

What the Fight About Confederate Monuments Can Teach Us About Academic Activism

This is my first piece in a series about activism in higher education. After all, college campuses have always been a place of activism in its many forms. In this series, I ask: Who can participate in activism, and how, and what dangers are there to us who do and what can we accomplish?

Activism and Employment Risk

Last NFL season, quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the playing of the U.S. National Anthem before a football game to protest state violence against black people in the United States. Many NFL fans and others grew angry at him for kneeling, arguing, among other things, that he was disrespecting the American flag, disrespecting the military (as though there aren't any black soldiers who have suffered state violence) and disrespecting the United States in general.

At the end of last NFL season, the 29-year-old free agent Kaepernick, who has led his team to the Super Bowl, was left unemployed. According to many, if not most, sports-writers familiar with the situation, he was blackballed by NFL owners.

In short, a person used his position to make a public statement about an injustice and lost his employment over it.

Lately, Kaepernick's protest has once again been in the news because NFL players are again kneeling during the anthem. This time, President Trump has had a lot to say about it. Trump's words about the protest—at public events and online—have been insulting and degrading. After Trump's insults, even more joined in the kneeling. Unfortunately, as others have joined in Kaepernick's protest, the original intent behind his protest has gotten lost in the shuffle—it has become a protest against Trump and for free speech rather than a protest against racial violence by the state.

Critics of #taketheknee have said that sports should not be a site of activism. They say athletes should "just play ball." But these criticisms get to the heart of what activism is and should be. Activism is, arguably, stepping outside of the expected parameters of your job or daily life activities and taking risks for something you believe in. Activism is doing more than is expected of you because you believe, strongly, that something needs to change. Colin Kaepernick's actions were the purest definition of activism.

My question is, when a person takes on the role of activist, must that person necessarily risk her livelihood?

Risks and Rewards of Campus Activism

This question leads me to activism on university campuses. A recent site of campus protest has been monuments to Confederate soldiers of the U.S. Civil War. Many students and faculty have worked to get these monuments removed from the grounds of their institutions.

Through activism, these monuments have also been removed from other public places, not just colleges and universities. But, as places of learning, colleges and universities present special challenges and questions—or do they?

On Sept. 7, *Wall Street Journal* columnist and conservative Peggy Noonan wrote a series of tweets about the current debate over taking down Confederate monuments, culminating in this epically bad take: "Then one side won, they

reconciled, the American experiment continued and we learned through this history. Keep 'em. Let it be. They are us."

First, "they reconciled" is an awfully sweet way to described the decades of horror that occurred after white politicians sold out Reconstruction. Those words gloss over lynching, the rise of the KKK, and Jim Crow. And, as Kaepernick was trying like hell to get people to see, we are not done reconciling, not at all.

Worse, Noonan's comments that these moments "are us," implying that they represent U.S. history, is inaccurate. The vast majority of Confederate monuments were not erected as monuments to the Civil War. They were erected decades later as a way to rewrite history. They are not historical monuments. [They are ahistorical monuments, quite literally.](#) As history professor Jane Dailey told [NPR.org](#), "Most of the people who were involved in erecting the monuments were not necessarily erecting a monument to the past, but were rather erecting them toward a white supremacist future."

It would seem that the moment has come to bring the monuments down. Take Duke University, for example. On Duke Chapel, which was completed in 1935 (70 years after the end of the Civil War, if you're counting), there was a statue honoring Robert E. Lee. Just recently, the statue was vandalized, and at first the school seemed unresponsive to removing it. Then, in secret, I started receiving private messages from people I know who work at Duke. They didn't feel that they could share information publicly, but they wanted me—a Duke alumna—to know that Duke was paying attention to the opinions of Duke graduates expressed on social media.

So I took to social media and began sharing my opinion about the Lee memorial at Duke, that it needed to come down, and why. Other friends and Duke alumni did the same. And only a couple of weeks later, the statue was gone.

Questions Raised

Why did my friends employed by Duke feel the need to ask for help in secret? Has activism in higher education grown limited these days—where faculty and staff feel that they have too much to lose?

Especially these days, when so many of our faculty no longer have the job security of tenure (and staff never had such protections), taking on an activist role can seem downright scary.

Then there is the issue of social media and the power it holds over institutions. Did Duke really wait until it had received a certain statistically relevant number of negative messages via social media channels before taking down the statue? Or was that just a rumor? Corporations certainly respond to being publicly shamed on social media—why not a university?

But, do we want our institutions of higher education to make decisions based on being dragged on Twitter? In this case, the choice was the right one. But what if the people doing the dragging are a bunch of Russian bots? Can we

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