

# Participation Does Not Equal Understanding

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Over the past few years, protests and rallies have become a defining feature of campus political culture. Societal issues unite students together with posters, chants and social media posts, and as such, participation in politics among students is easily visible. But, does this form of activism develop students' political reasoning, or does it simply appeal to a strong human desire to feel like they belong?

Some people celebrate the rise in activism as evidence of a well-educated generation. For example, Michael S. Roth, president of Wesleyan University, published an article titled "The Campus Protests Over Gaza Are All Part of a Good Education" (2024). In it, he explained that student rallies about the issue at hand—and rallies in general—are valuable because they help expose students to opposing views. However, engagement alone does not necessarily aid in one's ability to think critically.

Truly understanding nuanced political matters requires more than just awareness or participation. It requires a willingness to question one's own biases and evaluate alternative sources of evidence. These skills encompass critical thinking. The APA dictionary defines critical thinking as "a form of directed, problem-focused thinking in which the individual tests ideas or possible solutions for errors or drawbacks" (American Psychological Association n.d.). Campus political culture goes against these values and instead rewards performative engagement.

In many social settings, students experience pressure to quickly take sides on popular political

questions. If students do not adopt clear positions, they risk being seen as indifferent or even sympathetic to the opposing side. Thus, the social benefits of belonging to a political community or cause can discourage the slow, demanding process critical thinking requires. The social psychology concept of groupthink helps explain this dynamic.

Groupthink is "a mode of thinking that occurs when a group's desire for unanimity overrides realistic appraisal of alternatives," as defined by the psychologist Irvin Janis (Kretchmar 2021). In the "Political Psychology journal," Paul 't Hart, professor of public administration at the Utrecht University School of Governance, mentions an important additional aspect of Janis' definition of groupthink—an "excessive form of concurrence-seeking," in which preserving group unity becomes more important than careful reasoning and reaching one's own conclusion (Hart 1991). Hart continued by stating that these environments can create a skewed understanding of the world and lead to overconfidence in group decisions. On college campuses, this type of environment can push students toward rushed ideological alignment instead of conducting thorough research of complex issues.

The increase in political engagement among college students is not entirely negative. It also carries vital benefits, including an increasing awareness of national and global issues as well as encouragement among students to reflect on how they can make a

positive impact on society. However, engagement without true understanding is dangerous. When supporting a narrative becomes more important than researching important issues, the value of on-campus activism diminishes. The goal of getting a university degree isn't to merely express opinions. Rather, the goal is to create habits that foster rigorous thinking about the ideas one comes across.

The difference between awareness and understanding is not only important for college campuses. Democratic societies in general also need citizens who can evaluate evidence, address misinformation, and engage with people who do not hold the same views. When political engagement serves the purpose of belonging to a group above gaining a deeper understanding of the world, the result is a deterioration in these skills.

To increase critical thinking among students, society—and more importantly, universities—need to place greater emphasis on challenging our ideas. While classrooms are essential to higher education, they cannot counter the social pressures that dictate student political attitudes. Institutions, therefore,

should invest in ways to further incorporate structured dialogue across the political spectrum in campus programming. The result of this investment will hopefully be encouraging students to seriously examine political issues and opposing viewpoints.

Student passion is not the problem. It is actually one of the greatest strengths of campuses today. But that passion must come alongside the critical thinking that higher education should cultivate.

## References

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