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## The Power Complex: The WSU System's Response to Dissent in the Late 1960s

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### ***Abstract***

In the late 1960s, liberal and radical students enrolled in the Wisconsin State University (WSU) System coalesced into organizations to challenge the policies of the System's administration. One of these liberal-left organizations was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a national student organization known for confronting educational and political establishments. In order to prevent SDS from creating dissent on their campuses, WSU administrators established new policies that prevented SDS from being recognized and then used these policies to create guidelines that gave the administration greater control over student life in general.

Small numbers of African American WSU students also rebelled between 1968 and 1970, causing a systemwide crisis. After racially based vandalism and violence occurred on several WSU campuses, the administration bypassed traditional disciplinary practices and redefined due process within the System. As a result, the administration expanded its disciplinary authority, and ethnic minorities were left with minimal access to due process. By the end of the 1960s, the administration's reactions to these events had facilitated significant growth of power for the System's administrators.

### ***Introduction***

By the end of the 1960s, America's political landscape had been irrevocably changed by dissenters throughout the nation. In many ways, Wisconsin was a key battleground in the fight between conservative traditionalists and advocates of a new way of thinking. Nowhere was this battle more apparent than in the Wisconsin State University (WSU) System. At the end of the decade, WSU students of divergent cultures began to react against what they viewed as an unjust system. These students formed their own separate coalitions and fought these issues, both through established

channels and through unorthodox means. Confronting these forces was an established hierarchy of power headed by individual university presidents and a resistant Board of Regents. The administrators of the WSU System used all of their power in an attempt to maintain or exceed traditional standards of administrative authority in response to the students' struggle. In order to maintain complete dominance, System administrators manipulated, enlarged, and consolidated their already significant power in an attempt to become the supreme authority within the System.

### ***An Attack on Dissent***

In the late 1960s, student activism on college campuses had become a national concern. At the beginning of the 1967–1968 academic year, college administrators across the nation were witnessing student-inspired events unfold with a ferocious intensity. In October alone, the anti-war movement at the University of California-Berkeley staged a highly publicized “Stop the Draft Week” in nearby Oakland, and a national coalition took its protest straight to the Pentagon (Isserman & Kazin, 2008, pp. 192–193). Closer to home, radical and moderate students alike sat-in at the University of Wisconsin in Madison to protest Dow Corporation's campus interviews. The results of the protest were bloody and gained nationwide attention while placing Wisconsin institutions of higher education under the watchful eye of the state legislature (Maraniss, 2003). During this period, the university system in Wisconsin was separated into two groups, each with its own administrators and Board of Regents: the more prestigious University of Wisconsin System, and the larger, more rural system of the Wisconsin State Universities (Trahan, 1976). By the middle of the 20th century, the WSU System had started to transition from being a system of locally oriented teaching colleges to developing into a system of nine universities offering liberal arts degrees (Trahan, 1976). However, despite the growth, the administration and governing Board of Regents still seemed to prefer a traditional, ordered atmosphere and a distinct distaste for change.

The one student group that clearly held the attention of the regents was Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). By 1965, SDS was “the best-known radical group in the country” (Isserman & Kazin, 2008, p. 179). The regents were aware of this, and in 1967 they sought to solidify their stance on SDS's student radicalism. In February 1967, President Gates of Wisconsin State University-La Crosse denied the local SDS chapter a charter at the university, a decision that was affirmed by the Board of Regents in its March 10, 1967, meeting (Board of Regents, March 10, 1967). Soon after, the La Crosse SDS chapter filed a lawsuit against the university and the regents, instigating a legal battle that would last more than a year (Kopp, 1967; McPhee, June 6, 1968). During this period, Regent John Dixon of Appleton, Wisconsin, crusaded against the group with zeal. In a message to regents, presidents, and the Education Committee, Dixon mounted a blistering attack against SDS. He stated that “the S.D.S. has emerged in this country as a disruptive, destructive, demonic organization, dedicated to violence, committed to political revolution, and pledged to complete a student take-over of administrative control of our colleges and universities” (Dixon, 1968). To supplement this information, E. L. Wingert, a lawyer retained by the board to assist in legal issues, compiled 13 pages of handwritten notes about SDS articles, documentation, and

statements. These notes also included the phone numbers and addresses of the Appleton detective departments and FBI special agents (Wingert, n.d.).

