

# Student Activism Across the Past 5 Years

What Higher Ed Leaders Need to Know  
About Evolving Challenges



## Student Activism Trends

EAB analyzed student activism activity across the past five years, which included

**500+** activism data points related to protests, petitions, and demands

### The EAB dataset includes:



Institutions in the United States, Canada, Europe, and South Africa



A variety of institution types (public and private) and sizes (from small to large)



Across multiple platforms and formats: formal demands, social media campaigns, and news reports

### Student activists are asking us to do more, faster:

- Demands address wide range of university areas, requiring broad collaboration and buy-in from across the institution
- Students expect a fast response that outlines actionable next steps rather than just “empty words”
- Activists are less willing to negotiate; more likely to demand accountability

### Demands have spiked in 2020:

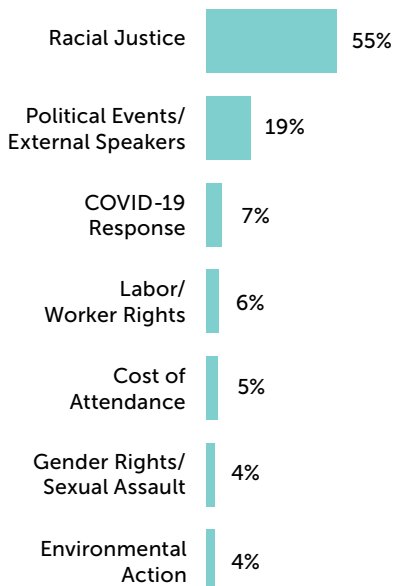


**42**

Sets of student demands have been publicized online from March-September 2020, the highest volume since 2016

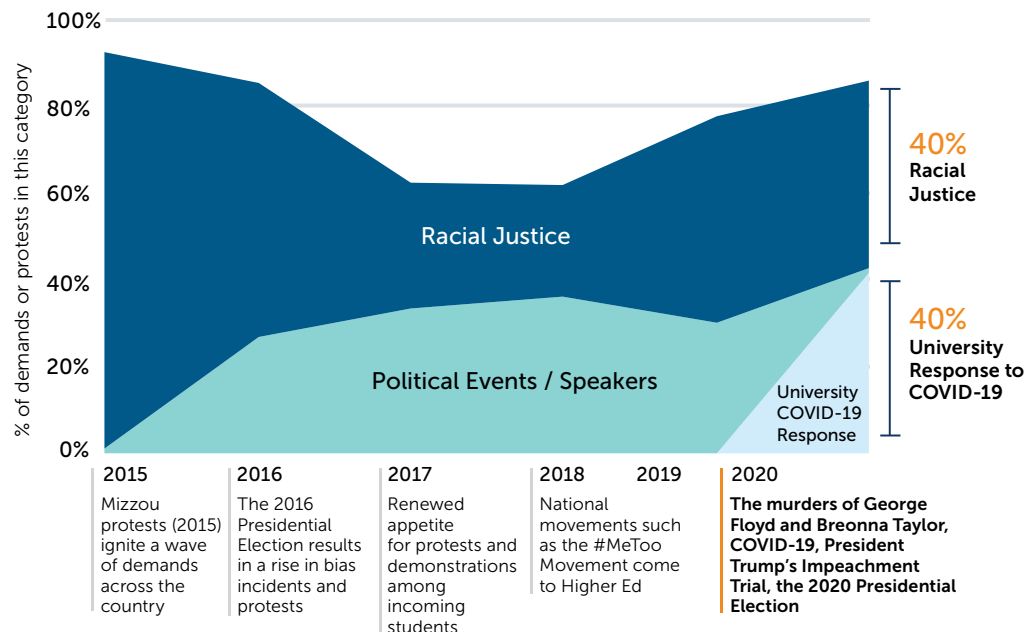
## Three Focal Points of Student Unrest Across Past 5 Years

From 2015 through 2020, the most common drivers of activism at all universities are as follows:



## Common Drivers of Activism at all Universities

It is important to note that while COVID-19 did not become an issue in the US until Spring 2020, it is still one of the top 3 causes among activists across the past five years.





## Racial Justice



40%

of 2020 student activism has been focused on racial justice



269

of the 500+ student activism data points were racial justice focused

Some of today's most common demands have been raised consistently for decades, dating back as far as the 1960s. These reoccurrences highlight higher education's failure to make significant progress on these concerns for decades. At the same time, the current cultural moment reckoning and unrest over racial injustice have spurred many new demands. As you review this list, take note of demands that have yet to emerge on your campus and consider how your team would respond to a similar demand or how you can address the matter with student's proactively.

### Common Racial Justice Demands



#### Consistent

*Frequently raised, some even date back to the 1960s*

- Increase faculty and staff of color
- Remove symbols of oppression on campus
- Hire BIPOC mental health providers specializing in racial trauma



#### New

*Included in recent demands, newer in the activism terrain*

- Increase access to reports filed against campus police officers, faculty and staff
- Defund campus police or invest in alternative campus safety initiatives
- Prioritize black-owned business when selecting auxiliary providers



## Politics & Free Speech



80%

of college students planned to vote in the 2020 Presidential Election



38%

of first-year students anticipate some chance they will participate in protests

In the hyper-polarized U.S. political climate, there is no shortage of causes or key moments for politics-focused activists. Regardless of ideology, these student activists advocate before, during and between election cycles. Our analysis showed that student activism centered around political topics spiked in the two years following the 2016 presidential election.

### Common Political and Free Speech-Based Demands



Eliminate free speech zones



Close the university on election day



Implement or improve bias-incident response and reporting procedures



Hold students, faculty, and staff accountable for offensive hate speech on social media



Allow (or disallow) a controversial campus speaker



Implement zero-tolerance policies regarding racism on campus



# COVID-19 Response



69%

of students agree that their university is looking out for their bottom line more than the health of students



40%

of 2020 student activism has been focused on University COVID response



## Renewed Controversies

Social justice activism has reached a new level of urgency because the pandemic has highlighted existing inequities and disproportionately impacted minority groups.



## Digital Activism

COVID-19 revived controversies around graduate student rights and student athlete unionization, sparking unrest that will persist beyond the pandemic.



## Student Impact

The number of students participating has grown with the shift to increased digital activism, forced by COVID-19, and the effectiveness of digital platforms.



## Cross-Campus Movements

With the growth of digital activism, activists on different campuses are more commonly collaborating and sharing strategies.

## Common COVID-19 Demands



Reduce or refund tuition and fees due to the negative impact of COVID-19 on experience and services



Implement pass/fail grading to accommodate COVID-19-related stress



Increase compensation and safety conditions for housing staff (e.g. RAs, live-in staff)



Streamline methods of reporting accessibility issues since classes recently moved online



Improve health and safety conditions for student athletes

Check out the full infographic on [eab.com](https://eab.com)

[CLICK HERE >](#)