The rise of student activism creates powerful “teachable moments,” as well as opportunities for public universities to contribute to their communities through civic engagement.

By Stephen G. Pelletier

With students demonstrating, presenting demands and even occupying the occasional building, college administrators may feel like 2016 is the new 1968. The new student activism raises a host of challenges, starting with the need to keep the campus safe and secure. But AASCU institutions have also quickly realized that students’ engagement in social and political issues can create fertile ground for learning.

Further, some leaders of AASCU institutions have begun to view student activism in a broader context. Stepping back from specific moments of conflict, those leaders have come to recognize that the process of helping the campus community learn from lessons sparked by student activism often fits very well with public higher education’s mandate to contribute to its community through civic engagement.

Sean L. Huddleston, the chief diversity officer at Framingham State University in Massachusetts, offers a relevant perspective on these opportunities. “We recognize that activism is learning within itself, and being an institution of higher learning, we want to encourage that,” he says. “We need to make sure that we are equipping our students with the skills they need to have civil discourse and intellectual debate, and feel safe to be able to do that.”

“One dynamic that is very important for many of us to keep in mind is that these aren’t just isolated issues on campus,” says Byron P. White, vice president for university engagement and chief diversity officer at Cleveland State University (Ohio). “The blur between campus and community is always there.”

Recalling the Teach-in

Students of the ’60s will recall the “teach-in,” a pedagogical tool for helping participants understand issues and share perspectives. In that spirit, many AASCU institutions see that today’s student activism presents many opportunities for teachable moments.

Recent experience at Armstrong State University in Savannah, Ga., is a good case in point. A quarter of Armstrong’s students are African-American; 8 percent are Latino; and 4 percent are Asian. Speaking recently during the AASCU webinar, Campus Demonstrations: Empowering Student and Community Voices in a Respectful, Safe Environment, Armstrong President Linda M. Bleicken noted that, while on the surface Armstrong maintains a certain Southern gentility, a survey of campus attitudes revealed “a pattern of incivility, bullying and overt bias” among faculty, staff and students.

Last spring, when external events—like the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Md., and student unrest at the University of Missouri—occurred at the same time that Savannah’s predominantly African-American neighborhoods were experiencing a spike in violence, Bleicken and colleagues moved quickly to organize a series of conversations on race, fear and what was happening both locally and nationally. “We wanted to create a safe environment for people to engage in meaningful dialogue,” Bleicken says.

The sessions last spring were well attended and prompted valuable discussions, both during the conversations and afterward, Bleicken reports. A new series is planned for this year, starting with “21st Century Policing,” and including such topics as LGBTQ issues and religion. Meanwhile, the university has started bias training for students, faculty and staff.
Student Activism

and has declared a commitment to pay more attention to diversity in hiring, particularly in faculty recruiting.

At Framingham State (Mass.), events at Mizzou led concerned students to voice an interest in better understanding free speech—an area of inquiry that campus leaders were quick to nurture. “We wanted to make sure that our students see the institution as a place where civil discourse and intellectual debate is not just something that is okay, but is something that they should engage in,” Huddleston says. “Especially around topics that can be very sensitive in nature—around race and ethnicity and sexual orientation and other designations that create this great diversity that campuses have—we felt that there was a need for students to understand how to interact and how to set their expectations accordingly.” The university helped students lead a forum on free speech in a residence hall, followed by a larger session led by a faculty member who is a constitutional scholar and an attorney. Thereafter, three sociology faculty members organized some 90 colleagues in a campus-wide teach-in focused on Black Lives Matter. Over the course of a week, faculty in disciplines as diverse as English, chemistry, and fashion and design designated time within their courses to talk about topics related to race.

Research on Activism and Learning

In a recent post on the American Council on Education blog, Higher Education Today, researchers Cassie Barnhardt of the University of Iowa and Kimberly Reyes of the University of Michigan reflected on the growing body of research that links activism and learning. Barnhardt and Reyes observed that universities “derive their legitimacy” in part from their commitment to develop “excellence, integrity and a sense of community among their students.” Student activism, they wrote, “provides a space for institutions to be thoughtful about enacting those very commitments.” Further, they wrote, “activism should be viewed as a developmental component of student learning” and “campus unrest must be understood in the context of civic engagement.”

In an interview, Barnhardt, an assistant professor of educational policy and leadership studies, says that research shows that education connected to personal experiences produces deeper learning. “A college education is in part designed to prepare individuals to be ready to deal with contentious issues in their communities,” she says, suggesting that in the very process of expressing dissent on social challenges, students can be seen as constructing ideas and perspectives that may one day help solve some of society’s most pressing problems.

Center of Discussion

In 2014, the dual threads of student activism and civic engagement came together in a pronounced way at Harris-Stowe State University. Located in St. Louis, Harris-Stowe found itself at the center of the discussion about the Michael Brown tragedy, which occurred just a few miles away in Ferguson, Mo. President Dwaun J. Warmack, who had been on AASCU leaders have come to recognize that the process of helping the campus community learn from lessons sparked by student activism often fits very well with public higher education’s mandate to contribute to its community through civic engagement.
the job for just a month when Brown was killed, told the AASCU webinar that, “As a historically black institution, we had to decide what would be our role to help the community civically and morally respond to this crisis.”

