

REDEFINING CAMPUS POWER

by Andy Burns

For activists to define and transmit their campaigns to others, it is useful to have a thorough understanding of what the term Campus Democracy means. How are our campuses governed, how should they be governed, and how they should not be governed? An even more interesting question is, should they be governed at all? It is useful to be familiar with some of the proposals that have been used to make attempts, some successful, at democratizing the university structure in the past.

When groups undertake campaigns that question and undermine the legitimacy of the corporate-dominated, authoritarian university, the question will always come up... "what else is there?" This question is a very typical response and should be prepared for. But more importantly, it is important to realize that the question is closely linked to the issue of freedom and democracy itself. It shows that people are not, in everyday society, encouraged to consider or create alternatives.

Of course, those that benefit from the status quo, private business interests and university administrators, prefer people to have a limited scope of imagination concerning political matters and will make all attempts possible to stabilize that condition. Therefore, it is the first task of the campus democracy activist to break through the dull, lifeless "reality" that people live everyday and that keeps people subdued, unquestioning, and disempowered. Before one can make a case for scrapping the current power structure it could prove useful to get people questioning other, less distant realities, such as the need to be constrained. There are many ways to go about this, and these will be touched on throughout the packet. But the important thing to realize is that a campus democracy campaign is a transformative campaign. It doesn't try to create something (like food safety standards) or do away with something (such as investing in rogue corporations) it seeks to alter the current structure in order to provide for the equality and freedom of all. With this in mind it becomes imperative to be transformative in tactics as well.

The Current Situation

At this point in our history, corporate influence has pervaded nearly every aspect of society. From simple things like our daily diet and the clothes we wear to matters of larger scale like the way we communicate with each other via phones, television, and the "information superhighway" corporations are redefining the

world and people are experiencing it in a new manner. The feel of the new corporate age is one of isolation, shallow interaction, and a sense that important matters are beyond the control and even the understanding of the average person. The lack of meaningful citizen power in state and national political affairs is a prime cause for this current condition. The two party system and corporate control of information are inherent and necessary for the perpetuation of this order.

As in life so goes education, and its true that this situation exists on campuses, both in higher and secondary education. The majority of the campus population has little or no interest in issues that directly affect them. An overall sense of apathy tends to pervade as decisions are left to the president or chancellor and a handful of vice-presidents. Students are excluded from most important campus decisions such as where their money goes, what services they will have and how they will be administered, and if and how much they will pay for their education. They get a token amount of power over issues of "student affairs" through what are generally powerless campus government bodies. Faculty have little say in the selection of deans, and are generally discouraged from speaking out against the government, business, or campus policies. Campus workers are sorely missing from decision-making processes and are frequently without the right to organize, not paid a living wage, and subject to intimidation, harassment, and even firings if they speak out. State institutions and private institutions differ in most of these respects, and there is no set of conditions that is true to every campus. But it is clear that the general political environment on campus is unfortunately one of disempowerment.

The disempowerment is not a natural or accepted one, as some journalists have attempted to portray it. College campuses are traditionally one of the more lively hotbeds of debate and political activity. Against a backdrop of fear and intimidation, courageous students, faculty, and campus workers are indeed standing up for themselves and in solidarity with others. The examples are too many to mention, but through the organizing of many campus groups such as the 180/Movement for Democracy and Education, the Center for Campus Organizing, United Students Against Sweatshops, Teachers for a Democratic Society, and numerous campus unions, there are hundreds of campuses where there are lively, ongoing campaigns targeted at shifting local and global power from pow-

erful corporate interests to real, everyday people, both student and non-student.

But administrators and corporate tycoons don't want anyone to know that. So, the corporate media and other outlets of information have long ignored the campus movements. In the 1980's there wasn't much widespread coverage of the shantytowns built on several campuses calling for divestment from the South African apartheid regime. Many people never heard about the on-campus solidarity work that students were doing to stop direct US military intervention in Central America. These campaigns continued well into the 90's. But the corporate media never reported on it. The tired cliché of "Generation X" as a lost generation with no purpose is a misconception that fits all too well with the interests of the power elites. Activists must and are breaking through the half-truth and it will be a great day when it is considered truthful no more.

