

BUILDING REAL STUDENT POWER

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Young people have long been the vanguard of progressive politics. They need campus infrastructure to help them organize for the long haul.

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Chairs line the windowsill of Hamilton Hall, which was renamed “Hind’s Hall” by students at the Columbia University Gaza Solidarity Encampment to honor 6-year-old Hind Rajab, whom Israel killed alongside her family in Gaza. Photographs by Kholood Eid for Hammer & Hope.

Student movements have been essential to social progress in the United States for more than a century. Over the past year we have entered a new cycle of activism on college campuses. Students are standing up for the people of Gaza and defending free speech. They are fighting for voting rights, sexual and gender justice, and fair wages and workplace protections in higher education. They want to learn America’s true history in their classes, not a fabricated version created to absolve white people of responsibility for racism, slavery, and oppression, and they want to be able to study without being saddled with a lifetime of life-destroying debt.

So much positive social change has been launched by young people unafraid to act on their strong convictions. Many of them arrive at college open to experience, emboldened by the new freedom and independence the transition into adulthood offers, and eager to express their creativity. But as much as we should encourage students when they raise their voices for social change, spontaneous protests are no substitute for building long-lasting power. And right now, today’s students have very little organizing infrastructure to support them on the national front.

If progressives want to move national policy and win elections, they need young people to be in organized communities with one another. We aren't going to defeat fascism with one-off or single-issue protests and cherry-picked student influencers. What's needed is a resilient, autonomous organizing infrastructure that persists year after year, one that would help students to collaborate across institutions, building durable youth power at the local, state, and national levels. Conservatives have worked hard to prevent it by attacking the structures that cultivate student organizing in two ways over the past decade: policing students' speech and dismantling the power students have over campus budgets.

Students once coordinated with one another across school systems to organize for lower tuition and expanded Pell grants, to control campus budgets and participate in hiring decisions, and to lobby in the halls of Congress with students in their states even if they were enrolled at different schools. But in recent years, elected officials and university administrations have taken agency away from students in order to control the access and leverage they have to interrupt business as usual on campus. This has debilitated student governments and disempowered students, with consequences that extend far beyond the rules of hosting events on campus.

The broader progressive movement can't engage or hire new young folks with substantive leadership experience if we don't have the organizations that place them in roles that provide that experience. The Covid-19 pandemic dealt another blow to students. Without in-person mentorship to pass down institutional and strategic knowledge, every new class of students is left to figure out how to do things on its own. The pandemic shut down campus organizing and cut off leadership transitions for two years, leaving a gap in information and training. Picture new students who spent their first two years attending college on the computer, away from their new community. How would they learn what organizing is like if they never had the chance to meet other students face to face?

Students have returned to campus, but the organizations they depend on need attention. Unfortunately, the right may understand the importance of student organizing better than the left. The right has not just been attacking progressive student networks — it has been

investing in a countervailing campus infrastructure that empowers conservative students and cultivates the next generation of leaders and organizations to sustain its cause. It's time for those of us on the left to step in and build a brand-new national student organization that fights for progressive values and protects freedom of speech.

I understand the power of campus infrastructure because I am a product of the United States Student Association (USSA), which introduced me to the career I have today. USSA began in 1946 as the National Student Association (NSA) after American students met with 37 other student organizations in Prague, where the International Student Union was launched. It created a Student Bill of Rights, establishing 12 fundamental rights essential to the full development of the individual and to the fulfillment of every student's responsibilities as a citizen, including "the right to establish democratic student governments with adequate democratic safeguards against abuse of their powers." USSA became the largest student-run and student-led organization in the U.S. and the vehicle that cultivated power, community, and training for student leaders. (In 1967 it was revealed that the NSA, like many other Cold War-era groups ranging from the United Auto Workers to the National Education Association, received financial backing from the CIA, a fact most students and staff were unaware of. As a result of the exposé, the CIA's covert funding operation unraveled, and the NSA became even more radical.) In 2012, USSA represented four million college students across the country. It had full-time professional staff including a training director, a communications department, a development department, a field team, an operations manager, and student interns. It coordinated two national student conferences a year: one set the agenda and elected the organization's leadership for the year, and the other, always held in Washington, D.C., in tandem with a national student march, trained student leaders in how to conduct an effective lobbying meeting with an elected official. In between the national convenings, staff worked with elected student leaders to train them in organizing grassroots campaigns, recruiting and retaining new leaders, and running campus-wide electoral engagement drives. Staff hosted weeklong trainings on how to fill out campaign strategy charts and power-map decision makers, and those trainings turned into recruitment drives to find young leaders who would run for elected positions on campus, in their statewide

student association, and in the USSA. After graduation, many of those new leaders were recruited by progressive organizations to work across the country and continue to dedicate themselves to social justice organizing.