Intentionally, he said, the university decided to cast itself as “the intellectual think tank to help the community heal.” The goal, Warmack says, was not to try to decide who was right or wrong, but to create a safe environment where the community at large could focus on healing. To that end, Harris-Stowe sponsored some 17 community or town hall events to help university students, staff and members of the community process what was happening in Ferguson. Students had a prominent role in each of those meetings, underscoring the university’s conscious decision to recognize and support the student voice throughout the process. Moreover, Warmack says, Harris-Stowe took pains to ensure that the campus community understood why the university saw its mission as helping the community make sense of unfolding events from an intellectual perspective.

According to Warmack, many good lessons ensued. While heated discussions took place, the university’s strategy resulted in very little violence on the campus. When protests in Ferguson flared up, for example, students themselves took on the responsibility of ensuring relative equanimity at the university, including forming a huge prayer circle on campus. Presenting an alternative image to street protests, a cadre of male Harris-Stowe students took a prominent role in welcoming elementary students back to their school once the protests stopped. Overall, Warmack says, “we learned a lot about how we keep our students engaged.”

Communications Is Key

One of the central lessons that administrators of AASCU institutions say they have learned from student activism is that communication is key. Leaders need eyes and ears on campus to inform them about what is going on. That may come through the chain of command—or from students themselves.

Dwyane Smith, provost and vice president of academic affairs at Harris-
Stowe, suggests that when students speak through activism, they are in essence “giving us an inventory about who we are as an institution.” Perception is reality, he says, and if, for example, students say that they feel unsafe, then they feel unsafe. The wrong responses, he says, are to roll out talking points about why the institution is safe, or perhaps worse, to ignore what students are saying altogether.

“I think that you have to be open to the activism,” Smith says. “Some schools ignore it and hope that it goes away, or they perhaps deny that there’s a problem.” He notes that building strong relationships with student leaders before situations get too heated can help a lot when things boil over. “Connect early on with student leaders, and then talk about what the issues are,” he says. “Don’t deny them. And then look for ways that we can fix them.”

Jonathan Alger, president of James Madison University (Va.), told the webinar audience, “The importance of active listening is perhaps the most undervalued leadership skill, especially for presidents and other senior leaders.” Lest their office become an “echo chamber,” Alger says, leaders need to guard against becoming too isolated from the variety of constituents they serve, and should seek ways to “see new or different perspectives, and to think about your own blind spots.”

Apart from learning from diverse colleagues, for example, Alger makes a point of meeting regularly with underrepresented groups as a way to show that “we want to hear from you about your experience, and not to assume that we know what that experience feels like.”

Such meetings, he says, also build trust, “so that in turn [constituents] will come to you with concerns as they arise.”

Free Speech

AASCU leaders also advocate strongly in support of free speech, no matter how challenging that may be. “I think that we always ought to demonstrate a preference for encouraging and protecting expression,” William J. Lowe, chancellor of Indiana University Northwest, told webinar attendees. “It is a posture that aligns with our traditions and academic responsibilities, as well as our social purpose.” But he acknowledges that such openness “can make for some very tough decisions and long days.”

In terms of building an inclusive campus community, Alger says, it is important that university leaders foster an environment that enables true civil discourse, grounded in the institution’s educational mission. By that he means modeling appropriate discussions and holding people accountable to “rules of engagement” that use facts, evidence and logical reasoning. “There are a lot of bad role models out there in our society,” Alger says, “and I think we need to help our students understand how to engage with each other.”

When questionable thoughts are voiced, he suggests that the right response is not to “drive expression underground,” but rather to treat such instances as teachable moments. “We know historically and also legally that we can’t just shut down speech that we don’t like or that’s offensive,” Alger observes. “You can’t punish everybody for something that is pure speech, but you certainly can talk about your values as an institution and what you stand for.” It may be tempting to respond quickly and intuitively to such challenges, he says, “but at the end of the day, we have to continue to base our decisions and policies on our educational mission, and not on emotion.”

Acknowledge Student Leaders

AASCU leaders say it’s also important that administrators respect and acknowledge student leadership. “I think it is important not just to engage the student voice, but to let the student voice lead,” Huddleston says. Like many institutions, he says, Framingham State has strong student leaders who often have a clear vision of what they want to achieve. “We want to make sure that we are engaging them and helping them to facilitate discussions that they want to have, and participating in those discussions,” he says. Rather than focus so much on potential ramifications of
student activism, he says, universities should do more to help students take a path that will lead to a positive outcome.

Faculty, of course, play a pivotal role in teasing out the lessons inherent in student activism. That said, professors may need insights themselves on how best to do that. At James Madison, for example, faculty can work through the Center for Faculty Innovation to find examples and tools to spark thoughtful classroom conversations on the issues that student activism brings to the fore. Similarly, faculty at Framingham can take workshops designed to help them learn strategies to incorporate inclusion into course content and pedagogy.

Ultimately, the best piece of advice may be that universities need to engage—and engage broadly—in student activism as a learning exercise that also serves institutional interests in serving diverse communities.

Instances of student activism are not merely public relations issues that need to be addressed, White says, nor are they one-off episodes that occur and then fade away. Moreover, he says, “I don’t think this is a strategy that you can isolate to a campus position or function. It permeates every aspect of the university, and everybody has to be equipped to address this.”

“This is who we are and who we are going to be—a complex, diverse institution where ideas and attitudes collide,” White says. “And we really need to build the capacity to facilitate and manage that reality.”

Based in Rockville, Md., Stephen G. Pelletier writes regularly about higher education.

1 The full webinar can be accessed for free via the AASCU website, www.aascu.org.