Leadership For a New Era of Student Activism

Does the “Occupy” movement signal a new era of student activism? And if so, how can college leaders respond appropriately and effectively?

By Stephen G. Pelletier

When “Occupy”-style protests spilled over to public university campuses this past fall, one consequence was that it put university leaders under a public spotlight. In November, for example, after campus police at the University of California at Davis squirted a line of sitting protestors with pepper spray and video of the incident quickly went viral, the media was awash with images of Chancellor Linda Katehi rejecting calls that she resign. In early December, Bay Area media ran pictures and video of Robert Corrigan, president of San Francisco State University (SFSU), attempting to engage clamorous Occupy protestors on his campus in a dialogue about relevant issues.

No one can predict the future of the Occupy movement. Nonetheless, universities today are seeing protests that in their passion, stridency and even tactics echo those of the 1960s. And regardless of how long Occupy’s activism lasts, or what form it might ultimately take, student activists all along the political spectrum are likely to be energized by 2012’s presidential election.

Let us assume that the new student activism does continue—and perhaps even expand. What are the implications for colleges and universities? How can university leaders meet the complex challenges that student protests bring?

All college leaders must balance concerns about safety and facilities with issues of free speech. But walking that tightrope can pose even more of a test for presidents of AASCU institutions. On the one hand, leaders of public colleges and universities need to allow room on their campuses for dissent and discussion under the conventions of freedom of speech. On the other hand, they must also protect public safety and
preserve property. At the same time, they need to balance those tasks in the context of institutions where the physical plant is often considered a public space and deliberations about how to address protests are subject to scrutiny through sunshine laws.

Range of Concerns

Campus Occupy protests have roots in Occupy Wall Street. Pitted as a contest between the 99 percent and the 1 percent, Occupy Wall Street has a wide range of concerns that stretch from social and economic equality to the more specific, such as investigating Wall Street practices.

While they often also advocate for broader causes, campus Occupy protests tend to focus on pocketbook issues affecting students, such as escalating tuition charges and rising student debt. A website for the group Occupy California, for example, features an image of a woman with a raised fist that is reminiscent of the protests of the Sixties. That group's primary concerns are “unending budget cuts and austerity measures” at “all levels of public education.”

While such protests could lose steam, evidence today suggests the opposite. Student anger continues to build and spread about the increased prices they must pay for college and about budget cuts that make it hard to complete degrees or even to gain access to higher education in the first place. Furthermore, some of those emotions are spilling over to faculty members—professors who may have seen their ability to educate students curtailed by budget cuts and who may have had to endure pay freezes, furloughs or even layoffs. Given that state budget pressures seem unlikely to abate anytime soon, it is reasonable to anticipate that the passions embodied in campus Occupy activism will be sustained—and could gain even further traction. In the face of such challenges, how can leaders of AASCU institutions best respond?

Strategies for Leadership

Many important insights come from university presidents who have, in essence, been on the front lines of campus Occupy protests. One such leader is F. King Alexander, president of California State University, Long Beach (CSULB). Police from CSULB are often called to serve at meetings of the Cal State system when they take place a few miles from campus. With those meetings a focal point for student anger about rising tuition and budget cuts, Alexander saw one recent demonstration take a rather ugly turn when protestors broke through glass doors (causing $50,000 worth of damage) to interrupt a system board meeting. Pepper spray was also a factor, with both protestors and the police saying the other side had used that as a weapon.

Alexander says protestors look for high-profile venues where they can make their case—and have it publicized by news media. That complicates life for public universities, which by definition have to maintain a certain openness and accessibility to the public. That means, for example, that public universities “have to be prepared in ways that private higher education and the private sector don’t have to worry about,” Alexander says.

Occupy protests were a fact of life at many public universities all last fall. Campus encampments were established, buildings or parts of buildings were occupied for periods of time, and protest marches and demonstrations were frequent. Those experiences gave public university presidents some valuable perspectives for how they might navigate the complex challenges that the Occupy protests create.

Don’t overreact. “The crowds want you to use force,” Alexander says. “They want the press to cover the most extreme examples of what happened that day.” So Alexander believes universities need first to be measured in their responses to protests. “The number one rule is don’t overreact,” he says.

