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, college students were suddenly granted a great deal more freedom. Students were given freedom in their personal lives. Parietal hours in dormitories, dress codes and other in loco parentis rules were eliminated. Students were given greater political rights. Regulations governing the formation and supervision of student organizations were suddenly removed. Rules restricting outside speakers were lifted. Student newspapers were given greater editorial independence. Students were given greater freedom over their education. Mandatory attendance and other norms governing classroom behavior were relaxed. Requirements for graduation were radically reduced, and general education programs were largely gutted.

This sudden expansion of student freedom was a response to student protests, which linked political issues such as racial justice and the Vietnam War to educational practices and policies. Student activists argued that their education had a covert political purpose. Their classes excluded critical perspectives on society and instead taught students to assume that the current social and political order was legitimate and necessary. Activists argued that college history courses justified colonial domination of Europeans over peoples of color, economics courses served the interests of the wealthy and political science courses celebrated low levels of political activity as a source of social stability.

The lessons of the curriculum, students argued, were reinforced by their position within the university. The authoritarian structure encouraged passivity and apathy. Students drew parallels between their position within the university to that of oppressed peoples around the world and argued that they needed to wrest power within their colleges and universities in order to transform those institutions into instruments of social change. Activists' claims were both preposterous (were not American college students among the most privileged people in the world?) and strangely plausible. Student activists became adept at exploiting evidence in favor of their analysis, such as dictatorial and condescending administrators, colleges' cooperation with selective service, campus ROTC programs, university-based military research, racially segregated dormitories, dress codes and other petty regulations, to mobilize their peers.

When students organized demonstrations to protest a campus policy, university and college officials initially responded by asserting their authority over students. They chastised activists for not respecting established procedures and disciplined students who broke campus rules. Activists, however, used this response to their advantage. Didn't administrators' reaction, activists asked, prove their point about the oppressive nature of the university? Eventually university leaders learned their lesson and realized that disciplining students only mobilized more students behind calls for "student power." They changed their tack and began to selectively agree to student demands, particularly demands to reduce regulations governing students' lives. University officials granted students more freedom not to empower them but rather to de-politicize them. They wanted to disengage students from political activity. These changes represented a retreat on the part of colleges and universities from taking responsibility for the political education of students.

The reforms of the late 1960s brought an end to higher education's post-World War II commitment to the preparation of democratic citizens. This commitment led to the spread of general education programs organized around Western Civilization courses (see the first essay in this volume). It also led to an increased attention to students' extracurricular activities. Educators at the time did not think that course work alone would be sufficient to prepare democratic citizens. They believed that they would have to engage students outside of the classroom to teach them how to act in ways consistent with the needs of democratic society. Members of the expanding student personnel administration profession (what we now generally refer to as student affairs) embraced this mission with particular vigor. In their journals and at their conferences, deans of students and their growing staffs discussed their obligation to form students into democratic citizens and debated the means to accomplish this. One of the key activities that these administrators supported was the creation and/or expansion of student governments.

College and universities created student governments earlier in the century to give students a role in student discipline. In the post-World War II period, through the advocacy of both students and student personnel administrators, the numbers and scope of student governments expanded significantly. The most important student advocacy group was the National Student Association (NSA), founded in 1946 to give American students a voice in international student organizations. The NSA pushed for an expanded

role of student governments on their home campuses and encouraged American students to become engaged with domestic and international political issues. It fit perfectly with contemporary ideas about citizenship education. Its annual congress served as a mock legislative session in which students from campuses across the country came together and practiced passing resolutions and policy positions. The NSA received crucial support from the leaders of the student affairs profession, who served as advisers, gave the organization legitimacy, defended it from attack, and helped it get material resources.

Student governments were the most important form of “experiential” political education on college campuses, but there were many others. There were student newspapers, debate clubs, and student-affiliate groups for the major political parties. Students had opportunities to learn about political issues from off-campus speakers and other special events. Even non-political student organizations, like a chess club or a sorority, gave students opportunities for practicing limited self-government. Deans viewed themselves in a teaching relationship to the students who participated in these activities. They saw themselves as teaching students the “responsibility” they needed for eventual “real” self-government. In the practice forms that were offered on campuses, deans supervised students giving them a little more freedom and authority when they had proved they could handle it and stepping up their supervision when students showed that they were not yet capable of acting responsibly.

