

One Nation?

Minority student activists shatter the multi-culti myth

On Feb. 9, 1994, 100 Hispanic and environmentally conscious students marched up four flights of stairs to the Michigan State U. president's office.

From behind the room's 40-foot meeting table, the president faced the music. One room, one cause, one president and 100 students, demanding that the university join the national grape boycott — a movement designed to protest the harmful effects of pesticides on grape workers.

The president listened but refused to make any commitments. Tension mounted. One Hispanic activist slammed a bushel of grapes onto the onyx table in a rage.

More members followed. Pretty soon, grapes covered the table and flew through the air. One female activist began dancing on the table, smashing grapes with every pounding step. Someone threw a bushel at the president, who had lost all composure and called for an immediate end to the madness.

It was the grapes of wrath. It was anarchy in the board room. Most of all, it was a wake-up call.

Welcome to the world of minority student activism.

Today's college campuses are full of such stories. Growing activism among campus minority groups — whether based on race, religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation — is transforming the individualized '80s into group consciousness in the '90s.

Still, group activism can be as exclusive as it is inclusive. Some claim a group's strict concentration on its own issues often detracts from the diversity of a liberal arts education. Are campuses being Balkanized as students stick close to their own special-interest groups? Is the student body dead? Or is it alive in a diverse, individualized form?

"In the past, there have been issues that mobilized students outside of their own immediate interests, like the war in Vietnam," says Souad Dajani, assistant professor of sociology at Antioch College in California. "But because of the emphasis on things like cultural diversity on college campuses, the student struggle has been turned inward, away from social issues. They're trying to get a sense of who they are, of their identity, and also of their power."

On the positive side, Dajani says, "They believe in social justice and they want to change the world quickly."

The down side, Dajani explains, is that students may often get caught up in a world of narrow definitions and not see what they have in common with other people.

"They may be cheating themselves out of exploring connections," she says.

By Jeffrey A. Sklar, Michigan State U.

Greg Powers, a senior majoring in social justice at Antioch, has found himself in constant turmoil on the school's highly PC (which he calls "Political Cleansing") campus.

"I don't think it's bad that people with a lot of the same ideas hang out together," Powers says. "You would just think that they would want to explore other cultures and ideas to have a better understanding of the world. If you constantly surround yourself with what you already believe in, how are you ever going to learn anything about anybody else?"

James Heath, president of MSU's black student organization, AS ONE, disagrees. "The idea that you're missing out on something has no credibility, because we learn about everyone else in all of our classes," he says. "From 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., we are learning about cultures of other people. So from 7 p.m. on, we've got to be concerned with our own culture, or we'll get a totally one-sided point of view. We need to take the time to learn about ourselves."

Laura Shipler, training and project coordinator for the National Multicultural Institute, a research and consulting group in Washing-

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ton, D.C., says she glimpsed a different perspective when she spent a semester at Spelman College in Atlanta.

"I was one of four white students there," Shipler says. "I realized that when you are a distinct minority, you're interacting with people who are different from you all the time."

As a result, Shipler explains, it may be the white students who miss an opportunity to learn about other cultures when minorities retreat into groups.

Curt Shepard, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute's Campus Project, says that oppressed groups often feel a need to create a common agenda. "It's what makes them strong," he says.

Still, Shepard emphasizes that there is a looming threat of campus Balkanization when a lack of communication or understanding causes different groups to work against each other. "That's when it becomes necessary for us to focus not just on gay and lesbian issues. If you want people to support you in your efforts, you need to be willing to work on their issues and concerns as well."

Intolerance and misunderstanding among various

groups is a problem that plagues the spectrum of minority student organizations. Richard M. Joel, international director for B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation and president of the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, explains that too often people become myopic in their devotion to their cause. This may result in basing one group's legitimacy on the illegitimacy of others.

"We're all on edge," Joel says. "We're all waiting to see if the man or woman next to us is going to embrace us or slap us. I hate to quote Richard Nixon, but in his first inaugural address, he said, 'We cannot listen to one another until we stop shouting at one another.'"

"We should emphasize the positive aspects of our identity and our vision and not take the cheaper path, which is to unite a constituency by declaring a common enemy. That only builds walls, not bridges."

Although many white students may think minority issues don't concern them, Shipler, at the National Multicultural Institute, says true diversity includes everyone.

"Whites often feel that they should not assert their identity as a result of guilt, anger and/or responsibility," Shipler says. In order for the campus society to continue to function and grow, she says, all students, including whites, should make contributions toward diversity and see their own insights and experiences as valuable.

"I, as a white person, can contribute something, and I have a real responsibility to do so," Shipler says.

The lack of white student movements today also concerns Ernesto Todd Mireles, chair of MSU's Hispanic student organization, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanos de Aztlan (MEChA).

"The average Anglo student doesn't see a need to protest anything," Mireles says. "That should send some warning signs out to people if you're in college learning all that Western culture can teach you about freedom and democracy. If that doesn't move you to address some sort of wrong, it's really kind of scary."

"What does that say about society at large? That there's a group of people who just don't care? And if they do care, they're seen as these radical, fringe, strange people. It's really sad. What would people think of Thomas Jefferson these days?"

"He's the man who advocated the overthrow of the government by the use of arms. What would that make him today? That would make him a hunted man."