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the public sector, might push for strong reactions to protestors. They may argue for keeping the news media off campus or even for throwing protestors in jail. Given that trustees may not necessarily be experts on campus demonstrations and may not fully understand the constraints that apply to public universities because they are public, Alexander says, “don’t let board members mislead you.”

Establish—and uphold—ground rules. Alexander suggests that public universities need to define what is and is not acceptable when it comes to protests. For example, he says, “students have a right on our campus to voice their concerns about society. They have a right as students on our campus to sleep on the ground. But they cannot disturb classes and the academic operations of the institution.” Defining the parameters of acceptable protest and communicating those parameters in advance can help universities maintain control.

Wim Wievel is president of Portland State University (Ore.), which this past fall saw many campus protests. Wievel made sure that his institution had well-reasoned policies of not allowing activities that were dangerous or that detracted from PSU’s educational mission. So long as students have proper permits, for example, PSU permits demonstrations, which are seen as a manifestation of freedom of speech. Camping on campus is not allowed, however. “We do not consider camping to be an expression of freedom of speech,” Wievel says.

Does Occupy Offer Teachable Moments?
Apart from tightening security procedures, corporations have yet to mount a cohesive response to Occupy Wall Street. There are those in the corporate world, however, that urge business to be, well, more activist in planning proactive and productive responses to the protests. Higher education might draw some lessons from those thinkers.

Writing this past October in Forbes magazine, for example, contributor E.D. Kain argued that “corporate America needs to engage the protesters and engage their ideas.” That same month, academics Hari Bapuji and Suhaib Riaz addressed similar issues in the Harvard Business Review. They wrote that the persistence of Occupy protests signals “authentic, deep-seated unhappiness with the failings of the U.S. economic system.” That, in turn, shows that “economic inequality is perceived as an important issue” in society—“one requiring business’s immediate attention.” Bapuji and Riaz argued that corporations “need to address the protesters’ key points” and “should find ways of empathizing with protesters’ frustrations on points of genuine concern.”

Are there lessons there for colleges and universities? In an interview with Public Purpose, Riaz, an assistant professor of management at the University of Massachusetts Boston, said in light of the role that higher education plays in encouraging discussion and learning, colleges and universities inherently provide an invaluable forum for discussion of the core issues that the Occupy movement raises. Given the centrality of economic issues for society today, Riaz says “we think that universities should try to create an environment where these issues are discussed. Different stakeholders should be involved and universities should be the platforms for the discussions.”

To that end, in fact, Bapuji and Riaz created the Business & Economic Inequality Forum (www.BEIF.net), a model that fosters campus discussions. This past December, the approach was tested in a forum at the Asper School of Business at the University of Manitoba that included academics, the university president and other administrators, students and members of the business community. The BEIF plans to host similar discussions at other universities, including in the United States.

“Our whole approach is that economic inequality is a broad societal issue, and everyone is a stakeholder,” Riaz says. “That’s what we said in our Harvard Business Review article, and that’s what we are saying to universities. Instead of letting protests get out of control, why don’t we proactively initiate discussions in the right spirit of the university as a place of learning?”
Know what’s happening around your campus—and around the country. Demonstrations under the broad umbrella of Occupy Wall Street can quickly and sometimes unexpectedly flow onto campuses. Universities need to be prepared for such possibilities. Alexander urges universities to “be very cognizant of outside entities that can piggyback on top of campus events.” He says it is vital that campus leaders have good intelligence about protests that may be occurring off campus in a given community in order to anticipate their possible impact on campus. To gain further perspective, staff at CSULB monitor national news reports daily to learn about protests in other parts of the country.

Be prepared to act fast. Campus protests can change rapidly. In response, universities have to also be prepared to act fast. From experience, for example, CSULB learned to be prepared to close facilities, such as the administration building or the library, when they became specific targets of protests. Alexander estimates that CSULB had to close buildings in that fashion perhaps five times last fall. Similarly, when protestors tried to occupy a student recreation center at Portland State, the university quickly ruled that only students with ID would be allowed access to the building—effectively culling non-student would-be occupiers.