This give-and-take took place within the confines of the ideal of institutional neutrality. Most campuses had restrictions on student political activity in order to insure that students did not entangle their university in controversial political issues. The rules varied from campus to campus. In the most restrictive settings, students were not allowed to form any kind of political club. More commonly, colleges banned only groups considered to be radical. More progressive campuses did not ban controversial organizations but had rules, such as requirements for faculty sponsors and official membership lists with a certain number of registered students, that made it more difficult for students to form radical organizations. Most campuses also censored student publications and had restrictions on outside speakers. Disciplinary procedures were also sometimes used to contain student political activity. Many campuses had vague rules that allowed administrators to expel students for any activity considered “unbecoming” to a student or damaging to the reputation of the school. Occasionally administrators used these rules to expel students who wrote controversial letters to the student newspaper or who attracted the criticism from important outside constituencies. Such discipline, even though infrequently applied, served as a threat to students who chafed at the confines of campus life.

For the most part, these kinds of repressive regulations reflected the conservatism of colleges at this point in time and their fear of offending public opinion. Their repeal was one of the most important achievements of the campus protests of the 1960s. However, these rules also represented colleges’ and universities’ commitment to the political formation of their students. If colleges aimed to shape students into a particular kind of citizen, then they had to care about their students’ political behavior. Students’ actions showed how well or how poorly colleges were succeeding in this area. Administrators

viewed “correcting” students’ political mistakes as an essential part of educating them. When colleges repealed these rules, they withdrew their responsibility for this aspect of students’ education.

These rules contained normative notions of good citizenship. Campus practices defined responsible citizens as people who considered both sides of an issue, who respected the opinions of people with superior experience and/or expertise, who made rational judgments, who respected democratic institutions, who sought reforms within established procedures, and who behaved and spoke in a moderate and temperate manner. Although these norms were conceived of as politically neutral, they did have substantive political implications. Certain political positions were considered inconsistent with these norms. In the post-World War II period, of course, communism was the prime example. But it was the civil rights movement’s adoption of civil disobedience as a political tactic that created conflict on campuses and inspired students to challenge the ideal of responsible citizenship that campus administrators were trying to instill in them.

The Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley provides a clear example of this dynamic. Berkeley, like most other campuses, had rules regulating political advocacy on campus. But Berkeley’s rules were particularly restrictive. It forbade all political advocacy on campus grounds because it would threaten the university’s neutrality. For example, the Young Democrats could not invite a candidate to speak on campus because it might imply an endorsement by the university. Students could tolerate these restrictions because they had easy access to other venues for these types of activities. A particularly important venue was an area outside the main gates to campus where student organizations had tables to recruit new members, advertise events, distribute literature, and raise money.

In 1964, however, the university administration announced that they had discovered that this area was actually owned by the university (rather than the city, as they had previously believed and the placement of the entrance gate implied). As a result, they said that the rules governing political activity on campus applied to this area and students could no longer have tables there. This decision angered many students, particularly a group of students who had become energized by the civil rights movement and who had been involved in civil disobedience protesting racial discrimination in the San Francisco Bay area. These students believed that the university had instituted the ban to prevent them from recruiting students to participate in local protests. They responded by organizing their fellow students, including students representing conservative groups such as Young Americans for Freedom and Campus Republicans, to protest the decision as a violation of students’ political rights. They organized a coalition of student political organizations and dubbed it the “Free Speech Movement” or the “FSM.”

The FSM initially tried to get the university to change its rules through established means: appeals to student government, petitions, and letters to the student newspaper. But when persuasion and popular pressure did not work, the FSM turned to more controversial means. It decided to break the rules and bring back their tables. University administrators responded by disciplining students who manned the resurrected political tables. The conflict escalated unexpectedly when students spontaneously sat down around

a police car that came to arrest one of the protesting students. As the FSM intensified its protests, the university administration continued to assert its authority over students' activities on campus.

As the FSM unfolded, students debated what constituted "responsible" political action. The decision to break campus rules alienated members of conservative groups who opposed the use of "irresponsible" tactics and broke apart the original coalition. FSM leaders offered an alternative ideal of responsible citizenship, arguing that people had an obligation to stand up for causes they believed were morally right and to challenge unfair laws. They maintained that it was hypocritical of the university to say that it was educating students to be citizens and then prevent them from participating in politics. They insisted that students should learn by doing and that the university should encourage political activity on campus. They portrayed the university as repressive, denying students' their most basic rights. They insisted that the university's intransigence forced them to intensify their protests.

This debate demonstrated how much students had actually internalized the norms that the student affairs professionals were trying to instill. Many students were reluctant to support the FSM because of its combative tactics. But administrators' attempts to discipline the leaders of the FSM gave credence to activists' claims and mobilized students to join protests. The FSM culminated in the mass arrest of over 800 students who participated in a sit-in at the main administration building. The faculty responded by voting to liberalize rules governing political activity on campus.