While the thought of an SDS presence on WSU campuses concerned the regents, they were able to use the situation for their own benefit, increasing the power of the System's administration. After the district judge ruled in favor of the university and affirmed that a president could deny charter to student organizations, Wingert and Dixon co-wrote a policy confirmed by the board as Resolution 3161 during its June 21, 1968, meeting (Board of Regents, June 21, 1968). The resolution states, in part:

It is...the stated policy of the Board of Regents of the Wisconsin State University System to refuse to approve, recognize, or encourage any disruptive, subversive, or anarchistic organization or activity...having such violence or disruption as an objective or likely consequence. The authority to implement and administer this policy is delegated to the presidents. The presidents may seek and welcome assistance, suggestions, and recommendations from faculty, administrative staff, or students. The obligation for the final decision at the University, however, rests with the President, who in turn is responsible to the Board of Regents. (Board of Regents, June 21, 1968)

This statement was a significant change from the due process procedures then conducted on the nine campuses. While this policy did not negate the normal process of obtaining a charter for a student group, which required an approval from the student legislature, it did create a systemwide policy that gave the campus presidents the power to deny charter based on their individual opinions of the group (Munns, 1968). Furthermore, the last clause of the statement implied that in these cases a president's decision was subject to the scrutiny of the regents, therefore giving the Board complete control over which organizations were recognized by the institutions. This factor was exemplified by a July 18, 1968, letter to the presidents from Eugene McPhee, the WSU System executive director. The letter determined that, according to his interpretation of the above resolution, the recognition of SDS by university presidents was contrary to board policy. Thus, a systemwide ban was created for SDS.

Even as the regents were consolidating their power using this policy statement, a new policy that would prove to be much more pervasive grew out of the fear of radical groups. Less than 2 months after the La Crosse SDS chapter began legal proceedings, the regents were discussing the creation of a Uniform Student Conduct Code for the entire WSU System (Board of Regents, July 13, 1967). WSU administrators cited protests in 1967 as the reason for their desire to create the code (Hinkley, 1967). In August, the board initiated a plan to acquire recommendations from the entire university community to be examined by the WSU Council of Presidents and the Board Education Committee (Board of Regents, August 17, 1967). Student, faculty, and administrative groups submitted recommendations in the following months to work out a mutually agreeable code. However, on December 1, 1967, the regents voted for a resolution approving a rushed version of the Conduct Code, despite protests by the Chippewa Valley Civil Liberties Union and the United Council of Student Governments (Board of Regents, December 1, 1967).

Across the state of Wisconsin, conservative groups, such as the Family Life Education and Marriage Counseling Committee, applauded the adoption of the code

(Bruening, 1967). However, some groups were less pleased. In an editorial by *The Racquet*, a student newspaper in La Crosse, the writer labeled the code “ambiguous” and “in violation of student rights” (*The Racquet* Staff, 1967). The article expressed concern that the Conduct Code subjected students to double jeopardy. Their primary concern was with a line that stated, “Students are subject to such disciplinary action as the university may consider appropriate, including expulsion for breach of federal, state, or local laws and university rules and regulations, both on or off campus” (*The Racquet* Staff). Throughout the System, students argued that the clause allowed the universities to initiate administrative discipline for off-campus activities, even if civil or criminal action had been taken by law enforcement. *The Racquet* editorial noted that the line was “rejected by the student government of every school in the system,” yet the regents had shown little concern (*The Racquet* Staff).

With the creation of the Student Conduct Code, the Board of Regents undeniably broadened its base of power to control student activities outside of the campus. However, by showing a lack of concern for the student governments’ opinion, the regents seemed to indicate that students had little influence in policy decisions that directly affected their lives. To ensure the strength of this resolution, the regents considered a more restrictive version of the code a month later. In violation of a bylaw stating that a notice of proposal must be given in advance of the meeting, they adopted the new conduct code without consulting any student organizations (Board of Regents, January 18, 1968; Wingert, January 30, 1968). By the final approval of the code, the regents had begun to exhibit distinct tendencies of consolidating power and disregarding the opinions of the WSU System community.

### ***A Clash of Culture***

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the almost universally white WSU System began to step up efforts to enroll minority students. In November 1967, the Office for Civil Rights, a national bureau, began collecting racial statistics for all colleges receiving federal aid, an action that may have prodded universities to enroll more ethnically diverse students (Arbeiter, 1967). This new emphasis on enrolling minority students coincided with individual university recruiting policies. Sociologist Richard Trahan (1976) noted that in the mid-1960s administrators from Wisconsin State University-Oshkosh (WSU-O) agreed to begin recruiting “disadvantaged” students from urban poverty areas, such as those in Milwaukee and Racine. This eventually led to the formation of the Advisory Committee for Culturally Distinct Students (ACCDS), which initiated a program to provide “a flexible admission and probation policy, special summer orientation and pre-registration, [and] a counseling laboratory staffed by faculty members and volunteer students” (Coordinating Council for Higher Education, n.d.; Trahan).

