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## **For us, by us: Exploring constructions of student activism and university support**

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Across the country, identity-based activist movements have impacted the mobilization of student activists on college campuses. This article focuses on students' construction of activism and their perceptions of support from administration, faculty, and staff. The researchers employed a constructivist framework and revealed four domains highlighting student's experiences with activism on campus. Our recommendations describe ways campus stakeholders can better support student efforts for social change.

**Keywords:** student activism, Islamophobia, identity, intersectionality, student organization, Black Lives Matter, undocumented, support

### **Introduction**

Across the country, identity-based activist movements have been capturing the attention of institutions of higher learning and college students alike. Multiple widespread national activist movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter and Sanctuary Campuses) have impacted the mobilization of student activism on college campuses today. Bragg, McCambly, and Durham (2016) asserted that student activists on college campuses across the country expressed concern and even outrage in response to racial discrimination, hate- or bias-driven incidents, or hostile campus climates. Furthermore, marginalized students are beginning to question if the access to education they have been granted is "good enough" (Bragg et al., 2016, p. 37). This point serves as a critical question that has prompted many involved student activists to challenge the status quo on their college campuses regarding campus climate, the equitable distribution of resources, and institutional change.

The purpose of this study is to examine how students at State University (SU) construct and define identity-based activism. Additionally, this study seeks to explore

how students on campus perceive administration, faculty, and staff support for student activism and how this support affects students' engagement. The findings enhance the context provided by existing literature on the reasoning behind student involvement in social movements related to support and perception.

Students, administration, faculty, and staff at SU all participate in a singular environment. As a result, it can be harmful if there are vastly different perceptions of the roles that each party plays in enacting social change on campus. Boren (2001) mentioned that in the past administration had interpreted student activism as disruptive and unlawful, while activists themselves often perceived their actions as a form of resistance. This perception is an example that highlights the need to initiate dialogue that seeks to understand how different stakeholders in the community can work together to create an environment that supports student activism and social change.

The following research questions were developed to examine how students construct and engage in student activism at SU:

1. How do students construct individual definitions of 'activism'?
2. How do students perceive SU administration, faculty, and staff support of student activism?
3. How does perceived support from SU administration, faculty, and staff affect students' engagement in activism?

## **Literature Review**

### *Historical Overview*

When exploring literature on student activism, it is imperative to examine the historical context of student activism and how it has evolved over time on American college campuses. For the purpose of this research project, it is also critical to observe how student activism has been constructed as a concept by students and the way activism has been presented on campuses. In the following sections, we discuss the current literature on the construction of student activism, institutional response and/or support, and the contemporary nature of student activism.

College campuses have provided a suitable environment for movements of student activism to thrive in response to various internal and external issues. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the primary topics of discussions among student activists were the "restrictive doctrines of *in loco parentis*, the classical curriculum, and substandard food and lodging" (Broadhurst, 2014, p. 4). Meanwhile, the institutions typically responded to such students' discontentment with stricter rules (Broadhurst, 2014). During this period, institutional support of student activism was absent. In fact, some institutions attempted to contain activism by removing student activists from campus.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, student activism focused on issues in the United States such as social reform and anti-military movements (Broadhurst, 2014; Harper, 2008). In the following decades, movements surrounding desegregation and equity played a more prominent role in the scene of student activism (Bragg et al., 2016). For

example, students challenged the “separate but equal” concept and African American students led in activism through the Black Power movement (Biondi, 2012; Rhoads, 2016; Rogers, 2012). Over time, minoritized populations gained presence and formed alliances on college campuses to resist against systemic oppression (Broadhurst, 2014). In the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, activism on campus had increasingly concentrated on diversity and accessibility issues. Throughout the nation, there was growing advocacy for “increased access to education, the rights of immigrants, affirmative action, and better campus climates for students of color and the LGBT community” (Broadhurst, 2014, p. 11).

Despite the evolving nature of student activism, students have consistently inserted themselves as an integral part of the American and global society. How students viewed and embodied the concept of student activism, however, was ever-changing. In the next section, the construction of activism by students is examined and discussed.

