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The art of activism: the history of UW SDS, past to present

By Anya Farwell The Daily

Feb 7, 2025

Protesting. For as long as I can remember, protesting has been part of the so-called “American culture.” Getting more airtime on news networks in recent years, protesting has stirred up a fair amount of controversy. From the Black Lives Matter protests during 2020 and onward to the more recent 2023 protests that shook college campuses over the Israel-Palestine conflict, protesting has turned into an art form in many ways, and specifically thrives on college campuses.

With the evolution of social media, protesting has changed. It wasn’t always as easy as uploading a social media post. Although that is one way to be involved in the ever-changing expression that protests have become, we have to look back in history with one question. What did protests look like fifty years ago, and what has changed about the art of activism?



SDS demonstration, probably inside Loew Hall, University of Washington, Seattle, probably 1969. Recorded by KOMO TV news camera. Courtesy of UW Special Collections.

Haller, Grant M.

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) has acted as the backbone to many Seattle protests over the decades. Originally established in 1960, SDS was labeled a hard leftist student organization, largely protesting the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War and the draft.

The anti-war sentiment echoed across America during this time, coining the most notable phrase “Make Love Not War,” now commonly seen on car bumper stickers or plastered on t-shirts. Before the establishment of the SDS, activism on college campuses was momentous, but with the start of the Vietnam War in 1955, the art of student activism changed.

Students were urged to take action with their fellow classmates in rallies and protests around campuses. Using their power as students to spread the movement with the young voices of America; at a time many deemed critical. Much like today, when getting young voters was so fundamental to the turnout of the election.

The UW chapter of the national SDS was established on campus in 1964, publishing the UW SDS Constitution soon after.

Joseph Airo-Farulla the UWSDS's first chairman, described the chapter as an “autonomous organization affiliated with a national group which champions civil liberties.” That year, the organization stated that they would focus their energies on Vietnam and the draft. They took strides to have their voices heard across campus with posters, leaflets, and a manifesto titled, “Vietnam, Democracy, and the Draft.”

Although “students” are in the SDS title, students were not the only ones taking part in the many protests and rallies organized around the Seattle area.

Most notably, a 1970 SDS protest outside the Federal Courthouse resulted in the arrest and charge of multiple UW students and alumni. “Conspiracy is Charged” the Seattle Post-intelligencer headline reporting on the protest read.

Among those arrested were Micheal Learner, a UW philosophy professor, and Susan Stern, an employee at the SDS headquarters in New York and a notable activist in the anti-war movement. A member of other prominent activist groups such as the Weatherman, and the Seattle Liberation Front, Stern was known throughout Seattle for her activism, usually leading her into conflict with Seattle police.

The arrest and trial in April 1970 introduced the world to the “Seattle Seven” for their protest of the Vietnam War. Stern and Leaner were both arrested and tried for conspiracy and inciting a riot in front of the Seattle Federal Courthouse. Stern and her colleagues were sentenced to six months in prison, but many of them were released early.

Stern and the SDS have turned into household names for some in the Seattle area, so what has SDS been up to since their infamous case?

UW SDS has recently been active on campus, most recently hosting a protest at Thomson Hall on Jan. 21. The protest supported transgender rights in response to Oliva Krolczyk’s planned [talk for TPUSA](#), a known conservative group on campus.

TPUSA is part of the legacy of the Young America’s Foundation (YAF), a right-wing group during the original days of the UWSDS. In many ways, TPUSA was the replacement for YAF, as the heart of the conservative groups on campus. Conservative or liberal, spaces for student expression evolve and adapt.

Despite activism being an ever-changing art form, SDS has survived through time. With the pitfalls of politics recently, SDS has persevered through the initial storm of conservatism.

As the year goes on, I can guess that we will see more of SDS around campus as they continue to urge the student population to promote their voice and believe in themselves.

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