

Week Twelve Reading Guide: Student activism at MIT, 1980s to present

In this final week we will hear from a prominent MIT student activist of the 1980s and early 1990s, Steve Penn, who is now a physics professor at a liberal arts college. During all of MIT's history there has probably never been a student more engaged in activism and protest. Four years after his PhD graduation, and ten years after Penn led the "Tent City" protests of MIT's real estate development near Central Square, a writer in *The Tech* appropriately described Penn as "[a famous student activist](#)." We will end the class with a brief discussion of the contributions of another famous student activist, Rasheed Auguste (BS 2017, 8 and 22), and the final chapters of the books by Ben Barres and Jon Beckwith.

December 9, 2019

Guest speaker: Steve Penn SB 1985, PhD 1993

Following the Vietnam War protests, the next major topic of campus activism in the US was protest against the apartheid system of South Africa, under which a white minority racially segregated and brutally suppressed black people following World War II until Nelson Mandela came to power in 1994. The first anti-apartheid protests at MIT occurred in 1971 and [were directed at the Polaroid Corporation's](#) sale to South Africa of ID-producing cameras used for racial control. In 1977, students at other campuses began calling for their endowments to divest from South Africa; this movement [reached MIT in 1978](#). It wasn't until the 1984-85 academic year, however, that protests heated up with faculty members being arrested for [protesting against apartheid](#) (and, separately, protesting a [US trade embargo of Nicaragua](#)). Perhaps their example inspired students, who began protesting in the [spring of 1985](#) (see the letter on p. 6), following examples set at [Columbia, Harvard, Tufts, and Cornell](#).

Anti-Apartheid protests covered by *The Tech*: [June 3, 1985](#); [November 8, 1985](#); [November 15, 1985](#) (besides the main articles, see the dorm discussion summaries); [January 8, 1986](#); [March 11, 1986](#).

Who was involved in anti-Apartheid protests at MIT? (This is a tiny fraction of the articles in *The Tech* covering many different groups, but it is representative.) What tactics did they use? What was the "Apartheid Colloquium" and where did it take place? What did Steve Penn do at his commencement in 1985? One of the goals of the protests was to get universities to divest from investments in South Africa. Columbia and UC Berkeley did, and eventually Harvard made a limited divestment, but not MIT. The limited response by university administrations led to stronger protests through the Shantytown movement, which swept most major universities in 1985-86 including MIT, where it was co-led by Steve Penn.

The Tech: [March 4, 1986](#); [March 15, 1986](#); [October 7, 1986](#); [October 21, 1986](#) (the letter by MIT President Paul Gray). Campus anti-apartheid protests died down in the fall of 1986, in large part because they led to an important legislative success: the US Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 (overriding President Ronald Reagan's veto), which imposed significant sanctions on South Africa. However, they started back up in 1990 when Nelson Mandela was released from prison: [March 6, 1990](#); [April 10, 1990](#); [April 13, 1990](#).

MIT had a difficult time dealing with Steve Penn's protests; sometimes he was arrested, more often [brought before the Committee on Discipline](#) where he was [again cleared](#). On May 2, 1990, President Gray even [debated a black South African leader](#) in 10-250. The administration created an Ad Hoc Committee on Demonstrations, and Penn responded by becoming GSC Vice President and in that role he [criticized Gray's approach](#). [Not all graduate students agreed](#) with Penn. One year later, Steve Penn received the [Karl Taylor Compton Award](#).

Soule, S. A. (1997), "The Student Divestment Movement in the United States and Tactical Diffusion: The Shantytown Protest," *Social Forces*, 75(3), 855–882.

This article develops an idea we saw previously in the context of environmental justice and the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference, movement spillover (here, diffusion). Soule argues that the Shantytown mechanism spread across college campuses similarly to diffusion, with the quickest transfer across institutions of similar ranking and endowment size. Small liberal arts colleges had the fastest spread; interestingly, they are also among the Whitest campuses. The basic mechanism—students emulating peers on similar campuses—seems obvious in hindsight. What is new in this article is the mathematical modeling used to characterize the diffusion of a protest tactic. One can only imagine that in today's more highly connected world, diffusion happens even faster. (Note that similar diffusion processes occur with technological innovation and the development of new industries.)

At Dartmouth College, conservative counter-protesters destroyed the shanties. What effect did this have on the shantytown protest movement? What is the difference between relational models of diffusion and cultural (non-relational) models? Why and how does culture (and its derivative, collective identity) matter? Why might diffusion have been much less effective for historically black colleges? Why is diffusion faster among liberal arts colleges? What role does social class play?

Although we will not have time to discuss in class, for reference I include a few more articles (a tiny fraction of his coverage in *The Tech*) showing the later evolution of Steve Penn's activism while a physics graduate student, in some areas that are still very relevant today:

Anti-racism efforts: [January 7, 1987](#) (letter on p. 4)

Support for Women's Studies and Prof. Ruth Perry: [May 5, 1987](#) (letter on p. 4); tenure appeal successful [July 14, 1987](#)

Commencement disruption, [June 23, 1987](#) (see also the article about a 1988 presidential candidate!), [August 28, 1987](#) (note comparison with 1970 arrest of Bohner and Katsiaficas), [February 19, 1988](#)

Tent City at the Simplex site: [November 21, 1987](#), [November 24, 1987](#) (plus many later issues of *The Tech*), [January 20, 1988](#), [February 26, 1987](#),

1988 commencement pledge: [May 27, 1988](#) (article by Seth Gordon and letter to MIT President Paul Gray p. 4 by the Coalition to Humanize MIT), reflections on 1987 commencement whistle disturbance

1991 protest at the inauguration of President Chuck Vest: [May 3, 1991](#)

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Auguste, R. 2016, “[Reflections of a BSU Co-Chair](#)”

As political action co-chair of the Black Students’ Union in 2015, Rasheed Auguste led undergraduate students to [produce and present a set of recommendations](#) for improving MIT for black students and for all students. This occurred during a period of significant protest at colleges and universities around the US following racist incidents at the University of Missouri. At more than 80 campuses, [black students published demands](#) of their administration to counter systemic racism. At MIT, Auguste and his peers took a more moderate approach, which worked well with an MIT administration eager to avoid the kind of [anti-racism protest](#) and activism that took place the preceding year. The 11 [BSU recommendations](#) have been partially implemented. Based on his own description, is Auguste an activist? What were his motivation, methods, and impact?

Barres, B. 2018, pp. 103–115.

In his final chapter, Barres discusses the importance of mentoring young scientists. Why is this topic so personally important to him? What, exactly, is mentoring? Why did Barres write the famous article in *Nature*, “Does Gender Matter?” (Unfortunately, the memdir.org web page cited in the book no longer exists, but the Harvard talk is still available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5La-ZPjdM>). What impact did the article have?

Beckwith, J. 2002, Chapter 13.

In this concluding chapter, Beckwith is unsure about the impact of his social activism, saying “Perhaps what matters most is doing what’s right, whether it succeeds or not.” What would you say in response?

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