

Get Up, Stand Up!

A Legacy of Student Activism at Scripps



BY DANIELLE DORSEY

ROOTED IN TRADITION

In 1968, when construction of a new humanities building threatened the campus olive grove, Scripps College students climbed the olive trees to thwart their demolition. It was one of many successful demonstrations during that era, and students and leadership eventually reached a compromise, digging up the trees and replanting them after the new building was erected. Eight of those olive trees remain in the humanities hall today and are used in various sustainability and environmental projects on campus.

The students who defended the olive trees were no doubt seeking to preserve the integrity of the campus, informed by their love for the College and its traditions as well as the incipient environmental movement.

When Ellen Browning Scripps founded Scripps College in 1926, she envisioned the campus as a place of great and lasting natural beauty, meant to inspire the pursuit of knowledge. But the students' actions can also be seen as preserving another of Ellen Browning Scripps' founding philosophies (one that underpinned all of her life's work)—her belief that action is key to achieving a more equitable society. Scripps never married or had children, instead choosing to focus her intellect, energy, and fortune on improving society through investment in public resources. In a 1919 speech to the La Jolla Women's Club, she encouraged her peers to be “combatants in world struggle for righteousness; as workers for the good of all.”

Ellen Browning Scripps' activist spirit still informs the character of the College; it attracts students who are engaged with the important social and political issues of their time and who have consistently

brought the institution along with them in their quest for “the good of all.” As Denison Ella Strong Library Director and Sally Preston Swan Librarian Judy Harvey Sahak '64 says, “From the very beginning, Scripps students have felt free—free to express their opinions and to stand up against what they felt was unjustified or bad judgment.” A student during the mid- to late 1960s and a faculty member since 1976, Sahak has seen issues evolve over decades at Scripps. “Whether it was the Vietnam War, women's rights, civil rights, or immigration, you name an issue, and there were students here advocating on behalf of it.”

INGENIOUS ACTIVISM

Since the 1960s, Scripps students have developed potent and creative methods for protest and dissent. Candelaria Devanie Dóñez '94 vividly remembers when students drew attention to the first Gulf War with a large display on Bowling Green Lawn. “We woke up one day, and it almost looked like Arlington Memorial; there were white gravestone markers, each one symbolizing the loss of 1,000 lives as a result of the Gulf War. The entire lawn was covered, you couldn't walk on it, and it was incredibly impactful.”

In 1993, students from The Claremont Colleges occupied Pomona College's Alexander Hall for two days. According to Dóñez, the seizure was the result of continued frustrations over a perceived lack of representation and support for students of color on campus. “There was so much going on internally and externally, as far as the riots and the war, and Alexander Hall was kind of the culmination of all of that. Students were just fed up.”

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Scripps student on campus, c. 1970
Courtesy of the Scripps College Archives

An illustration of a student with dark hair, wearing a purple t-shirt, holding a large white sign with both hands. The sign has the words "GET UP, STAND UP!" written in large, bold, black, hand-drawn letters. The background is a solid teal color.

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Ultimately, students felt they prevailed, as administration and staff began to work with them to revise hiring practices, institute aggressive affirmative action programs, and increase enrollment for minority and low-income students as well as improve dialogue and morale for those already on campus. The next year, students launched the campus newspaper *The Scripps Voice*.

According to Dóñez, *The Scripps Voice* was born out of students' continued desire to have a voice in administrative policies and decisions, even after the Alexander Hall protests had ceased. "To their credit," she recalls, "administrators did participate in that dialogue, and they frequently responded with letters to the editor."

With the advent of the Internet and social media, students have become increasingly more creative in getting their messages across. Just under two years ago, social media app Yik Yak began taking college campuses by storm. Yik Yak allows users to post anonymously; other users can see the posts if they are within a specific geographical range. College students often post anecdotes about things they see or hear on campus, allowing peers to chime in about these happenings without actually having witnessed them.

Unfortunately, some use the app's built-in anonymity as an opportunity to be malicious and harassing. At Scripps last winter, black students attempted to organize a series of mass die-ins at campus dining halls to protest the police killings of unarmed black citizens. They were verbally harassed and stepped on, and soon became targets for bullies on Yik Yak. Their original plan was to stage die-ins on all five Claremont Colleges campuses, but they ceased after the second demonstration, fearing for their own safety.

In response, The Claremont College's Office of Black Student Affairs (OBSA) launched a social media campaign and compiled the Yik Yak posts with the most disturbing racial content into a video. The video condemned hateful speech and showed students who were not directly affected by the harassment the severity and emotional toll it was taking on some of their classmates.

Students are split on whether social media does more good or harm in advancing social movements, but despite her mixed experiences, Black Lives Matter activist Tatissa Zunguze '18 remains hopeful. "Yik Yak has played a large role in my unwillingness to branch out and explore the 5Cs more because it has been very hostile and racist, and it's concerning because it offers anonymity so it could be anyone saying these things."

"At the same time, Zunguze recognizes social media has some merits. As I got more involved, Wanawake Weusi and OBSA ended up using social media in a way that was more empowering. I also have friends who share articles and their thoughts on Facebook, and it's encouraging to see people show support that way. It's also just a great tool for sharing information."

METHODS THAT ENDURE

One of the most visible protests to take place over the past year at Scripps College employed strategies that defined the civil rights movement. In May, black student leaders from all five Claremont Colleges campuses wrote letters to their respective administrators commenting on a perceived lack of support for students of color and demanding institutional change. The students then led a march and hand delivered the letters to each of their respective presidents, with more allies joining them until their number swelled to around 200 students.

Zunguze observes that while the OBSA Yik Yak campaign got students talking, the march got them directly involved. "It was large, and everyone was supportive. We had police follow us around, and the white students volunteered themselves to serve as a barrier in case violence broke out. We got to an intersection and blocked off an intersection for a minute, chanting the names of different black victims of police brutality." Since the march, Scripps students have met with President Lori Bettison-Varga and are beginning to set goals for the upcoming school year.

Student voices also played a prominent role in the Scripps Board of Trustees' decision to approve an admission policy that admits applicants identified as female on their birth certificate as well as applicants who self-identify as women. Last fall, students led campus forums, made presentations to board committees, and ultimately submitted a 500-signature petition to the board expressing the view that a women's college should be a place of inclusion, empowerment, and access to education for those experiencing gender-based oppression. The board voted in favor of the trans-inclusive admission policy in December, placing Scripps among the first women's colleges to take a position on this national issue.

FROM ENGAGEMENT TO IMPACT

Today, the victories of student activists are apparent in everything from Scripps' recruitment policies to accommodations for marginalized student groups. The Scripps Communities of Resources and Empowerment, SCORE, offers one example of the community's focus on social justice. The office provides organizational support to help student groups organizations promote social and political awareness. Over the past decade, SCORE has grown from a one-room office to a dedicated multipurpose space offering

speakers, workshops, and opportunities for dialogue, advocacy, and community building among students.

The benefits of this student activism extend far beyond the Scripps community. Empowered by a culture where policy reflects their perspectives, Scripps graduates go on to serve communities worldwide. Dóñez says, "Without a doubt, my time at Scripps and involvement in social justice activities during that time shaped who I am and raised my consciousness to the degree that brings me to this point now."

Though methods of protest have evolved, what remains unchanged is students' commitment to embodying Ellen Browning Scripps' mission and cooperating with faculty, staff, alumnae, and classmates to drive conversations forward, making Scripps' campus an environment where all are given equal opportunity to thrive. As Scripps alumna and civil rights attorney Karen Tse '86 observes, Scripps offers "a huge window of opportunity for us to be social activists, with a vision toward both action and implementation." ❁