Know your student leaders. When demonstrations come to campus, Wievel says, it’s important to keep the whole of the student body informed about what is going on. “You have to always be in close communication and reaching out to students, you and your student affairs people,” he says. “And of course presidents know this, but you can’t start this when trouble starts. That’s too late.” Wievel meets every month with student leaders, and PSU student affairs staff touch base with them daily. Keeping students informed helps stem the possibility that they will be swept up in a protest based on misinformation.

Know your police force. Alexander says another critical requisite is that university leaders exercise leadership in advance over their police force. First, he says, it’s important to know the background of campus police officers. Those with experience on challenging public police beats may need training to develop skills suitable for a campus. Alexander suggests that administrators make sure that campus police understand the institution and its student culture and that they know that “a security officer or police officer on the campus is an educator, not an adversary.” Important, too, is for campuses leaders to have developed a close working relationship with its police and the local police force long before potentially violent situations erupt.

With literally decades of experience with intense student activism, San Francisco State University has developed an administrative structure that integrates campus police into student affairs. SFSU’s police report to the vice president of student affairs. The head of the campus police functions as a cabinet member in the office of student affairs and meets regularly with campus counseling staff. Well trained to respond in ways that are appropriate to SFSU’s culture, campus police officers are “very carefully selected,” Robert Corrigan says. Most are college graduates, and many hail from the immediate region around the campus. “They are visible on campus. They talk with students. They’re not seen as some kind of military operation,” he says. “So when we have to do something in response to an issue or problem, we have well-trained police who work with well-trained people in student affairs to keep the dialogue open and try to make clear what the rules are,” including that students have no guaranteed access to campus space and that “there is no inherent right to be able to disrupt the life of the campus.”

Respect student concerns. To some extent, presidents who suffer the effects of budget cutbacks share the frustrations that protesting students have about rising tuition and program cuts. At this nexus, there is room for productive discussion. “Distinguish between the substance and the form,” Wievel says. “You can give great respect and recognition for the points

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that people are making and what they are angry about,” he says, yet still underscore that protest is counterproductive if it interferes with education and research or puts people at risk.

*Take responsibility as president.*

Even though budget cuts and tuition increases are byproducts of state economics, students are often quick to blame administrators. Wievel says that presidents need to deal with such criticism, even if it is misdirected, and not shirk from or delegate their responsibilities as presidents simply because campus discourse has become uncomfortably heated.

*Engage protesters in discussion.*

Perhaps because universities are an appropriate forum for civil discussion, presidents are often committed to engage protesters in dialogue. When Occupy protestors camped out at SFSU, for example, Corrigan made a point of periodically visiting their encampment. And when the PSU student union organized a day of activism on campus to discuss state budget issues, Wievel agreed to be a panelist. “They first asked me if I would support a walkout and of course I said no, that’s not the business I’m in,” Wievel said. But he did agree to take part in breakout discussions.

**Shared Frustrations**

Protesting students may not realize the extent to which university leaders share their frustrations about economic trends. “A lot of what they’re angry about I’m angry about,” Corrigan says. “We’ve got a budget here at San Francisco State which is almost the same as the general revenue budget that we had in 1997-98. But we have thousands more students. We’re a state that is dependent on an educated workforce but here we are sitting in line behind the prisons. They get $9 billion a year, which is twice the [appropriation for the] University of California and California State University together. What kind of value system do we have in this state in which we spend more on prisons than we do on higher education? It’s $50,000 a year to keep somebody in prison, and I get $7,000-8,000 to put him into a classroom.”

About the protesting students, Corrigan says, “I have to say that I have a fair amount of admiration for them. But there also have to be certain rules, regarding how they treat others, not blocking other students and faculty from getting into classrooms, and the like.”

To help campuses reach and maintain a state of equilibrium in the face of the new student activism, Corrigan says that presidents can be successful if they draw on the qualities that they rely on to be successful leaders. What are some of those qualities? “That they’re open. That they’re willing to meet with different people. That they have a value system that encourages frankness and free speech,” Corrigan says. “Stay patient,” Corrigan counsels his fellow presidents. “And understand what these young people are dealing with right now.”

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Stephen G. Pelletier is a writer and editor in Rockville, Maryland.