USSA helped create organizers who went on to become civil rights directors, field directors of labor unions, vice presidents of foundations, and political strategists running candidate campaigns on the state and national levels, historians, educators, business executives, lawyers, presidential appointees, and community leaders. The alumni of this giant network then mentored the next generation of student leaders in USSA. It was an organization rooted in leadership development, strategy and progressive policies.

More than 50 years after USSA's founding, I arrived at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I was a high-achieving, broke student excited to have made it to a four-year institution that had been home to the organizers and activists bell hooks, Huey P. Newton, Bettina Aptheker, and Angela Davis, among others. While looking for a work-study job, I went to an open house for the Student Union Assembly, our student government. In high school I had been the president of the Black Student Union but knew little about policy, good governance, or advocacy. I interned for the chair of the assembly my first year and in spring 2008, I was accepted into a slate of candidates endorsed by a large coalition of students-of-color organizations.

I grew close with the people I ran with. We discussed, debated, and finally agreed on a set of core values to use in our campaign agenda: putting students first, affirming that education is a right, and promoting democracy on campus. Students needed agency both to hold the campus administrators and the school system's president accountable and to ensure that the student government truly belonged to the students. Whether fighting for affordable tuition or against hate crimes on campus, we had to target the decision makers, whether they were the administrators, the chancellor, or the state and federal governments. We were clear that we weren't student government officers to throw events and be complicit — we had authority and used it.

But we had a lot of learning to do. We wanted to create a platform that would explain our plans and help recruit other students to lead with us, and we had to practice transparency,

teamwork, and accountability to accomplish that. We had to support one another while discovering our own strengths and weaknesses as leaders. Student governments at other campuses were negotiating similar demands. We were often fighting close to the same battles, and where we differed it inspired us to advocate for change in other ways. We communicated through USSA, and that structure enabled us to be students and leaders at the same time, part of a national network that magnified our impact.

As members of USSA, we elected the national board of directors and officers, and I was elected in 2008 chair of the National People of Color Student Coalition. After I graduated from college in 2011 I was elected vice president of USSA and in 2012 I was president. When the Higher Education Act was up for reauthorization or the House Appropriations Committee was considering funding for higher education and public service, we lobbied Congress as the official voice of college students nationwide. We fought for fee freezes, women's safety and reproductive access, campus climate sustainability, and better financial aid, including Pell Grant increases and a more accessible FAFSA. We collaborated with national labor unions to build alliances with workers on the local level and to fight for accountability. As part of a national voter registration drive in 2008, we raised money to pay students to do electoral organizing; those organizers then became campus leaders who could institutionalize USSA priorities beyond the election. We built coalitions on campus to fight for protections against hate crimes. In 2008, student leaders were some of the first staff and board members of United We Dream, which spearheaded support for the federal DREAM Act and organizing for comprehensive immigration reform.

Globally we were the official voice for students in America, alongside the European Student Union, the African Student Union, and National Student Union of India, to name a few. We learned that in Finland and Brazil college was often free and students sometimes even got stipends to cover living expenses. I left the U.S. for the first time to keynote the Canadian Federation of Students' 63rd Annual National General Meeting. USSA hosted officers from the Confederation of Chilean Student Federations in 2012. Later that year President Obama invited USSA to the Oval Office to discuss affordability

issues in education. I'll never forget how that moment made my family feel. It made me feel like I was making a difference and on the right path.

Everyone has a slightly different explanation for why USSA collapsed in 2016. As a co-chair of the foundation board at the time, I know it was a combination of factors, but more significant than the typical intra-organizational disputes were the external attacks. When right-wing politicians and conservative activists successfully challenged student governments' power to lobby, they defunded the statewide student associations that contributed the most in membership fees to the national organization. Without funds from membership dues, USSA could no longer operate. Over a few years of financial decline, the staff left to find other work, student leaders graduated, and there was no transition to bring in the next year's leadership. USSA wasn't able to fundraise enough money to fill the budget gap. The organization shut down, but the foundation continued to operate to manage closing out the bills, turn in funding reports, and file taxes.

What has happened to progressive student governments across the country reflects what has happened in state and national politics more broadly. A state statute governing the University of Wisconsin system, first adopted in 1974, stipulated that students "shall be active participants in the immediate governance of and policy development for such institutions." But in 2015, a budget signed by the notorious conservative former governor Scott Walker changed the statute's wording to downgrade students to having "primary responsibility for advising the chancellor regarding the formulation and review of policies concerning student life, services and interests." A document that once empowered students now strips them of their agency.

