



Righteous Fury: 1960s Black Student Activism at Harvard and Radcliffe

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Abstract

The black students at Harvard and other northern white colleges such as Columbia, Rutgers, and University of Pennsylvania would utilize black nationalist and militant organizational strategies in service of integrationist goals on campus. The black student struggles used the fiery rhetoric of nationalism, formed alliances with local community members of militant organizations, and thought of themselves as adherents of the nationalist ideology. They brilliantly and strategically exercised their agency by combining the two deeply embedded political traditions of radicalism and moderation in the course of the 1960s campus struggle.

The assassination of Martin Luther King on April 4, 1968 acted as a catalyst for the black student movement. Six days later, the students listed their demands, "Four Requests of Fair Harvard:"

1. Establish an endowed chair for a Black Professor.
2. Establish courses relevant to Blacks at Harvard.
3. Establish lower level Black Faculty members.
4. Admit a number of Black students proportionate to our percentage of the population as a whole.

Black students went on strike in the spring of 1969 when the faculty refused to institute a Afro-American Studies department.



Black women effectively embodied the increased radicalism of the time. On December 10, 1968, twenty-five student held a sit-in and outside rally at the Radcliffe President's Office. Mary Bunting declared that Radcliffe would institute immediate changes in its admission and hiring policies regarding black students, administrators and faculty.



Students utilized the black power fist, one of the iconic symbols of black nationalism, in order to push their educational reform agenda. The student posters from the 1969 strike exemplify their engagement with radical and progressive movements of the late 1960s.



Conclusion

The 1960s black student activists reached the height of their transformational power and brought a measure of racial reform through the university agreements in 1969. Although students exerted the greatest degree of power, they did not transform the university nor institutionalize their entire "Four Requests" platform by the decade's end. The student leaders had unapologetically reformist goals: more black administrators, an increase in the black student population, more black faculty hires, and the creation of an Afro-American Studies department. In the end, it was a combination of militant tactics and reformist goals that enabled black students to successfully lobby the Harvard faculty.

