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Still fighting the good fight: An analysis of student activism and institutional response

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ABSTRACT

The current study employs content analysis of news coverage on recent campus protests (the University of Missouri, the University of Cincinnati, Harvard School of Law, and Ithaca College). Using the contingency theory of conflict management as a theoretical framework, the study sought both parties' (institution and student activist group) stances along the continuum of pure advocacy to pure accommodation. The study also examined whether recent student groups applied radical activist strategies, and if institutions employed conflict resolution strategies.

Results indicate both parties were advocating, with only institutions moving along the continuum from advocacy to pure accommodation. Students were found to execute radical activist strategies and institutions' responses were dominantly unconditionally constructive.

Protests addressing racial inequality during the past decade have consistently disproven the idea of a post-racial society. Demonstrations focusing on issues from police brutality to education reform have illuminated outrage and intolerance by various audiences. The protestors bring attention to new forms of racist acts that are not as pronounced as those in prior centuries. Scholars resolve that overt acts of past years are now hidden in systemic policy and procedures. These policies serve as vehicles for institutionalized, structured racism.

Such institutions include American colleges and universities. Historically, underrepresented students have not been reluctant to express their displeasure with inequities and mistreatment by peers and administrators. Birthed out the civil rights movement and the Higher Education Act of 1965, the first Black Student Union (BSU) was formed in 1966 with the purpose of demanding an accepting environment for black students (Rogers, 2006). The movement of student activism grew steadily through the 1970s and 1980s but its focus became less activism and more reactionary. A resurgence of the original BSU mission has begun, with students organizing and demanding respect while announcing grievances. In 2014, an activist group at Harvard Law demanded the removal of a seal bearing the crest of a viciously cruel slave owner, and in 2015, a Yale activist group demanded the firing of a culturally insensitive administrator (Wong & Green, 2016).

As more and more students protest, the resounding question becomes, how are administrators and change agents responding? Public relations strategies and practices in higher education are essential to effective dialogue and actions. This study will examine University administrators' responses to student activist groups and determine the efficacy of these groups.

1. Literature review

1.1. Activism

Student activism is certainly not a new phenomenon to academe or scholarship. Researchers have written about student activist

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engagement with focuses ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to the Occupy Wall Street movement (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; McCarthy, 2012). Public relations practitioners and theorists have examined the formation and efficacy of activist groups (Murphy and Dee, 1992).

Activist groups are defined as those whose primary function is to influence public policy (Derville & McComas, 2005). Activists' pressures have been noted as being the impetus for public relations departments' reorganization and restructuring (Grunig & Grunig, 1997, as cited in Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Long considered a threat to organizations, activists groups share a unique public relations parallel with the organizations they oppose (Grunig, 1992). They both have similar desired outcomes, and plan for an inevitable confrontation. It is then the task of public relations departments to identify and strategically respond to activists' goals and strategies.

Activist strategies are identified in five categories: informational activities- holding media interviews and news conferences; symbolic activities,- boycotts and protests; organizing activities- meetings and community outreach; legalistic activities such as filing lawsuits and testifying at hearings; and civil disobedience- trespassing and blocking traffic (Jackson, 1982). These strategies can be categorized further based on the type of organization that employs them.

Derville (2005) posits two types of activist organizations: radical and moderate. Radical groups practice more extreme strategies while moderate groups practice more reserved strategies. *Radical activist organizations* are a group of two or more people who come together to effect structural change to social environments. Radical activists utilize mainly "militant communication tactics such as vitriolic rhetoric, disruptive image events, actions that provoke violent backlashes, unreasonable demands, pressure against targets' accomplices, harassment, and sabotage" (p. 529). *Moderate activist groups* are less confrontational, and are not likely to demand changes to the normal policies and operations from organizations. These groups do not single out individuals or specific institutions, but rather ascribe fault to social constructs. These groups are more likely to practice informational, legalistic, and organizing activities whereas radical groups participate in symbolic and civil disobedience activities (Derville, 2005).

Activists with the intent of creating public awareness and favorable opinion need not identify themselves as radical or moderate, rather than focus on developing the appropriate strategy. Jahng et al. (2014) found audiences do not differentiate types of activists groups, but recognize both as activists. Their study also noted activists who utilized protests were viewed positively and audiences were more likely to share their events on social media channels.

While researchers have analyzed how activist groups identify themselves (Curtin & Gaither, 2006; Leitch & Davenport, 2006), this study will categorize student activist groups' identity based on strategies practiced during conflict.

Based on the information above, the following research question is posited:

RQ1: Do student activist groups employ radical activist strategies or moderate strategies?

1.2. Contingency theory of conflict management

Several researchers have challenged the excellence theory as being the most effective model of public relations (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Shin, Cameron & Cropp, 2006). The excellence theory names the two-way symmetrical model as the ideal model of public relations, thus positioning it as a normative theory (Grunig, 1992). The two-way symmetrical model practices managing conflict and promoting "mutual understanding instead of persuasion to its own ends" (Plowman, Briggs & Huang, 2001, p. 302). The symmetrical model is distinct from two-way asymmetry's use of persuasion to influence publics. Two-way communication can be beneficial because it keeps organizations abreast of audience needs but these types of accommodative stances are not always the best option to resolve crises.

The contingency theory focuses on how to manage conflict between an organization and its publics. The theory recognizes conflict as being a natural and positive force in the public-organization relationship; both the organization and its publics will have goals and values and the contingency theory makes suggestions on how these differences should be bridged (Shin, 2004; Shin, Park & Cameron, 2006; Shin, 2008). In effort to demonstrate the many stances that actually take place, researchers suggest that the strategic and conflictual relationships between an organization and its publics be placed on a continuum anchored by pure advocacy and pure accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997). Where the company lies within the continuum determines the conflict management and communication strategies the organization will employ. A variety of contingencies contribute to the selection of strategies, including trust, the issue creating the conflict, and top management support (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2010).

The position an organization takes on the continuum before it interacts with a public may also differ from the position it takes during the interaction (Shin et al., 2005). This change reflects several factors the organization must take into consideration before responding to activist publics. This change is also determined by strategies organizations execute in retort to activist strategies.

1.3. Conflict management

Expanding previously studied approaches to conflict resolution, Plowman, Briggs and Huang (2001) posited a mixed motive model of public relations practice that includes nine negotiation tactics: *contention* – includes one party forcing its position on the other; *cooperation* – both parties work together to reach a mutually beneficial solution; *accommodation*- one party partially yields on its position and lowers its aspiration; *avoidance*- one party neither pursues its own concerns neither the other party's concerns; *unconditionally constructive*-organization reconciles the strategic interests of both the organization and the public; *compromise*-identifying an expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties; *principled*-both parties hold to higher ethics that cannot be compromised; *win/win or no deal*- if no solution benefits both parties, then they would agree to disagree; and *mediated*- involves the use of a third party.

In relation to the pure advocacy/pure accommodation continuum, the negotiation tactics contention and principled fall nearest

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