These campus campaigns through the 80's and 90's have focused on issues somewhat removed from daily campus life. Socially responsible investment, anti-sweatshop, human rights, US militarism, and anti-logging or mining campaigns have all been driving forces behind the growing chorus of students dedicated to halting the corporate juggernaut. When students tried to apply these campaigns to their administrations, time and time again they were rebuffed or given token acknowledgment. The level of struggle in the 1980's over the divestment campaigns was one of the most intense seen anywhere in the US in years. The students had a powerful cause, great organization, and well-executed campaigns, but the administrations were incredibly reluctant to concede to student demands. In many cases it took strikes, riots, or actual shutting down of the university administration to get anything accomplished.

Activists have learned from these struggles and many have identified two main reasons why administrations will not listen to student, faculty, or worker demands. The increasing connections between private business and higher education have transformed university administrators, never a very progressive lot to begin with, from having somewhat of an educational background, to a group of corporate style executives. Boards of Regents/Trustees seats and university presidencies are increasingly taken by businessmen and they've been all too eager to respond to the call of the almighty dollar. These corporate managers of our education system have an interest in moving universities toward

the model of education for profit. It would be acting against their interests if they agreed to limit the power of a corporation by, for example, forcing it to implement a code of conduct for investments or against sweatshops.

An even more dismal prospect is one that shows the true nature of power on university campuses. For campus administrators to agree to the demands of any progressive group that is circulating a petition or doing a media pressure campaign, would be a small capitulation of their unaccountable power, without which they could not function in the same capacity. Giving in to student, faculty, or worker demands would rob the administration of its perceived legitimacy. If they gave students what they wanted, the students would just ask for more and more. This is a possibility that the wealthy business owners who dominate our universities can not cope with because it undermines their right to exist. The result is a corporate-controlled, authoritarian university that forces its population to result to measures outside the scope of legalized power.

These ideas, although not new, are slowly becoming consolidated in the collective minds of campus activists over the past two decades. Through previous struggles against corporate power on and off campus, and heavy administrative resistance, activists have learned that in order to accomplish their goals, the playing field has to be radically altered. The voice of dissent on college campuses is becoming focused not only on reprehensible university policies, but also on the actual decision making structure that created those policies. Campus Democracy is coming into its own.

Defining democracy

To anyone who has heard any significant amount of the left's analysis, it should be obvious that there are many different definitions of the word democracy. Being an incredibly politically charged word, many different groups have used it for many different purposes. Therefore a good way to re-define the word to reduce some of its associated baggage, might be to go to its roots in the Greek language. Demos means "the people." In Greece, it was the body politic, the ones who could participate in the decision making. Kratia is the second half, meaning "rule by" or "power." So brought back to its meaning in the English language, democracy means "power of the people." Therefore democracy most definitely does not mean a system whereby a

majority of people vote to send those wealthy enough to afford campaign costs and hire PR firms to do their decision making for them. In other words, its arguable that a representative system is not a true democracy.

A simpler way to define this concept, using the root Greek, is to say that “rule by the people” is simply participation and a certain level of control over decision-making by the people who are directly affected by the decisions. Whether by representative means or by direct means this assumes that all affected parties have some means of inserting their wants and needs into the means of discourse as well as a means of imposing their will on the outcome of the decision. Given the many interests in today’s society, many theorists and political scientists say that this is undesirable due to the level of disagreement that will arise when divergent interests are allowed to participate in the same debate. This struggle for power, put simply, is politics, and it will never be eliminated no matter who is excluded from the decision-making processes. Those who would simplify decision-making structures with the stated intent of removing the political element are typically those who would also advocate that members of the business class would manage the decisions because they can responsibly represent the interests of the whole society. Democracy is never smooth and it will always have divergent points of view and interests competing for power. The purpose of democracy activists then, is to make room for and allow all parties affected by decisions to have an equal say in those decisions.