While USSA was fighting for economic and social justice and to make education a right for all, conservatives were busy trying to undo progress and make education a privilege for the few. When Charlie Kirk and Bill Montgomery founded a nonprofit organization called Turning Point USA in 2012, the stated mission was to "build the most organized, active, and powerful conservative grassroots activist network on high school and college campuses across the country." The website now boasts "freedom chapters" at more than 3,500 campuses. The Guardian reported Turning Point's revenues jumped

from \$4.3 million in 2016 to almost \$39.8 million in 2020. In comparison, USSA received less than \$100,000 in contributions in 2018, the year it closed down. Similar to how the right has used litigation to limit the ability of organized labor to collect union dues, conservative groups work to undermine student power by challenging the use of student fees to fund the student government budget. Just a handful of students, bolstered by conservative networks, could object to the student government sending students to D.C. in support of the DREAM Act and prevent that trip from happening, for example. While progressive groups are starved of student fees, Turning Point rakes in cash from shadowy donors and institutions such as the Heritage Foundation.

The strategy to dismantle student organizing has two prongs. First, it empowers conservative students to build their own organizations and to question the premise of student government itself by claiming that those groups can't represent all student issues fairly. When the student government advocates for reproductive freedom and inclusive health care for queer communities, pro-life and homophobic students might challenge the student government's ability to be the official campus student voice. In other words, as conservatives rail against racial diversity, they cynically call for ideological diversity, framing themselves as the true victims of discrimination and marginalization on campus. Second, it challenges the way student governments disbursed funding, drawn from the fees students pay every year. Lobbying from the libertarian Goldwater Institute in Phoenix inspired 2013 legislation that would have prevented student fees from supporting the Arizona Student Association (ASA). Goldwater Institute objected to the fact the ASA had backed a ballot measure that would have raised taxes to fund public goods, including education and health care.

USSA's statewide student associations were challenged and lost critical funding elsewhere across the country. United Council in Wisconsin, established in 1960, lost so much funding that it had to shut down in 2016. In 2023, the University of California Student Association was forced to enter a memorandum of understanding with the school system that limits its independence in return for additional financial support. In October 2024, the Oregon Student Association declared that it "faced challenges related to our

organizational structure and funding mechanisms which have made it increasingly difficult to maintain sustainable operations” and closed its doors after 49 years.

Attacks on student power are escalating in response to students protesting the ongoing genocide in Gaza and calling for divestment from Israel — and they often have bipartisan support. In April 2024 Katie Hobbs, the Democratic governor of Arizona, signed HB2178, which allows students at state universities to choose which campus groups their student activity fees support, over the objections of the Arizona Student Association. The bill was introduced by Republican Rep. Alexander Kolodin, an attorney who worked with the Trump team to try to overturn the 2020 election and who is rated a 97.44 out of 100 by Turning Point Action, Turning Point’s electoral arm. Kolodin stated that he introduced the bill because he wanted Jewish students to be able to opt out of funding groups promoting Palestinian solidarity. Mother Jones reported that dozens of schools have implemented new “expressive activity” policies “effectively banning many forms of protest,” including encampments and the use of sidewalk chalk.

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My entire career benefited from my time in student-run organizations. Over the six years I spent at USSA, my peers shaped and tested my leadership, training experience, relationships, and values. Being in student government was not a hobby — it was a boot camp that taught me organizing and gave me community. We have to do something about the state of student organizing, and we need to do it now. We can’t continue to depend on spontaneous demonstrations and siloed issue-based advocacy, leaving student engagement to big national nonprofits that mobilize but don’t organize. This is why I have joined a network of people now working to bring back a new national student organization.

In April 2024 a group of students met in Washington, D.C., to learn USSA’s history and begin advocating for its return. Since then, every other Friday they have gathered virtually to discuss three things: winning debt-free college, protecting freedom of speech, and building an organization that will serve as a national student body and voice. Nine statewide student associations are now working to recruit campuses in other states. We’re

still going to have to figure out the financial challenges, but that won't stop us from building relationships across school systems and fighting for the right to a quality education for all.

There are plenty of ways to mobilize students and engage them in advocacy, but the best way to build student power is not seasonal, conditional, or single-issue. It is relational, strategic, hard, exciting and student-run and student-led. If the progressive movement truly believes in the power of the people, then we must help students regain that power by building robustly funded organizations able to train young people in leadership on a mass scale and by protecting their freedom of speech. Only then can we guarantee the success of our movements and give democracy a fighting chance.

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