### *Student Construction*

The historical context of activism continues to play a large role in how students come to construct meaning behind this term. Pasque and Vargas (2014) discussed students’ performance of activism through a service-learning course. Findings from this study were framed to focus on performances of activism through sound and silence as methods of communication, and gender and dis/ability as methods of physical engagement with others. While this study provided examples of students engaging in this performance, the links or constructions made by the students themselves are not clear. Another example of connecting activism with performance is evident in the research by Sadler (2010) in utilizing the arts via the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Sadler (2010) discussed the inability to separate art from politics and society. She pointed to “art’s complete and utter ability to encapsulate the human condition, that give it such efficacy as a form of protest” (p. 84). These examples are important because they challenged a typical picture of action in activism. They pointed to the idea that constructing activism looks different for each individual and they use their respective medium as an act of defiance.

The literature also consistently pointed to the construction of identity through engagement with specific activist movements. DeAngelo, Schuster, and Stebleton (2016) discussed the identity construction of undocumented students involved with DREAM Act activism. They suggested that students developed a better understanding of self through engagement in activist work associated with a social identity. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) noted similar findings in their research on self-identified women of color activists.

It is evident that activism exists in multiple forms and engages individuals differently. It is also critical to examine the many and unique expressions of activism that have evolved. Engaging in a form of activism provides the student with a voice with which to share a message that subverts or challenges a dominant narrative (Pasque et al., 2014; Sadler, 2010). To this extent, engaging with the question of how students construct activism assumes each individual, their intersecting identities, and their life experiences are uniquely their own and play into how they find their voice. This allows us as researchers to have a holistic picture of students’ experiences.

Current research pointed to connections between activism, performance development, and identity construction. Historically, social movements and personal experiences with forms of oppression and marginalization also contributed to students' engagement with activism. Within this context, the role of university support and response is another key component of the discussion.

#### *Administration/Faculty/Staff Support*

While student activists are determined to influence the current environment of their institution, it is important to consider the role of administration, faculty, and staff in supporting activism on college campuses. Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, and Barnett (2005) illustrated the dynamics between student activists and stakeholders by linking their relationship to the system of power that exists in institutions of higher education. As a result, student activists have constructed different perceptions of administration, faculty, and staff, in regard to how they show their support (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). These perceptions significantly influenced how student activists engage in conversations with administration in institutions of higher education.

It is important to note that student activists' perceptions of administration, faculty, and staff are determined based on the varied degrees of support shown. According to Kezar (2010), faculty participation in student activism has crucial implications for the outlook of student demonstrations. Kezar (2010) indicated that faculty presence at protests were necessary to serve as "mediators" against law enforcement and administration. Furthermore, faculty involvement has been known to increase student participation at demonstrations and has led to fundamental changes on college campuses (Kezar, 2010). Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) described how the perceptions of administration, faculty, and staff can differ among students to the extent that they are characterized as antagonists, gatekeepers, or absentee leaders--but not collaborators. For this reason, administration, faculty, and staff, need to be aware of their impact on students' engagement in activism.

Nevertheless, there is a large influx of students who see their administration, faculty, and staff as resources, support systems, and means to gain legitimate recognition for the activism work they are taking on (Sadler, 2010). Finding balance between providing the students with the resources to accomplish activism while not getting overly involved remains an issue for administration, faculty, and staff. However, some see this as an opportunity to introduce students to contemporary forms of activism (Sadler, 2010).

#### *Contemporary Activism*

Student activism in the present-day context has evolved. In the past, student activists invested most of their time and energy on one or two social issues (Sadler, 2010). Involvement and breadth of participation has since increased (Sadler, 2010). Rhoades (1998) attributed this increase to changes in identity-based politics during the 1990s and the impact of these politics on its citizens. With colleges and universities becoming increasingly diverse, the number of students impacted by national issues and their involvement in social movements increased.

Additionally, advancements in technology have surged and brought student activism to new mediums. With the abundance of access to computers and the Internet, student activists now have additional resources to gather and disseminate information on a larger scale (Carty & Onyett, 2006). Within the past 10 years, social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter have become heavily utilized platforms for organizing student activism (Vatikiotis, 2016). For example, at the University of Michigan, the Black Student Union used the hashtag “#BBUM (Being Black at the University of Michigan)” to discuss the perceptions of racial climate for Black students (Berrett & Hoover, 2015). These online networks of activists in a more globalized society allow students to learn from people with different identities and bring awareness to their campus populations.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

In this study, we analyzed participants' accounts through a constructivist framework. According to Navarro (2015), a constructivist framework treats knowledge as it is constructed by individual experiences and “each experience is critical to the collective understanding of a phenomenon” (p. 367). In the data collection process, individual responses, as well as focus group responses, were gathered and the research team derived meanings of student activism and institutional support of activism. Our goal was to allow students to individually and collectively arrive at their interpretations of student activism.