Despite the good intentions of certain administrators in Oshkosh and across the System, the situation for black students remained challenging. The institutions showed some advances in recruiting, but once the students arrived, they found little guidance. James Bealer, dean of students at Oshkosh, expressed the opinion that many recruited black students “used their loan money to buy clothing, alcohol, parties, etc.” rather than pay tuition (Bealer, 1968). Coming from poverty-stricken areas of Wisconsin, these students had little experience with the mechanics of a predominantly white bureaucracy. With little experience in allocating financial aid, the students were

arguably less prepared than middle-class white students to handle this new financial situation. In addition, many financial administrators were reluctant to assist these students. Maurice Spitler, financial aid director for WSU-O, felt that there was no problem using “self-help programs” because the students should have a “personal financial stake in their education” (Spitler, 1968). Sandra McCreary, a black student at WSU-O, described Spitler as having “a way of making each one of the black students who went into his office feel like they were begging” (“Racism—As Different,” 1969). Administrators like Spitler forced unprepared students to accept work-study jobs that limited their hours of study, placing them at a distinct disadvantage. At the same time they were dealing with institutional difficulties, these students also experienced racism from the local community. In a *Milwaukee Journal* article, McCreary cited many examples of prejudice in Oshkosh, including hostile whites who shouted “nigger” and instances where she was “stared at in an Oshkosh Department Store” (“Black Students,” 1969). Struggling with financial assistance, unresponsive administrators, and a hostile community, these students felt trapped.

During October 1968, black students at WSU-O began to publicize their grievances. The Black Student Union (BSU), a coalition of black students on the Oshkosh campus, created a list of demands to improve the school for black students and gave them to James McKee, a black coordinator for the ACCDS program (Trahan, 1976). These demands made their way to President Guiles, the administrative head of the campus (Trahan). A statement headed the list, saying, “What Black people in America now need is not exposure to and absorption of traditional European academic ideas, but rather preparation in fields directly related to our own lives and especially designed to better prepare us to improve our lives and the welfare of our people” (Trahan, p. 136). The students were asking for a college experience that would relate to situations they knew and the problems that affected them and their families. Traditional liberal arts education, based predominantly on European beliefs and concepts, had little meaning for black students whose backgrounds and experiences were vastly different from their white counterparts. The BSU demanded an Afro-American Center, black professors and courses, and a black student fund to obtain black speakers, black literature, and to finance the center (Trahan).

In response, the University attempted to meet these demands, but policy makers had little enthusiasm for change. Three classes were added dealing with minority students; however, the university made little headway in recruiting black faculty (Advisory Committee for Culturally Distinct Students, November 21, 1968). For example, Dr. Justin Obi, one of the few black employees of WSU-O, related in an open letter that a black professor he recommended was not hired because he had not earned his doctorate yet, even though many white professors in the department also lacked this degree (Obi, 1968). In addition, the university authorized the allocation of an old house for an African American cultural center. Although temporary, even the university admitted that the house was in “poor condition” (“Racism—As Different,” 1969).

The black students at Oshkosh considered the response unacceptable, and tensions boiled over on “Black Thursday,” November 21, 1968. Early that morning, a large group of students entered Dempsey Hall and filled Guiles’ office, as well as surrounding offices. They presented him with the same list of demands, along with

a new demand to remove Spittler (Trahan, 1976). When Guiles refused, some of the students proceeded to tear apart the office, knocking over books, damaging paintings, and ruining files (Trahan). Police officers were called in, and they arrested 94 black students and four white students who “volunteered to be arrested in a gesture of solidarity” (Trahan, p. 142).

Although this incident was a difficult situation for the community to deal with, it was the administrative reaction in the aftermath that proved to be explosive. Soon after the incident, Guiles issued suspension orders for all 94 of the black students without any form of due process, while the four white students were ignored by administrators (Guiles, 1968; Trahan, 1976). Guiles accused the students of interfering with the functions of the university and infringing on the rights of others (Guiles). The following month, the students sought a restraining order in federal court to force the System to give them an impartial hearing and reinstate them until due process had been given (Barbee & Julian, 1968). The students won the case, and the regents were forced to act (Doyle, 1968).

In general, the Board of Regents was not sympathetic toward the students. Regent Siinto Wessman authored a personal memo that stated, “I’m glad Guiles socked it to ’em. As the Chinese say... ‘a few knocked heads is worth a million words’” (Wessman, 1968). Adding to this bias, the Wisconsin Legislature was pressuring the regents to act sternly or suffer monetary consequences. Assemblyman Herbert Grover threatened to “come in fighting against the State University System budget if you people [the regents] fail to deal strongly in this situation” (Grover, 1968). In the end, the regents chose to take on new power (which they called “original jurisdiction”) by bypassing the established tribunal system and appointing a hand-picked hearing agent, J. Ward Rector (Board of Regents, December 6, 1968).

