

REPRESENT

A look at the political influence of BU, past and present
by Stella Lorence

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (CAS '11) was sworn into the House of Representatives, representing the 14th district of New York, on Jan. 3 of this year. That same day, an anonymous Twitter user circulated a video of her dancing on the roof of the College of Arts & Sciences, and Ocasio-Cortez was thrust into the limelight, along with her alma mater, BU.

Ocasio-Cortez, affectionately nicknamed AOC by supporters, has made quite a splash as a freshman representative, but a look at her BU career suggests she has always been an outspoken leader.

According to *BU Today*, Ocasio-Cortez was “a leading student ambassador” for the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground. She majored in economics and international relations, according to an article from *The Boston Globe*, and was also president of Alianza Latina, a Latin American student organization.

Ocasio-Cortez is just one product of what has been a fairly politically active and progressive campus. This activism, which can be traced through the line of presidents who have shaped the school into what we know today, is rooted in BU’s early history.

“The early founders were very committed to this idea that everyone was equal,” said Ryan Hendrickson, the Assistant Director of Manuscripts at the Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center.

Like most universities founded in the early 19th century, BU was founded as a religious institution, incorporating Methodist ideals into its charter and curriculum. One such ideal was that of social equality, which was proven during the term of BU inaugural president William Fairfield Warren.

“During Warren’s presidency, Boston University awarded the first Ph.D. degree to a woman, graduated the first black psychiatrist, awarded the first theological degree to a woman, and graduated the founder of Goodwill Industries,” according to lecture materials prepared by Daryl Healea.

The “utopian” idea that everyone deserves equal access to education carried through to the 1920’s and into “old-school liberal” Daniel Marsh’s presidency, Hendrickson said.

Marsh was president from 1925 to 1951, during which time he remained true to the early ideas of social equality and promoted the idea that students should give back to their city and society. In the post-World War I political climate, Marsh was accused of being a communist, and BU was viewed as an especially liberal school.

“The country moved right and BU didn’t,” Hendrickson said.

Even so, BU students did not engage in a lot of social or political activism during the ‘20s and ‘30s, Hendrickson said. At the time, BU was a big football school.

Following Marsh as BU president was Harold Case, serving from 1951–1967. Case was devoted to promoting racial equality at BU, especially by bringing in more black faculty, Hendrickson said.

Also during the time of Case’s presidency, BU began laying the foundation for the large international presence still prominent today. Because of the school’s Methodist roots, BU maintained connections with many missionary families who channeled international students into the school, Hendrickson said.

In the late 1950s, the racial tensions in the U.S. and in Boston began to rise. Case tried to keep BU inclusive, which seemed like a radical concept in the 1950s, but many students felt BU was not doing enough, Hendrickson said.

It was at this time that BU, with frequent sit-ins and demonstrations in the streets, experienced a “surge of political activism” and developed a reputation as a radical school, Hendrickson said.

The surge of activism continued into the 1970s, shifting focus toward the Vietnam War and the Nixon administration. Due to safety concerns related to bomb threats, and a nation-wide student and faculty strike, more than 400 BU classes were suspended, according to *BU Today*. Final exams and commencement for the class of 1970 were canceled at BU as well as several other schools across the country, according to *BU Today*.

John Silber, BU president from 1971 to 1996, ushered in a new era in BU history, and an effective end to student activism, said Hendrickson. Silber, who was not religious, fired all left-wing professors who were not tenured, and he turned the police onto student activists.

“There was a lot of violence on the BU campus for about a year,” Hendrickson said. “[Silber] changed the character of the campus.”

Under Silber's presidency, political activity happened "under the radar," Hendrickson said. "The school had become so big that you could definitely find your people, but they wouldn't really do anything."

Political activism remained diminished in the 90s due to a lack of major social issues or controversy in the political sphere, Hendrickson said.

This lull ended in the early 2000s, when, spurred by the Gulf war and developing Iraq war, there was a "renewed interest in what's actually going on in politics," Hendrickson said.

A lot of the renewed activism stemmed naturally from the Howard Thurman Center, where students of different backgrounds came together wanting to get involved, Hendrickson said.

This activism has continued through the 2010s, propelled by the 2016 election campaigns and results. A lot of recent BU activism has been characterized by careful deliberation rather than spontaneous demonstration.

"BU doesn't boast about [its prominent political alumni] a lot" because many of them were "quiet" during their time at BU, Hendrickson said.

"A lot of students who come here are here to learn," Hendrickson said. "They work hard at BU, then get involved."

The established political clubs on campus have continued this more academic approach to political engagement.

"We try to create a space that's free from judgement," said Anna Stroinski (CAS '19), the president of BU College Democrats.

BU College Democrats, which is a chapter of College Democrats of Massachusetts, offers a place for students to debate and discuss ideas while also giving more motivated students the opportunity for further engagement through internships and grassroots work.

"It's important to know that while we always offer a platform to be heard, it's important to not pressure people to share their ideas because you feel entitled to them," said Eva Jungreis (CAS '19), the Director of Communications for BU College Democrats.

BU College Republicans, a chapter of the College Republican National Committee, offers a similar atmosphere focused on providing students with a place to discuss politics, said Matthew Arsenault (COM '19), secretary of the organization.

“[BU College Republicans] is just a place where [members] can speak their mind or maybe open up a little more about a part of their lives,” Arsenault said. “A lot of people like to come where they can not just talk with like-minded people, but more talk about what’s going on in current events and things of that nature.”

BU College Republicans also aims mainly to support local, state, and national candidates by being the “college activism wing” of the party, said Arsenault. Both BU College Republicans and BU College Democrats see their membership and activism wax and wane with the election cycle.

“If it’s election season, people are way more engaged,” Stroinski said. “There’s nothing more binding than a canvassing trip.”

Stroinski said she tries to encourage well-rounded debate and to argue the opposing side, because it is easy to fall into a pattern of general agreement. She said you learn more from these kinds of debates.

Learning as much as possible is the common theme in BU activism, especially recently. Even those who are more actively engaged, like Nicolas Suarez (CAS ‘21), try to learn as much as possible through their engagement.

“I think one of my priorities is gaining experience so I can learn more about the political and legal process,” Suarez wrote in an email.

Suarez got his start in politics in eighth grade when he joined Students Working Against Tobacco to help his mother overcome her tobacco addiction. He has experience interning with Senator Edward Markey (D-MA) and is currently interning with UK Member of Parliament Catherine West.

“I think that BU has never been more interested in politics until now,” Suarez wrote. “If I were to tell students anything, it’s to not only learn about the current political atmosphere, but also become involved!”