We also used place-identity theory to frame our study. By using this perspective, we were able to focus on the components from the environment that contribute to a student's construction of activism. As outlined by Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983), this theory is influenced by “social and cultural processes” (p. 57) that contribute to development of self-identity. Place-identity theory focuses on the thoughts individuals have about their environment (Proshansky et al., 1983). What is distinct about this theory is how a variety of different connections by an individual are used to create a self-identity as it incorporates “memories, ideas, feelings, values, preferences, meanings, and conceptions of behavior and experience” as they relate to a specific physical space (Proshansky et al., 1983, p. 59). Both positive and negative experiences with the environment shape identity (Proshansky et al., 1983). Using place-identity theory as a framework is appropriate as it recognizes the piecemeal construction of identity in relation to environment.

Additionally, we included intersectionality as a perspective that can be used to examine how different interconnected identities influence an individual's lived experiences and ultimately shape their worldview. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality can be described as “the mutually constitutive relations among social identities”. In our research study, this perspective recognizes how participant's different identities impact their constructions and definitions of activism. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize how intersectionality illuminates how different marginalized identities interact with and are impacted by systemic oppression. Crenshaw (1991) used intersectionality to bring attention to the ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural and political aspects of violence against women of color. Therefore, intersectionality can be used to examine how students with intersecting marginalized

identities interact with structural and institutional oppression within their campus environments. Hancock (2007) argued that intersectionality refers to both a normative theoretical argument and an approach to conducting empirical research that highlights the interaction of categories of difference. Intersectionality, as a perspective, will acknowledge the complexity of identity as it relates to meaning-making about activism and perceived support from administration, faculty, and staff. It is critical that intersectionality is employed as a perspective because this research is specifically centered on identity-based activism, which cannot be examined without considering how different individuals' identities influence their experiences.

### **Methodology**

The nature of our research study sought to gather information best collected through qualitative methods centered on student narratives. In our exploration of students' perception of activism and institutional support, "direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts" (Patton, 1990, p. 53, cited in Schuh, Biddix, Dean, & Kinzie, 2016) presented powerful data that can be used to construct this phenomenon from a student perspective.

#### *Site Selection and Access to Participants*

SU is a predominately white suburban research university enrolling over 35,000 undergraduates. SU is the flagship institution of the state located in the Midwest. According to the 2016 Freshmen Class Profile, 68% of undergraduates enrolled at SU are white, 8.7% are international students, and 23.3% are considered domestic students of color.

This study focused on self-identified undergraduate student activists and used purposeful sampling. Three movements were selected in response to the political climate surrounding the 2016 Presidential Election where inflammatory language against Muslims, Latin Americans, African-Americans, and other minoritized populations were present (Brown, 2016). The selected organizations were identified by the researchers as active groups at SU during the semesters preceding and following the election. To recruit participants, the researchers emailed and sent Facebook messages to specific student organizations at SU that supported and participated in these movements. The organizations that were contacted in regard to the Black Lives Matter movement included Black Student Union (BSU), National Association for Black Journalists (NABJ), Students Against State Violence (SASV), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Participants were also recruited from Undocumented Student Alliance, which focused on raising awareness and assisting undocumented students. Lastly, the Muslim Student Association and SU Against Islamophobia were selected as organizations that were mission-driven to support Muslim identities at SU.

#### *Strategy of Inquiry*



We employed a narrative inquiry approach for our research. Narrative inquiry often is used in educational research to empower students' voices of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It allows for a broader exploration of how students construct activism and how they perceive responses from administration, faculty, and staff. Through personal narratives and stories, our data collection approach aligned with the goals of an exploratory study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Loh, 2013). Data was collected using both focus groups and open-ended questionnaires.

