

Student Unrest and the College Campus

BY GORDON W. BLACKWELL

THE MOUNTING WAVE of student demonstrations and protests on college and university campuses leads us to wonder whether we are moving in the direction of Latin American and European universities.

We seek to understand the causes underlying this apparent rebellion. And we ask ourselves what can or should be done to control properly what appears to be almost a movement—before it gets out of hand.

We see little evidence of overt protest among Furman students. Yet I believe we can discern some restlessness and some indications that student interests and ideas are changing.

As in previous generations, many are asking whether college students today are vastly different from those of the past. Every college generation is different, of course, as it is influenced by a world that is rapidly changing. But also, perhaps, every college generation is the same in a sense.

As I have thought about this I find I can identify four generations of college students in my own

memory, each spanning a period of about ten years.

The first generation I would designate as that of the *roaring twenties*. Economic prosperity and splendid isolation characterized the United States. Women bobbed their hair and smoked openly. Their bathing suits, and their dresses, rose for the first time above the knees. In college it was a time of raccoon coats, hip flasks, bathtub gin, jazz, and the Charleston. Young people sang, "Collegiate, Collegiate, Yes We Are Collegiate," and F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote penetratingly about this generation which was then thought to be the wildest in history.

Then we came to the *depression years* of the 1930's. With general financial need there was less money for frivolity, and students became more serious. They sought a place in society. They sought jobs. Left-wing organizations espousing radical causes sprang up on college campuses, and years later we learned that some of them had been subject to outside subversive control. Isolationism grew weaker with the rumbling of tragic events

around the world. Students danced the Big Apple, and listened to the smooth music of Guy Lombardo and Wayne King. They sang "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby."

Following the disruption of campuses by World War II came the *post-war years*, extending into the early 1950's. This was a time of economic reconstruction at home, with the United States assuming world leadership abroad. Many veterans came or returned to college campuses — mature, adult, hard-working, sometimes hard-drinking, often married, with families. They looked back continually to their war experiences and were





Dr. Blackwell talks with students at a monthly fireside chat in the student center. Channels of communication between students and the administration and faculty at Furman are kept open through an open-door policy by the dean of students and his staff, easy availability of faculty members and frequent meetings between the president and representatives of the student body.

much influenced by them. It is difficult to measure the impact of this generation upon our colleges or upon the younger students who were non-veterans entering college straight from high school. But the climate of college campuses changed with this influx of older students whose values had been shaped by military service.

Now we can say that today's students are a part of the *revolutionary years* of the late 1950's and the 1960's. These college students are the products primarily of permis-

sive urban families of the post-war period. In a time of continuing economic prosperity, the affluent society has become accustomed to wall-to-wall comforts — a society which sometimes seems to have allowed success to replace significance. College campuses are crowded with automobiles. Beatniks have appeared in some places, affecting sloppy clothing, long hair, and beards. More and more young people exhibit rebellion against conformity. There is more open display of affection. The contraceptive

pill is freely discussed and on some campuses is even prescribed for an occasional unmarried student by the college health service.

In a period of international and domestic unrest over the uneven spots in Africa, Vietnam, Bogalusa, and Los Angeles, students seem not so much to be seeking a *place* in society as trying to *change* society. They have become closely identified with minority groups and underdeveloped nations. Youth itself sometimes appears to be a minority group asserting new

rights. Non-violent action is seen in "protest" on behalf of causes ranging from the international scene to the home campus.

REVIEWING THESE FOUR college generations one asks again, is the current college generation really different from those that have gone before? Certainly there have been changes in youth, with girls beginning much earlier to wear lipstick and heels, to date, and to marry. More young people drink and appear to have questionable moral standards. Respect for authority and an understanding of their own responsibilities seem definitely to have weakened among youth. As one demonstrator on the Berkeley, California campus put it: "We don't trust *anyone* over thirty."

And yet I believe that much in the present college generation is not new. Are not all adolescents "reaching out for independence and self-hood," as David Mallery has put it?

In an effort to put these many factors into a meaningful framework, I have a thesis: The current college student unrest results in part from the essential features of adolescence, in part from the social, economic and political temper of our times, in part from the climate of each campus, and is triggered by specific controversies concerning student rights and responsibilities.

Just now I shall deal with only one part of this thesis, *campus climate*. We need to determine how students, faculty, administration, and governing board can work together cooperatively to secure a proper campus climate so as to channel student energies and concerns into educationally useful activities. We need to work toward a proper balance between student freedom and responsibility. It may help if we examine some of the

relevant factors in campus climate.

For example, it makes a lot of difference whether there is a *feeling of identity and community* among students or whether there is an ubiquitous anonymity characterizing campus relationships. In a large university where it is possible even for a make-believe student to be registered, take courses, pass examinations, and proceed toward a degree, while in fact no such student exists, one can only wonder about the lack of personal relationships.

