

Celebrating 'Builders' and 'Burners' in Student Activism

IHE insidehighered.com/views/2017/12/07/administrators-should-support-various-types-student-activism-opinion



As we approach the midpoint of the academic year, surges of campus activism will continue to unfold. Some of the issues that will pique students' interest will be obvious, while others will surprise us. No matter the issue or side of the political or philosophical spectrum, it is the commonly understood role of administrators to work with students to support activism in a way that students get their message heard and also optimizes safety and civility.

As the year unfolds, I ask fellow administrators to take this role a step further. It is crucial for us to question the roles students are playing in activist movements and broaden the definitions of activism that don't propagate a sort of "activism Olympics" that has plagued many of our student leaders. This means we must support students who are doing the vital work, whether they demonstrate what I call "builder" or "burner" activism.

"Burner" activism (figurative in nature, of course) is activism that disrupts existing power structures and norms. It has been a tried and true way for students to draw attention and ignite action from the administration. Taking over the offices of campus leaders, shutting down streets, holding sit-ins -- burner activism seeks to "burn down" oppressive structures and policies.

“Builder” activism, in contrast, often done in the aftermath of burner activism, seeks to build new structures that work differently (often more inclusively) for one particular group of students or all students on the campus. Founding a new student group around an emergent campus identity or working with an administrative office to expand their mission to be more equitable are examples of such work.

From over a decade of observation of campus movements, I now believe that both burning and building strategies are essential for forward progress. One seems incomplete without the other, even if they exist at different times, with different groups of students, on entirely different parts of the campus.

It is important to note that by building and burning, I do not meet formal versus informal forms of activism. Too often, some administrators privilege particular forms of activism (those students who go through formal channels and play nice) over others (students who use more informal channels or tactics of supposed disruption). These preferences are often tied to identity, as more often than not, students with more privilege have access to formal campus leadership positions -- particularly elected positions like those in student government. In my definitions of activism, a student of privileged identities who filibusters a student government meeting is using a burning strategy, while a queer student of color who starts an affinity space for community healing and support is using a building strategy.

Again, I assert each form has value and should be celebrated and supported. Some student activists engage seamlessly with both building and burning strategies. Many of the student groups stemming from the Black Lives Matter movement used burner strategies to march on administrative offices to draw attention to racial unrest, while also following their actions with thoughtful lists of demands. Indeed, many of them laid the foundation for building work.

What I ask of my fellow administrators is to examine their own privileging of particular campus activism and consider if they are consciously or unconsciously narrowing the definition of effective activism on their campuses. I have anecdotally seen students and administrators who specialize in one strategy judge or diminish those who engage in the other strategy or different forms of activism.

Administrators may fall into this due to their position on the campus. Upper-level administrators often champion and reward builders who organize coalitions and more quiet ways of pushing change forward, often shunning burners who laid the foundation for such work to take place. In contrast, entry- and midlevel administrators, particularly those from marginalized groups, may fear engaging in burning strategies will have negative consequences for their jobs. Therefore, when oppressive structures stand in the way of creating equitable campus environments, it may be useful to solely encourage burning strategies for students to get the job done. That way, such administrators can be ready to pursue building strategies when the figurative ashes are clear. Admittedly, I have been guilty of this myself in the past.

In any case, it is wrong to narrowly reward and uplift activism that makes administration most comfortable or serves solely their needs. Such a narrowing of activism for our students stifles their creativity and inhibits their ability to imagine a campus and indeed a world that is more inclusive and equitable. Students are drawing upon historical movements and infusing their own energy and passions toward creating a more just society. It is our job to encourage this quest for justice, even if it challenges our power and our comfort.