Focus groups served as our primary data collection strategy as it helps explore and clarify views in a collective way that would be less easily accessible in a one-on-one interview (Kitzinger, 2006). As a branch of interviewing (Schuh et al., 2016), focus groups allowed the facilitation of a "natural, but intentional conversation" (p. 149). Focus groups were also an efficient way of gaining a large amount of information (Barrows, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000) and specific attitudes and opinions (Hines, 2000) on a subject in a short time. For our topic on student activism, focus groups aligned with an exploratory approach (Kim, Keininger, Becker, & Crawley, 2005; Nassar-McMillian & Borders, 2002), identifying the major themes behind the construction of activism in the minds of students along with the perception they have of the support from the administration, faculty, and staff at SU. Tynan and Drayton (1988) stated that for a group to have a relaxed discussion, its members must have similar interests. The focus group setting provided students a supportive and collaborative space to engage in dialogue about activism, which is valuable for a student's learning experience (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

### **Data Collection**

The data collection was broken up into three components: the pre-questionnaire, the focus group, and the post-questionnaire. The pre-questionnaire was dedicated to gathering preliminary demographic information: pseudonym, age, and classification, semesters at SU and academic college, as well as individual definitions. The focus groups were comprised of 2-4 individuals from previously mentioned student activist organizations.

The focus group was facilitated by two members of the research team. The facilitators had the focus group protocol to guide questioning and focus group discussion. The protocol used allowed for the participants to give specific answers related to themselves (Krueger, 2002). Focus groups were audio-recorded and an additional researcher took notes to allow facilitators to be fully engaged in the focus group. The note-taker recorded important statements and times of those statements to assist in making sense of the audio recordings. It is ideal for group discussions to be audio-recorded and transcribed (Kitzinger, 2006).

Lastly, the post-questionnaire was given to the students at the end of the discussion. This questionnaire included demographic questions inquiring about race, gender, sexuality, and religion. We hoped the participants would authentically bring up how these identities impact their involvement with activism. Students had the opportunity

to write down a “prefer not to answer” response when asked about their social identities. The post-questionnaire also asked participants about their overall experience in having conversations about identity-based activism. This open-ended follow-up question served to gauge student definitions and perspectives on how their definition of activism changed or remained the same following the conversation. Additionally, the pre- and post-questionnaire allowed students to articulate their individual thoughts without the impact of censoring and/or conforming to peer influence in the focus group conversation (Rose, 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

The transcribing of the audio recordings from focus groups was integral to data analysis. Generally, the data analysis process could be considered inductive in form, meaning that the process went from the detailed data (like transcriptions) to general codes and themes (Creswell, 2012). The transcriptions were text files analyzed by hand. A hand analysis provides the researchers with the ability to manually input and organize information in a text database (Creswell, 2012).

For the purposes of this exploratory data analysis, in vivo coding was the preferred coding method to accurately center the voices of the student participants. In vivo coding is specifically a coding process that extracts exact words or phrases spoken by the participants to represent themes that emerged (Saldaña, 2015). After the coding process, the list of codes was reduced (Creswell, 2012) and themes were drawn out in order to develop broad interpretations of the data. The themes were separated into smaller list in order to write detailed information about specific themes (Creswell, 2012). Several viewpoints and perspectives were included as a part of the data analysis. Additionally, we recognized the role our different identities played in relation to each other as a collective group. Our identities may have influenced the way that we viewed and interpreted data; thus, we communicated with each other as a group to acknowledge our individual lenses.

#### *Trustworthiness*

The selection and facilitation of the three focus groups were strategically organized by the researchers. The possibility of power dynamics and existing relationships between the facilitators and the participants was a factor in the study that the researchers sought to avoid. In doing so, researchers that supervised or had a close relationship with participants did not facilitate their focus group. This was done to circumvent familiarity in a group setting and potential biases in the answering of questions.

Additionally, in the coding process of the data, in order to ensure trustworthiness, the coding process was divided between researchers. Separating the coding process per person helped eliminate bias and prompt researchers to discuss their findings amongst the group. One of the ways to enhance trustworthiness and accuracy of a study was to allow multiple perspectives inform the results of the data (Creswell, 2012). Through the

independent coding process, each researcher was able to offer an interpretation that was unique and stemmed from their positionality.

#### *Researcher Positionality*

The constructivist framework prompted us to be cognizant that our research reflected the narratives of SU undergraduate students. However, all researchers have not been an undergraduate student at SU. It is also important to note that every researcher has participated in activism at SU. Our participation affected how we constructed our research study and also affected how we facilitated each focus group.