During the hearing, all of the students were tried as a whole and faced the same charges: blocking the executive offices in Dempsey Hall and failing to withdraw after having been ordered (Guiles, n.d.). On December 19, 1968, one day before the regent’s executive committee would meet and determine the fate of the students, the ACCDS issued a statement listing six different possible actions to be taken in regard to the students—actions that ranged from immediate reinstatement to expulsion (Advisory Committee for Culturally Distinct Students, December 19, 1968). The committee itself “preferred some middle ground” (Behrendt, 1968). However, the regents were less forgiving. Ninety of the students were given the maximum penalty of expulsion, while four of the students were found to be “less culpable” and were only suspended for the remainder of the fall semester (Board of Regents, December 20, 1968). The fact that four students were found less guilty, even though all had violated the student conduct code by blocking access to Dempsey Hall, indicated to some that the regents were convicting the 90 students of another unspoken charge (Board of Christian Social Concerns of the United Methodist Church, 1969). Determining the precise reason the regents chose the maximum punishment for the majority of these students is difficult. Perhaps it is more germane to consider that an outraged board was the sole judge of the case, taking unprecedented action over the recommendations of the local campus committees. The regents had created a powerful new policy that allowed them to set the boundaries of due process within the System.

Racial strife proved to be too persistent to stay isolated in Oshkosh. A little over a year later, at Wisconsin State University-Whitewater (WSU-W), tensions flared again as blacks and whites on campus clashed in violent encounters. On December 15, 1969, after an intramural basketball game, white fraternity students cornered the black team and their girlfriends in the gym and a fight ensued. The black students were outnumbered, and the white students became violent. Trahan notes that one black girl was hit and pushed down the stairs by a white male. After little action was taken by the police, the black students regrouped at the new Afro-American Center, then raided the Phi Chi Epsilon house, breaking furniture and punching the fraternity members. At some point, a handgun was fired into the wall, escalating the issue to a crisis (Trahan, 1976).

In the immediate aftermath, the administration's actions were reminiscent of the Oshkosh ruling. President William Carter issued immediate suspension orders without a prior hearing (Carter, December 17, 1969). Learning from the Oshkosh court case, the administration immediately scheduled a hearing but chose to use a hearing agent for the second time in the System's history (Carter, December 22, 1969). The fact that the administrators had only chosen to do this when black students were concerned did not go unnoticed. In an anonymous flyer, a student stated, "The outright violation of the student disciplinary code is a race event....Only twice has the Board of Regents intervened in the history of the organization to break the student law—both times involving black students" (Anonymous Student from Wisconsin State University-Whitewater, 1970).

Headed again by Rector, the hearing proceeded with some concern. The regents seemed to desire ultimate control over these students' fates. Soliciting E. L. Wingert's opinion, the regents wanted to find out if Rector's recommendation could be delivered to Carter. This was in contrast to a System policy that called for a student-faculty tribunal to receive it (Kopp, 1970). Wingert (1970) replied by stating, "the applicable guideline clearly requires that the report be made to the standing tribunal." However, he continued by saying that, in "exceptional situations," the president could direct the report to come directly to him "and then [the president] could hear and decide the case upon receipt of the report" (Wingert, 1970). Carter took this action, allowing the regents a solid base of influence (Board of Regents, February 20, 1970). Of the 12 students involved, two were expelled, and seven were suspended for various periods, while charges against three were dropped (Board of Regents, February 20, 1970). In the same meeting, the regents agreed on a resolution reviewing all black culture centers and requiring the board's approval for their continuance (Board of Regents, February 20, 1970). This action was preceded by the closing of the Afro-American Center at WSU-W for classroom space (Trahan, 1976; Concerned Students of WSU-Whitewater, 1970). The administration had not only used original jurisdiction once again in the case of black students, but administrators had manipulated their power to ensure a definite punishment and retaliated against the black population that had challenged their status quo. By the end of WSU's major racial struggles, the administration was more powerful than ever, and the minority students in the System were left disenfranchised, with little access to due process.

## Conclusion

Each example discussed above can be looked at separately as a different strand of administrative policy for the WSU System in the late 1960s. The regent's reaction to SDS and the creation of the Student Conduct Code implies that they were willing to manipulate policy to serve their own ends, particularly to prevent the radical student dissent that was changing campuses around the country. In the case of minority dissent, the regents showed no intention of allowing the black protestors, a dissident minority on a largely Caucasian campus, to change the status quo. Such a change would have invited unacceptable criticism from state legislators and the surrounding communities. Yet, when examined as a whole, there can be no doubt that the primary objective of the administration was to gather and consolidate as much power as possible while in office. In every scenario, the regents and administrative heads of campus attempted to distance themselves from social change, ensuring they had the means to control the WSU System at the cost of student liberty. Many factors can be considered as partial reasoning for their actions, including racism, government and community pressure, and personal political views. There is no doubt, however, that all these factors belie the administration's predominant goal of wielding power in the face of challenge.

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