The FSM attracted attention of students throughout the country. At the National Student Association Congress in the summer of 1965, delegates debated two different motions regarding the FSM. One essentially condemned the FSM for its unruly actions and the other praised the movement for defending the political rights of students. The later motion won, signaling a shift in students' ideas about citizenship and their attitude towards authority. The president of the NSA noted that students were excited by events at Berkeley and wished they could have a FSM on their campuses. Within a few years, student activists would figure out how to create impressive protests on their own campuses.

The FSM was particularly powerful because it combined "real" politics with campus politics. Grass-roots political campaigns, particularly the anti-war and the civil rights movements, made it possible for student activists to recreate this combination. For example, anti-war groups could easily link national policy with institutional practice because of the draft. Draft deferments were tied to college students' grades and majors, so the selective service required that all colleges report their male students' grades. Anti-war activists could therefore protest their colleges' cooperation with the war machine. There were many other connections as well: ROTC, defense research, segregated fraternities, miniscule numbers of black students on campus, racist materials assigned in courses. Protests about all these issues could be easily turned into protests about students' political rights by organizing events that broke campus regulations. This would invoke disciplinary procedures, which then would then become a cause in itself. By the end of

the decade, activists would regularly demand “amnesty” for students arrested in building takeovers and other illegal protests. This demand was designed to simultaneously legitimize the political activity of students and to reject the institutions’ authority to regulate students.

Initially university administrators responded to these types of protests by refusing to negotiate with students. They said that students needed to use responsible political means and then they would consider their concerns. They tried to enforce campus rules and discipline students who broke them. This did not work. It did not work at Berkeley during the FSM, and it did work for the protests that followed. On the contrary, it accelerated the level of protest. By the end of the 1960s, university administrators realized that the worst thing to do was let a protest turn into a confrontation about student rights. They then changed their tactics. After fiercely defending their right to enforce rules, they suddenly stopped. They stopped arresting students who sat-in buildings and stopped trying to discipline them through campus procedures. Instead, they created committees to investigate the issues that students raised and agreed to students’ demands when they could. One of the easiest changes to make was to rescind rules that governed student life; hence the sudden liberalization of students’ personal and political rights at the beginning of the 1970s.

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Administrators’ switch was smart tactically, but it was a cynical. They traded their traditional commitment to political education for quiet. They responded similarly on the curricular side. As students mobilized, they raised issues about the quality of their education. Activists were particularly dissatisfied with the indirect, consensual political education offered in colleges and wanted to replace this with direct forms of political education that included radical perspectives. But they were dissatisfied with other aspects of their education, and they wanted a voice in educational policies. Student activists started to claim that students should have academic freedom — they should have a voice in determining the nature of their education.

While faculty generally supported students’ desire for political freedom, they did not welcome students’ demand for a role in academic governance. Their own authority in this area was hard fought, and at many institutions, still precarious. An AAUP committee created to examine student academic freedom maintained that students should have the right to invite speakers and form organizations. They said that student newspapers should go uncensored. But they did not think students had academic freedom in the same sense that faculty did. The chairman of the AAUP committee explained, “Students are essentially in a position of dependence, subject to the authority of the institution from which they hope to receive their degrees, subject to the authority of their teachers.” Therefore the issues central to faculty’s academic freedom, “control over content of instruction, the standard of instruction, the selection of staff, or the direction of institutional development,” were irrelevant to students. The philosopher Sidney Hook, a leading expert on academic freedom at the time, reiterated this view. “It is nonsense to speak of academic freedom of students,” he asserted. “Students have a right to freedom to

learn. The best guarantee of that freedom to learn is the academic freedom of those who teach them.”¹

When student activists challenged this subordination of students’ academic freedom to that of the faculty and tried to claim some authority over academic matters, faculty resisted. Most professors maintained that students did not have the expertise to participate in curricular decisions. Much of the objection to proposals for new programs, such as black studies, was not because of the subject to be studied but because students wanted a voice in the ongoing governance of these programs. Activists responded to this resistance by organizing the Student Power Movement. Borrowing both their name and their themes from the Black Power Movement, activists demanded the right to educational self-determination. Universities responded to this demand not by giving students power within the institution, but by giving them more freedom to select their own courses.

