

Module 09: The 1960s: Who Won? Student Protest and the Politics of Campus Dissent

Evidence 21: Gail Stagg, "Students protest Council's changes," May 1971

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Introduction

One year after the student protests of May 1970, VPI student activists organized a memorial rally for the students killed by National Guardsmen at Kent State University. The campus response was dismal at best. Only three out of the eight scheduled speakers showed up at the event, while only approximately 150 students attended. In just twelve short months, it seemed that the student protest had lost its momentum, or, as this front-page article from *The Collegiate Times* suggests, simply moved in a different direction. The "open door" policy referred to below belonged to a larger set of university policies for student life. Under the "open door" regulation, students could entertain members of the opposite sex in their dorm rooms, but only if doors remained open. Although quite a bit looser than previous *in loco parentis* policies, which placed universities in the role of surrogate parents and generally prohibited mixed-sex dorm-room socializing, the new regulations appeared far too restrictive for VPI students (like their cohorts at colleges and universities across the nation) to accept without a fight. As you read the article below, place it within the context of the previous year's protest activities and the meager attendance at the memorial rally described above, which occurred less than three weeks before the demonstration described below.

Questions to Consider

- How does the letter characterize students' priorities?
- Why, in your opinion, might it have been easier to organize students around personal lifestyle concerns than around overtly political objectives?

Document

Students protest Council's changes

To the chant of "One, two, three, four, we don't want your open door,"

approximately 1000 students congregated on the drill field Monday night in the first large rally of spring quarter.

The rally was called to disseminate information and to protest changes of University Policies for Student Life for 1971-1972, that were enacted Monday by the University Council.

The rally convened with a statement by Fred George, SGA [Student Government Association] President: I understand you people are pretty upset, Sandy Hawthorne, past SGA president and the only student member of the University Council spoke, explaining the actions of Monday's University Council actions concerning Student Life Policies, Hawthorne pointed out that regulations for student life at Virginia Tech are "the most conservative in the state of Virginia." Concerning the Council's action's Hawthorne stated that. "The University Council has moved ahead about thirteen years to 1984."

He explained that a registration system for room visitation has been enacted for next year, according to which a dorm resident would be required to sign in any guest of the opposite sex during open house.

In response to questions on what alternative the students could offer to the University Council concerning open house, Hawthorne stated that he advocated the revision presented by the Student Life Committee of the student senate and approved by the Commission on Student Affairs, which proposed that those University regulations which conflicted with the civil codes of the state be eliminated.

"We don't plan to comply with any more dorm regulations...we dislike," Hawthorne went on. He also referred to University Council's adoption of a no knock policy for entering student dorm rooms.

Concerning the University Council's decision to reserve the University's right to suspend a student who is convicted on narcotics charges whether on or off campus, Hawthorne stated, "I know no one at Virginia Tech smokes dope."

In response to a question relating to his suggested method of reversing the Council's decisions, Hawthorne proposed various devices such as letters, phone calls, personal visits, and "any means to constructively convince the

University Council, that's what I think."

He added that he did not want to limit any creative actions by individuals, however. He also noted that another rally is scheduled for Wednesday night, by which time more information and copies of the revisions can be distributed to students.

Copies of the 1970-71 university Policies for Student Life were then thrown into the crowd. Hawthorne then explained that the copies would be burned and thrown on that "trash heap- Burruss Hall," [referring to the university administration building] to show University Council that "no student on this campus likes what they did."

As the crowd moved to Burruss, the pamphlets were burned. Throwing the flaming booklets resulted in a small fire in front of Burruss that was extinguished by students. A sign reading "Shut doors or shut Tech," was displayed on the front door of Burruss.

The students then lined the streets in front of Burruss, obstructing traffic for a few minutes. At one time, an unoccupied car was rolled into the street, but it was immediately removed by a group of students.

After a short stop in front of Squires Student Center, the crowd took to the streets, downtown. Town policemen directed traffic away from Main Street. At the intersection of Main and Roanoke streets the majority of students sat in the street. However, the "sit-in" lasted for only a few minutes before the students moved back toward campus.

In the process of the street rally, windows were broken at First National Exchange Bank of Blacksburg, Neily's Bookstore, and Hummel's Jewelry. A crowd stood and watched after a burglar alarm was set off as a result of the damage to Hummel's display window.

The crowd diminished, and a somewhat smaller group returned to Squires [student center] to consider further actions. About one hundred people hiked up to Shanks dorm, apparently to stage a dorm-in. However, the dorm was locked and well guarded by resident advisors when they got there. A second floor window was broken as the crowd surrounded the dorm.

Gradually, the students drifted away in many directions.

Source:

Gail Stagg, "Students protest Council's changes," *The Collegiate Times* (26 May 1971), 1.