Education in the mix

This principle of equal decision-making power has been long thought of as inherent to systems of government. Homage is consistently paid to it, although it is not truly practiced. It is agreed in most circles that people have the right to decide what the conditions of their living will be. However, in a setting of higher education, these democratic principles are not considered a human right. The reason for this is that participation in institutions of higher education is seen as a choice. There is no choice about the fact that one has to live in society, but there is a choice about whether or not one chooses to attend college. The right-wing argument is that the choice doesn’t inherently give a person the right to manipulate the conditions of the educational system. This line of thinking justifies the control of education to rest solely in the hands of administrators, and sometimes faculty since they are seen as the pro-

viders of the “service” of education. In this case, students are simply consumers who can choose at will the wide variety of different educational “products,” those products being universities and colleges.

This market-based model of education should be rejected by activists. There are valid reasons why this model should not and does not hold weight with rational people. The first is that in our current society, higher education is a gateway to security. Without it, people are forced into a uncertain labor market that has become increasingly unpredictable. It is true that people are, in effect, coerced into needing higher education to be successful and healthy. Therefore, as in civil society, people have a right to participate in decisions of such systems that are vital to their interests. This right does not come from their special ability to manage institutions effectively, but from the fact that they cannot escape from the effects of the system that privileges those who are able to enter college.

The second argument against the market-based, authoritarian system of higher education is that the duty of true education is to teach people to be able to function in a democratic society. When schools and universities give their students no chance to be involved in the decisions that affect them, students “learn” that this is the reality of life in the larger society. It becomes ingrained in the psyche of the disempowered student that others are looking out for their interests and they should trust them. Indeed, they are made to feel that there is no alternative. Until institutions of education, from grade schools to professional schools, start giving students these democratic decision making skills and experiences, they will continue to fail the students and society at large in their mission of producing a free society.

In order for these decision making lessons to be effective, they should not be undertaken as in a laboratory setting where the outcome has no bearing on actual reality. Students, along with the other groups who make up the campus should be able to participate in the making of the highest and most important decisions. Without such decision making authority, the participants will never be involved enough to feel ownership of the institutions or decisions that are made for it. For example, why would a student, who has no procedural power over the decisions that a university board makes, feel inclined to defend or justify a decision that may actually be in the interests of her/his university (and

therefore that student as well) unless she/he has some say in the decision? Unless those who make up the university are allowed to also make up the highest level of decision making then they will continue to be uninterested and feel removed from the institution itself.

Campuses, at the turn of the century are, however, much removed from this ideal. They are consistently governed by corporate-style Boards of Trustees or Regents who make decisions concerning the hiring of administrative officers, resource and fiscal supervision, determining the general character of instructional programs, and setting requirements for admission and graduation. The generally unaccountable boards are made up primarily of successful businessmen. Several characteristics are associated with this condition that make it undesirable. Activists ought to become familiar with them in order to be grounded in a comprehensive analysis. Some of the disadvantages of filing university boards with businessmen include: lack of a background in education or collegiate subject matter, lack of ability to identify with underprivileged, a tendency to operate the university as a business, and a biased class structure (acting in interest of wealthy)

The unaccountable boards give authority to an executive officer, be it a rector, chancellor, or president, to carry out the actual daily business of the university. The executive officer delegates many of her/his administrative duties to a myriad of vice-presidents and other bureaucrats while giving governance of curriculum and academic affairs to deans. Different means of designating these officials exist at different schools, but the great majority are not commissioned from the grassroots up (although these departments typically have some level of influence). Instead they are ultimately subject to the highest administrative authority. Private business thrives in this atmosphere and without controls can begin to affect the academic freedom of the faculty and even the free speech of the students (as seen with the attempts made at introducing non-disparagement clauses for exclusive corporate contracts with cola or athletic shoe giants).

This condition has been identified in academic journals and termed "corporate managerialism."¹ With the rise of corporate culture throughout society, university administrations have begun to take on the qualities of a corporate board of directors including such aspects as exorbitant salaries and benefits, bulging bureaucracy, god-like status, and a tendency to think of themselves

as being the university. This style of administration naturally tends to cultivate ties with the corporate world, even going as far as to select administrators and trustees directly from that sector. The most important aspect of this trend is the streamlining of decision making that accompanies it, giving increased authority to unaccountable officials or vice executive-administrators in the name of efficiency and competitiveness. For the committed democracy activist to be able to transform this condition, continued investigation and analysis of this trend must take place and be acted upon.

