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Encouraging Students to "Showcase" Their Activism

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Encouraging Students to "Showcase" Their Activism

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Shawne, a Fairfield University junior, and I, a Politics Professor, decided to write this piece together to explore the dynamics of teacher-student relationships when engaging in political action on our campus. We have worked together on many projects ranging from conference panels and presentations to "A Year of Activism: Communities in Action," one of the themes designed to frame programming and curriculum at Fairfield University during the 2009-2010 academic year.

Interrogating and exploring what we mean by action in the world, the fourth step in the Ignatian paradigm of education, frames this project that invites the Fairfield community into a dialogue about what we mean by "activism." Direct action focuses attention on how to enliven the intersection of our "living" in various communities through activism and our "learning" in classrooms and co-curricular contexts. "The Year of Activism" will conclude with the "Dare to Act – Act to Change" Communities in Action Summit on Friday, April 16, 2010. Students, faculty, and staff will showcase their activism, ranging from immersion trips and serving meals at homeless shelters to service-learning courses, for the entire campus community.

Political action, however, also involves students standing up for their beliefs that may put them at odds with administrators and other students on campus as Shawne explains here.

Although still somewhat of a "rookie" activist at 21, I am not a newcomer to grassroots organizing. My freshman year I ran, as a woman, for Mr. Fairfield, with the hope of energizing students to talk about gender, sex, and sexuality on a campus where such discussions just don't happen. Jesuit values such as "women and men for others" and the magis should inspire us to engage with hard questions and realities about sexualities that we might otherwise wish to ignore.

With this in mind, I decided that the time had come to take a stand against the pseudo-satirical column "He Said/She Said" that ran for years in Fairfield University's independent student newspaper The Mirror. This column was known for its degrading remarks towards women and hyper-masculine portrayal of men. The controversy about this column reached a boiling point for me in September 2009. The column described the "walk of shame" for female students who, after one-night stands, were cheered by male students as these young women exited the dorms and whom the columnist described as "victims" and "hood rats."

After reading the column, I made my way to the lower level of the student center and with the help of my residents created a banner reading, "Hey Mirror, We Will Not Be Victimized." We hung it over The Mirror's office space. I then sat in silent protest outside of the newspaper's office door with the same phrase written across the article itself. Soon, my residents joined me and before we knew it, fifteen people gathered around us, writing this phrase on the article and taping it to The Mirror's office windows. As the word spread, faculty, staff, and students appeared. During what transformed into a day-long protest, people ripped out over 170 pieces of this "He Said/She Said" column, wrote their response across it, and hung them up in protest. A mosaic of campus resistance to such oppressive portrayals of women resulted.

Shawne's political action represents how the entire campus can transform into a space where students, with the support and engagement of faculty, staff, and administrators, engage in political activism that extends beyond voter mobilization, student government, club participation, and campaign volunteering. This political activism aims to empower students to organize, strategize, and carry out direct actions that reach out to their peers on issues critical to them.

We explored this form of activism during the Campus Activism Workshop for faculty, students, and staff which was the "Year of Activism" kick-off event organized by Shawne and happened to coincide with the "He Said/She Said" controversy. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, co-authors of *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* (2005), facilitated a discussion with over thirty participants from all parts of the university who shared different perspectives about what it means to "do activism" in partnership with others that crosses lines between classroom and campus, living and learning.

Students conveyed the challenges of translating concern about an issue such as homelessness or human trafficking that they learn about in class or at a lecture into action. Without basic knowledge about how to take direct action, many students expressed that they simply give up and remain unsure of how to engage, which can result in frustration and even withdrawal from participation. Others shared the thrill of organizing events and actions. Faculty and staff spoke to challenges for them regarding the different demands on their time that include family responsibilities, research agendas, and busy travel schedules. They shared a deep enthusiasm for supporting student activism and raised questions about how best to do so in a way that provides guidance without assuming leadership.

Achieving a dynamic balance within the teacher-student relationship necessary to engage students in a range of political actions can be difficult. The key for us is the importance of employing the Jesuit notion of *cura personalis* that invites us to engage each other in all our rich diversity and complexity. We all have complex lives with many different demands that may allow us to engage in varying ways or to invite others to take our place. Sometimes we need to assume leadership and other times we need to support others in doing so. Understanding ourselves as teachers and our students from this perspective promises to open up the horizon of opportunity for direct action to advance social justice and peace well beyond our classrooms and campuses.

