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Julia Rubin
Roger Williams University

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Protest: A Teach-In

Faculty experts to present youth-led movements for social change in the U.S. since 1968



A scene from the student-led San Francisco College Strike of 1968.

September 19, 2018 | By Julia Rubin

BRISTOL, R.I. – More than once in the last several years, Roger Williams' waterfront campus has been the scene of peaceful, yet impactful dissent. Students have protested a lecture celebrating Christopher Columbus. They have gathered at the library to remember victims of the tragic shooting in Parkland, Florida and speak out against gun violence. They have laid down on campus concrete, signs with messages like, "We Can't Breathe," "No Justice, No Peace," and "Black Lives Matter," scattered amidst their chalk-outlined bodies.

"Freshmen were about 12 or 13 when Trayvon Martin was shot, so their lives are 'Black Lives Matter' lives," Laura D'Amore, associate professor of American Studies says, "Their lives are gun control lives. Their lives are 'Me Too' lives. They have grown up seeing how youth and students can make change."

D'Amore, however, has also heard students voice frustrations that their efforts were not leading to more sustainable change. She suggests they, and others, look to the past for guidance, thus she organized an upcoming opportunity, "[Protest: A Teach-In.](#)"

Expert faculty members, D'Amore included, will present lectures on five historical moments in which racist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic action reached a boiling point and young people fought back.

From the "Justice in the Classroom" event, a space that welcomed dialogue from students and faculty about their experiences on campus, to the creation of a Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at RWU, the university has responded to student suggestions for progress.

"When we understand the history, we can not only think critically about societal ills that led to them, but we can also study the effective mechanisms that have been used in the past to compel change," D'Amore says.

The movements covered in this teach-in include the San Francisco College Strike of 1968, 21st Century advocacy for trans equity, Native American environmental justice initiatives, AIDS activism of the 80s and 90s, and the 1976 protest against exploitation of the Yale Women's Crew Team.

D'Amore's presentation, "We're Human, and Being Treated as Less than Such': Exploitation, Title IX, and the 1976 Yale Women's Crew Team," shows just how much students can accomplish in the face of injustice.

The women's team "only had a trailer with cold showers at their site." D'Amore says. "They were practicing in the cold. And they were showering in the cold and getting on a bus and waiting for the men to come out of this beautiful facility, warm and showered off. They got to a point where it was too much."

Their awe-inspiring response would pave the way for countless women to have fair conditions in college athletics.

Assistant Professor of American Studies Aaron Allen will discuss another contentious, unprecedented protest. His presentation, "Our Survival is Non-Negotiable': Student Dissent and the San Francisco College Strike," will explore the longest student-led protest in U.S history, in which 1968 San Francisco State students demanded racial representation on campus. Allen cites San Francisco State as one of the biggest contributors to the making the field Ethnic Studies to be offered at campuses nationwide.

As a professor of this subject, Allen says, "I recognize that it was their activism that essentially led the way for me to do what I do."

Allen hopes this event will inspire students to see that they can fight against injustice and make an impact. He says that young people have unique energy and perspective. They can "articulate their feelings when something isn't right and feel heard in spaces they feel silenced."

Not only is this an important learning moment for students, but it embodies the very values upon which the university stands. As D'Amore notes, our namesake Roger Williams was a dissenter. He translated Native American languages to improve communication. He founded Rhode Island with the ideal of separation of church and state – revolutionary for his time. He was an advocate for inclusion, equity, and justice.

D'Amore says, "If we pick up on those kinds of values, then we must teach students how to engage in civil discourse." When people's voices are silenced or erased, when their lives are made smaller by the forces of oppression, "protest and dissent is one of the ways things change, and they don't change if you don't speak up."

The event will be held on Saturday, Sept. 22, 12-5 p.m. in the School of Law, Room 285. It is open to the entire Roger Williams Community. Students can attend one, some, or all of the presentations. Students will earn one merit point for attending three hours, and 3 merit points for attending all five.

The teach-in will feature the following five topics:

- **"'Our Survival is Non-Negotiable': Student Dissent and the San Francisco College Strike"**

Aaron Allen, Department of American Studies

Allen will discuss the contentious nature of this 1968 San Francisco College State College protest and how participants revolutionized racial representation for college campuses nationwide.

- **"'Trans is Beautiful' – Student Activism and the Push for a True Trans Tipping Point"**

Gabby Porcaro, Asst. Director of Queer and Trans Student Initiatives

This presentation will focus on 21st Century college student activism surrounding trans equity. Attendees will learn about the policing of trans bodies in public spaces, access to appropriate facilities, and access to safe and equitable health care.

- **"Environmental Justice and Tribal Sovereignty in the North American 'Sacrifice Zone'"**

Jeremy Campbell, Department of Anthropology + Sociology

Participants will learn of the important role student activists have played in the struggles for native environmental justice mobilizations over the past several decades. These include, but are by no means limited to, the Dakota Access Pipeline, Yucca Mountain, Alberta's tar sands, and Bear's Ears National Monument.

- **"'Just Drop My Body on the Steps of the Congress': AIDS and Political Mourning"**

Jason Jacobs, Assoc. Dean of General Education

Jacobs will discuss AIDS activism of the eighties and nineties, and how such protesters were fighting for the lives of all gay people, who were potentially vulnerable to government neglect and pharmaceutical company greed, and had to rely on each other as a community.

- **“‘We’re Human, and Being Treated as Less than Such’: Exploitation, Title IX, and the 1976 Yale Women’s Crew Team”**

Laura D’Amore, Department of American Studies

D’Amore will bring attention to a peak moment of sexist discrimination in athletics, which sparked a chilling and change-making student-led demonstration.

Roger Williams University community members can look forward to additional upcoming social justice teach-ins, with emphasis on dissent and civil disobedience.

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