From theory to reality

In order to be able to answer the question mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, "what else is there?" one should be aware that the campus democracy struggles of today are not novel or new by any means. Understanding and placing the campaigns of today in a historical context and knowing what steps have been taken on specific campuses will aid activists in their attempts to create democratic change at their schools. There is a history to this particular movement and to some extent democratic principles have been enacted on a limited number of campuses.

Student protest has been around for a long time but it was only relatively recently that concrete proposals for democratization of the universities became prevalent on college campuses. Some of the most significant have been put forward by the German student movement in the 1960's. The SDS (German Socialist Student Union) put out a memorandum on the universities along with a reform proposal by the Association of German Student Bodies (VDS) that were reported on by Jurgen Habermas.² The German student's proposals were largely based a participatory model in which undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty would co-administer resources within their own area of functioning. The plans were formulated to eliminate academic hierarchies and would substitute administrators with actual participants in the academic process. This was the most far-reaching and radical plan submitted by any group. It summed up the torrent of anti-authoritarian sentiment that swept the industrialized world in that decade. As translations of these texts were difficult to obtain, details are limited to what has been previously discussed and further study is required.

Other European universities have been significantly affected by demands for democracy. In the Scandinavian

nations (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) universities were traditionally elitist institutions that served the dominant classes of society until the 1960's when many were significantly altered to provide for mass education of the domestic population.³ The Nordic nations are distinct in their treatment of the universities as institutions both of democratic access and functioning. Universities were primarily controlled by powerful faculty until the mid 1960's.

The reforms enacted and the means for enacting them were different in each nation. Campus struggles in this era had swift and far-reaching effects at Danish universities. They were first implemented first locally in 1970, and were later extended to all institutions of higher learning in 1973 by the national government. They included such measures as equalizing all power of faculty with respect to tenure in governing bodies and expecting faculty to be responsible for administrative tasks. Students and staff were given 25 percent representation in all governing bodies including those at the highest levels of authority. Special study boards were set up with shared influence between students and faculty to give students responsibility for their own education.⁴ These Danish forms were by far the most radical and the other nations implementing various plans of a less transformative nature. An interesting nation to note is Sweden. Universities in that nation involve average people from the society at large in all levels of management but the lowest.

Scandinavian universities are unique in that their reforms took place with a permissive attitude by the social democratic governments. When students demonstrated for more power, the government gave it to them. Many times the reforms came even from the highest levels of government, instead of from demand of the campuses. But in the period following the pro-democracy fervor of the 1960's the spirit of reform slowed and debates over the mechanics of participation turned into questions over principles of representation.⁵ Still, significant changes have remained and the Nordic universities are worth considerable study.

Moving to North America, the establishment of semi-democratic practices has occurred at many of the Canadian universities. With respect to student representation on top policy-making boards, Canada ranks as one of the highest nations. Most universities adopted this measure after the late 1960's struggles, but it is clear that the trend developed nationally due to a close

linkage of Canadian institutions to a proactive national collegiate association. The effect of this has limited ramifications when considering actual democratization due to the fact that many of these bodies allow students to sit only as non-voting members. However, Canadian institutions do generally give students a large number of elected members on senates and committees. Since these bodies, in Canada have control over much of the academic curriculum, this could be considered a somewhat progressive trend.⁶

Relative to their German, Nordic, and even Canadian counterparts, campus populations at American universities are much less empowered. Higher education in the US is much more decentralized than in any other area, with the states controlling the administration of the public and, to some extent, the private universities through corporate charters. Given this reality, it is little surprise that the more democratic campuses are small liberal arts schools, and not the large state institutions. But it should be noted that these small colleges are very inaccessible due to their high cost. Therefore, the extent to which democracy has been achieved even at the most progressive schools is debatable and within this discussion is limited only to their internal functioning.

