

[Campus Protests in Context -- Some Questions for 2016](#)

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The year 2015 began with the continuation of the Black Lives Matter campaign—a response to numerous stories of police brutality directed against African Americans. As the year progressed, however, the protests addressed a new front: college campuses. Where once colleges provided sympathy protests due to events in Ferguson, Missouri, or Staten Island, New York, college students began to pay closer attention to the legacies of racism and discrimination on their own campuses. Students at the University of Missouri, for example, were involved with protests in Ferguson in 2014 and used those experiences to spark their own protests at Missouri in 2015. It would be easy to view these protests as just extensions of the Black Lives Matter campaigns. That would also be a mistake. Instead, these protests should be seen in the context of recent, post-1968 African American history. They are but another stage of the long struggle of African Americans to find a place for themselves within American society.

Considering the story of African Americans after the 1960s is crucial if we're to understand why students are fired up on college campuses across the nation. Starting with 1968, which provides a benchmark for the so-called "Post-Soul Era" used by writer Nelson George and sociologist Zandria Robinson, among others, historians can create a clearer picture of what has concerned both African American activists and non-activists. The "post-soul era" begins in 1968 with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and is useful as a demarcation point between the Civil Rights activism led by King and others, and what would come after it: not just the well-known Black Power movement, but also intellectual and political work done by African Americans closer to the political and cultural mainstream of the United States.

Campus activism should also be seen in this light. While by 1970 much campus activism was focused on the Vietnam War, this was also an era when African Americans began to debate their place on recently desegregated college campuses. The rise of Black Studies during the late 1960s and early 1970s coincided with African American students increasing in number—and visibility—on college campuses across the country. Questions about the future of African Americans were raised by scholars such as Vincent Harding, who wrote on several occasions in *Negro Digest* about the role of the "Black University" in a national and international context.^[1] In both essays, Harding expressed how a vision of Black Studies, and learning for African American students in general, could arm such students to work in an environment of cooperation with students from across the African Diaspora.

The campus activism of the 1980s was often about the issue of South Africa and its Apartheid regime. Again, African Americans across college campuses grappled with an issue of race—albeit one that was both international in scope but had domestic political implications. While conservatives decried sanctions against South Africa as a hurtful action against a Cold War ally, African American

activists and liberal allies argued that the United States had a moral obligation to support the black South African majority struggling against the Apartheid government. In many ways, this international struggle was but a proxy for domestic American concerns about race during the Reagan years. A victory on sanctions and divestment from South Africa, achieved in 1986 over President Reagan's veto, was a significant victory for liberal activists during an otherwise conservative decade in American politics.

The erecting of shantytowns on college campuses in the 1980s, to express solidarity with black South Africans and pressure the United States to break ties with the Apartheid regime, should be thought of as a prelude to today's student protests about diversity on college campuses. As Bradford Martin argued in *The Other Eighties*, these shantytowns were about "contested public space"—much like many of today's college protests have been about the memorialization of public space on campuses.^[2] The activism of today borrows from both the late 1960s concerns about how African Americans would become part of predominately white institutions, and the 1980s struggle over public spaces. Today's students, while operating in unique circumstances (social media, the existence of an African American president, continued recovery from the Great Recession), also owe some of their tactics—and indeed, the very issues they struggle against—to these previous eras.

It is difficult to say what 2016 will hold for these protests. Any protest movement needs sustained pressure to succeed, and the college campus protests are no different. The examples above—the fight for Black Studies programs in the 1960s and 1970s, and the campaign to press for sanctions against South Africa in the 1980s—worked only after tremendous pressure from students and sympathetic faculty. So it will also be with the current campaigns on college campuses. College students in the present protest against a nebulous idea of "diversity" and for full inclusion into a college community. This fight has links to the Civil Rights Movement, but also—and this is important for any future analysis of the current campus upheaval—owes much to the post-Civil Rights era efforts by African Americans on college campuses to make themselves both heard and included.

[1] These essays included "Some International Implications of the Black University," *Negro Digest*, pp.33-38, March 1968, and "New Creations or Familiar Death," p. 5-14, March 1969.

[2] Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), p. 46.

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