

The Time is Now for Student Activism

By Talia Cain



It's 10pm and you have just gotten home from a long day of classes, work, and meetings. All you want to do is curl up on the couch, eat some pizza rolls, and binge-watch Netflix. Yet, you have fifty pages of reading, two papers, and a group project all due tomorrow. We've all been there.

The expectations placed on college students today are overwhelming. Trying to find a balance between being a decent student, employee, organization member, leader, friend, family member, and community member— all at the same time— often feels impossible. Undoubtedly, sacrifices have to be made; some things have to give. When you weigh out the factors, such as your growing student debt and scholarship GPA requirements, it's understandable that many decide to put activism last on the list of priorities.

However, forgoing activism is essentially neglecting the duties we have as democratic citizens. Oxford Dictionary defines activism as action intended to bring about change. As members of communities, it is important we remember our responsibilities to others and advocate for positive change where it is needed. Although our country was founded on the ideals of liberty and justice for all, that is not the world we live in. Yet, through activism, we *can* work to build a society where this statement is more than just a dream.

Why then, if we know how important being politically informed and engaged is, do we have such a collective attitude of indifference towards politics? Why does the media poke fun and belittle the struggle for social justice, specifically when it's young people taking a stance? While there are clearly individual exceptions, there is no question that our generation of college students is apathetic towards activism. In order to address this apathy, we must first understand the social and cultural trends that have made it the norm amongst many students today.

First, as previously mentioned, there is unreasonable pressure placed on students, which free time hard to come by. Second, many people seem to have forgotten what it means to be an active democratic citizen and why it is important. Third, there is a stigma surrounding student activism. Fourth, there is a lack of institutional support for student activism. Lastly, the media sustains a culture of complacency.

To be an active democratic citizen means being in tune with both local and global issues. It means that you are connected to your community, and that you recognize the power you have to influence society. We influence society when we vote in political elections or when we protest against government policies, but we are also constantly influencing society in the way we choose to interact with others. The media tends to create a monolithic image of the activist: someone marching with a painted sign. However, an engaged citizen is more than just someone who speaks up, they are also the ones who are willing to listen to others.

To interact with others, especially those who are different than you, in ways that show respect and open-mindedness is the foundation for democratic citizenship. The more you start to listen to those around you, the more empathy you will develop. Over time, this fosters a commitment to holding leaders accountable, for wanting to be a part of decision-making processes, for reflecting on how you personally contribute to social systems, and for making sure people are treated fairly and always given equal opportunities.

However, in today's world, the more involved you get or the more questions you ask, the more stigma you face. Many different labels have been ascribed to student activists. Conservative news media websites often condescendingly call millennials who engage in political activity "social justice warriors" or "snowflakes." These negative labels make it more challenging to speak up in the presence of injustice. In response to the polarized political climate and out of fear of being framed in an unfavorable light, people tend to be less willing to physically show up at places like city council meetings and advocate for change. Instead of acting on their beliefs about social issues, people resort to only talking about them. While this does bring about an awareness of different social justice topics, in the face of injustice, both are necessary.

Social change requires awareness *and* the willingness to do something in response. It takes recognizing where these negative labels and media messages come from. Most likely, those trying to belittle student activists are the ones most threatened by their power. Society is set up in ways that make it easier for some to succeed, and activism is at its core is going against this structure. For some, a more fair and just society requires giving up their privileged seats of comfort at the top, and allowing more people access to the tools they need so they too can succeed.

It can be difficult, however, to do more than just talk about the issues when there is no institutional support for activism. Imagine how different it would be if professors didn't assign mundane, time-consuming readings and assignments, but encouraged engaged, active citizenship by assigning projects that required students to learn by doing; to go out in the community, research issues up close rather than in a textbook, and devise solutions to societal

problems. Imagine if the administrators encouraged students to invest their time in doing service work.

Imagine if there were resources and tools available to students who wished to come together and protest. Imagine if there were spaces devoted to activism on campus. This can also be applied to high school and middle schools. We know that the most meaningful learning happens outside of the classroom; so why can't these two worlds—the classroom and the community—collide and inform one another?

While media has been positively influential in uniting movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, it has also served as a barrier to authentic activism. Namely, it has made it difficult to distinguish between genuine activist efforts and surface-level, guilt-induced performance activism. We often tell ourselves we are being active, engaged citizens because we shared an article on Facebook that expressed our political beliefs. Or maybe, we feel like we have done enough because we retweeted a meme that advocated for a certain social change. This falls short of creating real change, making it more like performance activism; it's the act of making it appear as though we are committed members of a democracy, but with no strings attached, no commitment, no personal investment. It usually comes about when people feel guilty for not contributing doing their part to create a better world.

In general, we all tend to forget that grassroots movements, especially ones started on college campuses, have historically been some of the most powerful forces in sparking change. The revolutionary social changes that occurred during the 1960s would not have been possible without student activism. In today's fast-paced, politically polarized, and morally ambiguous world, it is important we gather the courage to stand up for what we believe. We, as students, cannot allow ourselves to withdraw and think that the world's problems are too big for just one person to change. While it does require effort on behalf of everyone involved in educational processes—students, administrators, teachers or professors, family, peers, friends—one voice is loud enough to ignite a movement.