Now we know, of course, that small size gives no assurance of meaningful relationships between students and faculty, but a college in human dimension certainly makes this goal easier to achieve.

Again, it helps when the institution has a *clearly stated and clearly understood mission*. Here, I believe, church-related, liberal arts colleges have an advantage.

Furthermore, it makes a difference when *most of the students live on campus* and come to share in the *traditions of the campus*. The large urban university, with a high proportion of commuting students, has unique problems in achieving a feeling of identity and community among the students.



ANOTHER IMPORTANT aspect of campus climate is the extent of *concern for effective teaching*. As the intellectual ability of students increases, emphasis upon good teaching becomes more important to the students. In 1963 President Clark Kerr of the University of California made the following prophetic statement: "The undergraduate students are restless. Recent changes in the American university have done them little good—lower teaching loads for the faculty, the choice of faculty members based on research accomplishments rather than instructional capacity, the fragmentation of knowledge into endless subdivisions. There is an incipient revolt of undergraduate students against the faculty; the revolt that used to be against the faculty *in loco parentis* is now against the faculty *in absentia*." How true this statement was, President Kerr soon learned.

Here, again, small size of a college is no assurance of good teaching. But it is undoubtedly true that the great universities must emphasize graduate programs, research, and service activities. The college which sincerely wants effective teaching will demonstrate this, as does Furman, in the criteria used in faculty selection and in rewards for the good teacher.

Still another concern is how to achieve a campus climate with *proper balance between intellectual understanding and the ever present desire of youth for action* — one which will meet Immanuel Kant's dictum: "Thought without action is empty; action without thought is blind." Speaking before the Phi Beta Kappa Chapter at Harvard in 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson put it this way: "Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man."

Without it thought can never ripen into truth."

Even those college students who are most concerned with intellectual development and rational thinking are often equally concerned about the relevancy of what is being taught. Sometimes they wish to put their learning into immediate action—hence the success of the Peace Corps. Concern about current social, economic and political issues is an essential aspect of personal growth, especially in a democracy. While I feel that in college our students should not be propagandized for any extreme point of view, some student organization and promotion for legitimate causes is proper and is expected on our campus, for example, the recent raising of funds to provide blood for American soldiers in Vietnam.

FINALLY, ONE MUST seek to achieve a proper *balance between an authoritarian climate and one of permissive student freedom*. Removal of students who show unrest, who criticize, or who demonstrate for causes is seldom the answer. Neither is the argument that students should be freely allowed to have *any* learning experiences which they may desire. What guidelines can help the college in striking the proper balance? May I suggest several rather dogmatic positions.

The administration and student government must take a firm stand for law and order both in the community and in the college. Unless respect for law and authority is maintained, all is lost.

Next, the administration and student government should see that regulations and sanctions concerning student behavior are reasonable and clearly stated, and that they are firmly, consistently, and fairly

administered. Colleges are notoriously slow to change, and student regulations may become outmoded.

Next, care must be taken to avoid infiltration of the campus by extremist groups of any kind. This danger is real, especially in the large universities. Yet, this effort to control extremist groups must not be used as an excuse to deny diversity of opinion or freedom of expression on the campus.

One of the essentials in avoiding student unrest is to keep open the channels of communication between students and the administration and faculty. At Furman we attempt this through an open-door policy by the dean of students and his staff, easy availability of faculty to students, monthly meetings of the president's Student Advisory Council, monthly fireside chats with the president in the student center, and weekly meetings between the president and the editor of the student newspaper.

A trend discernible in many colleges is to allow students more of a hand in the management of the institution. Properly handled this will not be an invasion of the rights of the faculty, administration, or governing board but will provide students the opportunity to manage some of their own affairs and to offer advice on many other matters of their direct concern.

And in all of this, as more freedom, more information, and more opportunity for participation are given to students, there must be a continuing emphasis upon wise assumption of *student responsibility*.

THESE, THEN, ARE some of the factors in campus climate which I believe we must consider as we seek to minimize student unrest and at the same time provide the most meaningful learning opportunities possible. At Furman I believe we are in a reasonably favorable position in these regards. Student leaders are most helpful, and the vast majority of our students seem to have an understanding of these matters.

Certainly all of us agree that *the college is for students*. The student is the center around which all of our activities and efforts must revolve. Our aim is for the Furman graduate to have four years of intellectual, spiritual, and social development. Perhaps some unrest is a necessary concomitant of this development. But we can agree with President Thomas A. Spragens of Centre College when he said, "Protest alone is not enough . . . the processes of protest constitute only the pep rally and not the game itself."