In a small town, 5 miles outside of Columbus, Ohio sits one of the most progressive of all mainstream American institutions of higher education. Otterbein college, a private school with a small number of students, adopted, in 1970, a provision for full and equal participation by students and faculty on a Board of Trustees presided over by a single administrator. Students and faculty also have gained membership on all councils and committees having jurisdiction over all levels of campus management, business affairs, and curriculum. All representatives to these bodies are elected. This system has been in place since 1970, and though simple in its implementation and process, has rarely been imitated.⁷

One of Otterbein's predecessors, though not as thoroughly democratic, may have influenced its decision to move in the aforementioned direction. Antioch College, also in Ohio, gradually became considerably more democratized in form throughout the 1930's, when a progressive president, Arthur Morgan, was persuaded that "colleges ought to use the period of higher education in student's lives to prepare the students for the intelligent discharge of their future civic responsibilities."

ties in the larger society.” After encouragement from the student body, he allowed students to elect three representatives to Antioch’s administrative council. At that time the council merely advised the president, but was later given full decision making responsibility for all matters of the school, including the budget. This council is made up of three students, five faculty, the dean, and the president. Antioch’s tradition of democracy has lasted since those days and today is considered as one of the most progressive schools in the nation.⁸

An interesting structure has been put in place at a small college called Carleton College. Like most universities, it has a highest decision making council, here called the College Council. The Council is composed of seven elected students, seven elected faculty, two alumni, three trustees, and five administrative officials, including a presidential chair. While this in and of itself is not the ideal structure, Carleton College is worth mention because all decisions made by this council are subject to a majority referendum by the faculty or by the student senate (authorized by a majority of the student body), or a veto by the president. This system of checks and balances, while not eliminating hierarchical decision making, does move the balance of power closer to the two groups that are actually essential to university functioning: the faculty and students.⁹

There are some public institutions that have unique and democratic structures. One that serves to demonstrate that coercive authority is not inherently necessary to the functioning of systems of human interaction is Minnesota Metropolitan State College. The notable aspect of this college is its lack of reliance of elaborate structure that is so characteristic of other American universities and colleges. One of its professors, Dr. David Sweet, remarked, “I think we have created an educational anarchy.” While the MMSC does not completely eliminate structure, it does eliminate hierarchies. There is no chief executive to preside over the workings of the college, and the decision making body, the College Assembly, is comprised of all the faculty, all the students, and all campus employees. A group called the College Association, made up of donors and friends) is also allowed to participate. This is pure direct democracy with one person getting one vote in all institutional decisions. A structure of committees is set up to carry out the work of the Assembly. Along with this structure, or lack thereof, it should be noted that MMSC is a college set up to serve adult students over the age of 25 who are either transfers or who may have

previously dropped out of other colleges. The system was set up as an interim structure, but then remained for some unknown amount of time.¹⁰

All the included structures and proposals share one common principle; that the pure and simple responsibilities of a university is to educate students and undertake research projects. Therefore there are only two groups inherent in the functioning of any university: the students and the faculty. Lines can be blurred and arguments made for breaking down the differences between these groups, as has been done in many respectable educational theoretical journals; but for now this discussion will assume the necessity of the distinction between faculty and students. But one reason that a constant in each of these plans is that students and faculty should have some sort of shared governance is because, theoretically, these are the only groups necessary to a university. In reality, there comes into the picture a hired staff of labor to facilitate the process of education. Therefore, even though there have been few who have advocated it previously, it is this author’s opinion that labor should have a voice in the management of the campus. Robert Paul Wolff argued for his ideal university by making the case for student faculty interaction and control in all levels of academic decision except the students own certification, of which faculty should be in control. He completely ignores the relevance of administrators, which do not naturally exist in an educational setting. If those administrators do exist, they should merely act as staff who carry out the decisions of the students and faculty.¹¹

Demolishing the Ivory Tower

One of the chief complaints against the mobilization of activist resources toward the democratization of universities is the tendency for educational settings to become quite removed from the real world of society at large. Many people feel that a campaign targeted at simply changing the power structure of universities would neglect other, more dire causes. College students are indeed a privileged sector of society and have a history of being incredibly out of touch with the concerns of the working class, farmers, or minorities in the inner cities. It should be well understood, especially after the mobilization in Seattle that these groups can not and should not work in isolation.

Democracy on campus must work in tandem with a larger society and promote democracy and social

justice at large. Campus activists must be able to fuse together local, on-campus elements with those off-campus, first to avoid becoming removed from the struggles of those more oppressed than themselves, and second to be effective. Students, by themselves—or even in conjunction with faculty and workers, will find it difficult to justify their demands for democratization without the support of the community who draws on the university for a source of knowledge and an educated labor force. Many possibilities exist for these avenues to be explored and since it holds that larger coalitions produce effective results, steps should be taken to work with those who would not generally consider themselves allies or even activists. Coalitions are necessary to produce results and are desirable to link up struggles in various places. Activists should work with other organizations on their causes, attend their events, and generally support the community at large.

