



Inspiring Generational Change: AID's Role on Campus

by Kelsey Flynn, Global Leadership Intern, August 6, 2006

Today's university students are more connected to the rest of the world than ever before. They use online translators to access websites in foreign languages. They trade international music with their counterparts abroad. And they chat about politics with their peers around the world through online message boards. Students' unprecedented global interaction is exemplified by the steady rise in the number of Americans choosing to study abroad. In 2004, more than 191,000 Americans studied abroad, nearly tripling the 71,000 students abroad in 1992.¹ Students are also increasingly eager to learn foreign languages; 1.4 million American college students were enrolled in a foreign language class in 2002, an increase of 17.9 percent just since 1998.²

With so much international engagement, it is striking to hear today's students denounced for their lack of activism and overall apathy. To a generation who sees rallies and riots as black and white images of an expired time, it may seem as if the age of student activism has passed. But a closer look into local involvement and issue-specific activist groups reveals that student activism is actually on the rise. The difference between the generations is instead based on the way student activism is channeled, with passion among college students still potent. Americans for Informed Democracy has seized this new activism and internationalism with successful results.

Activism Past and Present

Activism in the 1960's and 1970's consisted of campaigns of unified support for a single cause. Students across the country gained widespread media attention for their massive rallies, marches and sit-ins around civil rights and the Vietnam war. These mechanisms were appropriate for mobilizing passionate, progressive, likeminded students on college campuses around issues of right and wrong and war and peace. But students today are less likely to see global issues in black and white terms, in part because their interaction with the rest of the world is so multi-faceted that they see many global issues from multiple perspectives.³ The advocacy approach has

limits among this population, which surveys indicate is more middle-of-the-road than past student generations.⁴ These trends suggest traditional advocacy may not be a good way to tap the interest of many student leaders who are globally engaged but unlikely to take stark positions.

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specifically tailored to students' interests and passions. One factor affecting this shift in activism comes from the interconnectedness of today's world; awareness of many international issues is prevalent in media and on college campuses. Many students today also choose to join organizations that represent their religious or ethnic background.⁵ In addition, today's student activists

emphasize local ways to get involved with important issues. Instead of symbolic rallies and marches, students use local involvement to rally behind national and international issues. Choosing concrete acts over symbolic statements, student activists have found great success. Students are putting emphasis on daily choices in a "think globally, act locally" approach to global issues.⁶ Students pressure their campuses to buy fair trade products, divest from Sudan, and become more environmentally friendly and self-sustaining.⁷ Now more than ever, students are channeling their activism by acting within their communities to create change internationally.

It is no coincidence that these same students who value making a difference through local involvement are increasingly choosing service work as part of their post-graduate experience. USA Today reported that this year Peace Corps received more than 11,500 applications and took 7,810 volunteers, more than 20% over the year 2000. Other students are choosing domestic ways to channel their activism and volunteerism. Applications for Teach for America in 2006 have nearly tripled since 2000. The same trend is consistent with applications for AmeriCorps*VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America)⁸. Clearly students are eager to engage international and domestic issues with the hands on, local approach that defines this generation of activism.

AID's Role in Activism

AID's approach to student activism moves alongside this generational trend. AID offers initiatives on a wide range of issues to fit students' specific interests and it focuses on how they can take positive action on that issue through education and action in own local community. AID hosts ongoing leadership retreats on specific issues from climate change to global poverty that provide students with a comprehensive package of leadership and messaging toolkits that train them to be effective organizers and advocates on these issues in their community. AID then helps these empowered students to coordinate engaging town hall forums and international videoconferences that connect communities to global issues and people with whom they often feel disconnected. With a toolkit for each of AID's initiatives, students can pick an issue and simply follow the step-by-step instructions on how to run a successful town hall meeting or international videoconference. The tools that AID provides have left many students with the skills to channel their activism further.

One student exemplifies the new activism through his work with AID. Yuri Beckelman, a graduate from Calstate University Monterey Bay and former class president, passionately cares about preserving our global environment. After attending a leadership retreat with AID, where he learned of AID's Local Environmental Coalition Building toolkit, he returned to his community to host an educational forum and to build support in his local community for the Urban Environmental Accords. The Accords are a seven year plan for local governments to improve the global environment by taking action locally. With AID's support network behind him, Beckelman led a successful campaign for the Accords, successfully obtaining Capitola Mayor Dennis Norton's signature.

Measuring AID's Effectiveness⁹

AID measures success in two ways: media coverage and generational change. Most Americans get their information about global affairs from the local television news. However, the local media typically only covers disasters--the famines, the earthquakes, the wars.

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Consequently, Americans who depend on the local news for international information tend to perceive the world as a chaotic place and Americans as trying in vain to end crisis after crisis.¹⁰ However, when the same media shows

footage of young Americans who are concerned about the rest of the world and who believe they are impacted by what happens on other continents, readers begin to see a different image of the world. For example, a recent Chicago Tribune headline about an AID event reading "Bringing tsunami home" emphasized the interconnectedness of American students and the tsunami victims. Likewise, the San Francisco Chronicle showed the interactions between students across the world in an article entitled "Students link with aid groups in Sri Lanka."

AID views such positive media coverage as an indicator of a more significant, more sweeping goal: generational change. In an era of extreme ignorance of international affairs among ordinary Americans who have an unparalleled amount of influence on the rest of the world, it is absolutely vital that the young generation lead the U.S. into a more global perspective. To that end, AID is transforming latent global interest into action by opening up mainstream channels in the community to concerned students. Ultimately, this network of globally conscious young people holds an unprecedented opportunity to "bring the world home," helping America to find its active, accountable role in an interconnected world.

Endnotes

Note: This paper is adapted from an earlier working paper by intern Meghan Tinsley.

¹ Open Doors Reports in 2002 and 2005 from The Institute of International Education.

² “American Students Flocking to Foreign Languages”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 Nov. 2003.

³ Harvard Institute of Politics’ Survey of Student Attitudes: The Global Generation. Executive Report, p. 6. 19 April 2005.

⁴ Hoover, Eric. “Student Groups Aim to Tap Interest in Politics,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* January 31, 2004.

⁵ “Student Activism Becoming More Personal, Yet More Global”, *National On-Campus Report*. 15 Oct. 2005.

⁶ “Student Activism Becoming More Personal, Yet More Global”, *National On-Campus Report*. 15 Oct. 2005.

Walton, Beth. “Volunteer Rates Hit Record Numbers”. USA Today. 6 July 2006.

⁷ Millenson, Dan. E-mail to Kelsey Flynn. 19 July 2006.

⁸ Walton, Beth. “Volunteer Rates Hit Record Numbers”. USA Today. 6 July 2006.

⁹ This section is taken from an earlier working paper by Meghan Tinsley.

¹⁰ See more on this at www.usintheworld.org.