

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

Introduction

When people think about student politics and the sixties, they usually imagine a nation thrown into turmoil by antiwar demonstrations led by unkempt and wild-eyed radicals shouting through megaphones and marching in the streets.

Certainly, such events did occur. The histories of student protests at some of the nation's best-known schools — Columbia, Cornell, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Wisconsin, Kent State University in Ohio — highlight the roles played by militant student activists in sparking national debate over the Vietnam War and other issues of a social, cultural, or political nature.

Nevertheless, the stereotype of 1960s student activism obscures the much more complicated reality of student politics and student life during a tumultuous decade beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s.

This module uses the story of the student protests at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (known then as both VPI and Virginia Tech, its current moniker) in the spring of 1970 to trace the larger landscape of student politics during the Vietnam War years. Located in rural southwest Virginia, VPI was a large, up-and-coming state university that had yet to achieve national prominence by 1970. Its predominantly white, upwardly mobile, working- and middle-class student population, largely attracted to the school because of its affordable state tuition, made VPI typical of many other large state universities. Although its geographic isolation prevented national trends from arriving on campus in full force until the close of the decade, VPI embraced the advent of the sixties as other campuses across the nation already had.

The documents in this module explore student politics during the Vietnam War era at a state university with a fairly typical student body. The example of VPI will help you answer a number of important questions concerning student activism in the sixties. What political views, for example, did students at the time hold? What were their primary concerns? How did they express their beliefs and convictions? And, finally, how did their actions compare with the highly publicized protests taking place elsewhere at the time?