True, campus democracy cannot be actualized without equalized access for all. Therefore, support should be given and allies made within the more established organizations that promote this cause. The Scandinavian universities show this to be true. Democracy on their campuses came along with significant democratic movements within the larger framework of a social democratic society. In the 1960's, the limited amount of campus democratization that did occur came in the context of a larger movement of general protest against the values of the dominant militarist-capitalist hegemony. True to the spirit of the populist movement of the turn of the century, activists should nurture coalitions and a general solidarity with all that have a complaint against the authoritarian, corporate-controlled university, but especially with those from without.

Organize!

Moving to a tactical discussion and noting that ideas on the nuts and bolts of accomplishing these goals are numerous yet still somewhat hard to define, a general framework for fashioning campaigns can be constructed. Wolff recommends a one word motto of Solidarity! for all democracy campaigns. He recommends that students and faculty meet in a setting outside the authority of the administration of departments, colleges, and the administration and declare themselves the real university. He advocates this body creating their own laws and choosing their own leaders and then stating that they will henceforth not be governed by anyone else but themselves. The Board of Trustees, he says can

attempt to try to break that arrangement, but assumes that since the students and the faculty are the university (I would add workers), it would be too strong.¹²

The importance of inclusivity, meaning workers, students, and faculty, can not be overstated and Wolff hits the nail on the head with his analysis that the only power those in positions of authority will listen to is that of coercion. Wolff advocates, possibly without fully realizing it, the coercion of administrations through general strike. Indeed, be it a general strike or any or political action outside the authority and constitution of the university's procedures is inherently coercive. However, there are two reasons why this type of influence is actually ethical and perhaps even necessary. The first is that the policies and procedures that the established order has implemented and functioned upon in most cases were not formed with the consent of those who they affect. Therefore the "governed" have no responsibility to follow them. The second justification campus populations have enabling them to engage in coercive acts of civil disobedience, is that these are the only tactics to which administrators have historically responded. The recent anti-sweatshop protests and sit-ins demonstrate this, as have campus struggles throughout the past century.

Conservative educational thinkers have lamented this fact. But their lamentations are usually accompanied by the recommendation that university administrators figure out the people who they are charged with controlling and understand that if minimal concessions are given to those demanding power, they will return to their placable state. Additionally, once they have acquired some amount of power, they will be much less likely to cause disturbances; the key being how to concede the minimal level of power necessary to pacify the rabble. Many academics see "too much" democracy as mob rule.

Activists should be aware of these kinds of administrative tactics. Attempts at appeasement should be understood and prepared for. Giving students a single seat on a board of trustees with no voting power or a governor-appointed student trustee is a classic example and this tactic should be resisted. Many schools now exhibit this increasing trend toward "liberal" administrations that purport to listen to campus concerns and keep them in mind when making decisions, yet in reality do nothing to affect the status quo. This has been recognized by many activists and denounced, but

it needs further analysis. Nevertheless, activists should be ready to confront it when it rears its head.

With the current university system being incredibly entrenched in its routine of playing to the concerns of private business, the goal of educational democracy will be notably difficult to achieve. Likewise, it is even hard for many people to imagine. After a lifetime of living under an anti-democratic system that constantly makes the case that it is the leader of free world, it is understandable that people would encounter this problem. Being familiar with some of the real world scenarios that exist will prove useful and if well-transmitted could have a significant impact on campuses across the world. As long as students, workers, faculty and the at-large community outside the walls of ivy are united, there are no limits to what can be achieved.

Notes

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5. Allardt, Eric et al, eds, *Nordic Democracy*, 456.
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10. Hill, Norman L. "Democratic and Other Principles of Empowerment," 31-32.
11. Wolff, Robert P. *The Ideal of the University*. Boston: Beacon. 1969. 133-136.
12. Wolff, Robert P. *The Ideal of the University*, 136-137.

This text was laid out for ease of reading by the Coalition for Student Power: www.forstudentpower.org.

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