At Berkeley, for example, a group of faculty called for serious curriculum reform following the Free Speech Movement. They had been dissatisfied with the type of education offered at Berkeley and saw the FSM as proof that students were also dissatisfied. The chancellor of the university supported the faculty and created a committee to review undergraduate education at Berkeley. FSM leaders had criticized the education they received but were unhappy with this faculty-led effort because it did not envision a significant role for students. The committee issued a preliminary report, and faculty provided feedback. The committee issued another report with recommendations for reform, and these recommendations were then debated in the academic senate. Through these various iterations, the committee’s proposals were whittled down, and instead of adopting a major reform, the Berkeley faculty created the Board of Educational Development (BED), a vehicle for sponsoring experimental courses and programs. These new courses could then be tested, and if they proved successful, could guide further educational reform.

Students did not have a formal voice, but the faculty members who were appointed to the BED were sympathetic to students’ vision of education reform. Students began to propose courses. BED members were uneasy, but they decided to work with students toward approving student-initiated courses. BED required a faculty sponsor who would play a significant role in the class. Although students wanted more authority, they were willing to work with BED. The compromise worked fairly well until 1968 when a student, who was trying to respond to black students’ complaints about the absence of a black perspective in courses, proposed a course taught by Eldridge Cleaver, author of the popular and controversial book, *Soul on Ice*. The board did not accept the initial proposal. They asked students to get additional faculty sponsors, limit the number of students who could enroll, ensure that faculty would grade student work, and bring in other lecturers in addition to Cleaver. When students made these changes, the course was approved.

¹ Phillip Monypenny, “Toward a Standard for Student Academic Freedom,” in *Academic Freedom: The Scholar’s Place in Modern Society*, ed. Hans W. Baade, (Dobbs Ferry, NY: 1946), 196, 195; Sidney Hook, “Academic Freedom and the Rights of Students,” in *The Berkeley Students Revolt: Facts and Interpretations*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset and Sheldon S. Wolin, (New York:1965), 433.

The announcement of the course created a political explosion. Ronald Reagan, who was then governor, personally intervened and promised to prevent the course from being taught. This created an academic freedom crisis on the Berkeley campus. The Berkeley faculty defended the course because it had been sponsored by a faculty body. But many members of the faculty did not think the course was sufficiently academic and did not like the idea that students were engaged in curricular reform. So they fought the regent's intervention, but as soon as that battle was over they eliminated BED. They took away other kinds of supports for curricular innovation, and efforts at significant curricular reform at Berkeley ended. Instead, the faculty voted to largely eliminate general education requirements. They claimed that they were giving students the freedom to shape their own education. Other campuses took the same path in response to the Student Power Movement: They allowed students to elect their own classes but did not give them a substantial voice in academic affairs. This concession frustrated leaders of the movement but satisfied enough of their peers to quiet demands for curricular reform.

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When campus protests began to spread in 1966, universities administrators were surprised and responded by insisting that students behave responsibly. They chided students for not using established procedures to voice their grievances and disciplined them if their protests violated rules. Administrators viewed this as part of their obligation to educate students in proper political behavior. Within a few years, they changed their approach. They realized that ignoring rule violations and relaxing regulations over students' lives would make it harder for activists to mobilize their fellow students for large protests. Between 1968 and 1973, the restraints on students were radically reduced. This freedom was granted not to empower students but rather to disengage them.

During the 1970s, another round of reports and books about the future of higher education was issued. Education of democratic citizens was conspicuously absent from the discussion of the purposes of higher education. Leaders of higher education in the 1970s abandoned the aim that dominated the attention of their predecessors a generation earlier. University presidents no longer wanted to encourage students to be politically engaged, and they gave up on shaping their political identity and values. Campuses did settle down. The activism of the late 1960s was followed by a long period of student apathy. Concern about this apathy prompted some educators to fret about students' lack of social responsibility and look for ways to encourage student civic engagement. In the last decade, this issue has gained traction and is now attracting the interest of organizations like the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and, of course, the organizers of this conference. Apathy has made it possible to once again consider the political education of college students.

Historically, granting students greater freedom also represented a retreat from efforts to teach students to become democratic citizens. This history highlights some of the issues that need to be addressed if colleges want to recommit themselves to the political education of their students. What kind of citizens are we trying to shape? What sort of

control over students' lives would we need to take in order to encourage that norm? Can we support a normative concept of students' political development without returning to the types of restrictions on students' political liberties that were enforced in the 1950s? Can colleges encourage their students to be politically engaged without being held responsible for the political actions of their students? What are the institutional costs involved in political education? Are these worth the benefits, or is freedom enough?