#### *Focus Group Participants*

Participants in this study included 8 undergraduate students at SU. Participants self-identified as 4 African American women, 2 Muslim women, and 2 women identifying as Latinx. The participants varied in their length of time and academic discipline at State University. The sample included 3 second-year students, 1 third-year student, 3 fourth-year students, and 1 fifth-year student. These participants were in the following academic colleges: School of Public Health, Media School, School of Global and International Studies, School of Informatics and Computing, and the College of Arts and Sciences.

## **Findings**

### *Definition Domain*

This domain hones in on our first research question — How do students construct individual definitions of ‘activism’? The majority of the participants defined activism as a verb. One participant said, “When I looked at the word ‘activism’, I initially underlined ‘act’ because I just think it’s more action.” This trend of activism being associated with action was seen throughout the focus groups. Some participants alluded to action being physically enacted like putting one’s body at risk.

Participants also discussed that activism is purposeful. True activism is when organizing is involved with one cohesive mission moving forward. That cohesive mission, in turn, causes change. For example, one participant said:

So when a group cares about an issue I think that activism with a purpose is something that pushes for not only a general awareness about the topic but also a specific immeasurable change within the space they operate and/or outside the spaces they operate.

From the students’ perspective, the desire for immeasurable change in the society should be the backbone of any movement and of organizing. A participant in the Black Lives Matter focus group noted that they felt “people are losing that there is [a] larger purpose” to joining organizations and making change.

Additionally, activism encompasses support. Support within activism recurred in multiple participants’ responses. One participant in the anti-Islamophobia focus group explained that she needed to support other groups in order to expect support about her own movements:

Being a Muslim makes you kind of care by default about activism because I feel like if I don't stand up for other groups that feel oppressed or feel not as cared about, then why should anyone care about me? I know that's a weird way to put it, but that's like a huge thing that motivates me. That I shouldn't expect people to care about me if I don't care about them.

Words like “aid”, “help”, and “support” were used often among all the focus groups highlighting the role that support plays. Many named that any form of injustice should be fought by all to strive for basic human rights.

Lastly, participants identified activism as being educational. One participant said that the role of educating people who are unaware of current issues is important to understand the varying perspectives that exist:

So that is why it's super important for me to try to get people to understand other people's situations ... No matter if I went through the same battle that they went through, I'm still not going to feel the same as they did, but I still think it's really important to try to like give people a different perspective to look at.

Participants labeled bringing awareness through programming efforts on campus or taking the time to talk to people through dialogues as ways to engage in education. Giving space for this separate education experience to take place is inherently activism.

#### *Influence Domain*

An important domain that emerged encompassed the factors that influenced definition of activism. The participants' definitions were influenced by family, personal experience, curricular support, and historical and current events. Several participants mentioned the influence of family in their construction of activism. One participant mentioned that family “never discouraged me from standing up for things that maybe they didn't stand for;” which highlighted the importance of family support within activism. Furthermore, the past and present experiences of family members were shown to have impact on the construction of participant's definitions. For example, a participant stated that “my parents are undocumented,” and how that experience ultimately influenced the motivation behind their activism.

The majority of participants discussed how personal experiences contributed to their definition of activism. One participant discussed how her parents encouraged her to become involved in serving the community, and how that influenced the perception of activism. Additionally, participants mentioned how social identities influenced their constructions of activism. One participant who identified as a Black, cis-gender woman described her experience of being the “other” in a community. For her, this experience was fine until she dealt with “racial violence” in her residence hall. This incident propelled the personal exploration of knowledge about activism.

Participants identified SU as an important academic environment that created and fostered their definition of activism. Several participants that identified with the Black Lives Matter movement discussed the importance of curricular influence on their social justice knowledge base. One participant detailed her experience of enrolling in an African American and African Diaspora Studies course and the historical knowledge gained from it. Not only was this knowledge instrumental to the construction of her activism, but it opened her eyes to the historical and current examples of activism.

The influence of historical and current events was also prevalent in the discussion. One participant directly tied her definition of activism to Martin Luther King and stated, “[W]hen Martin Luther King was marching, he was marching because he’s trying to show how these white people are like coming at us and we are not doing anything, and we are being very peaceful, and we are walking. And like, y’all are fighting us. But now we don’t face that.”

Additionally, one participant that identified as Syrian explained, “I’ve been active my whole life, but I didn’t really become super active until, you know, the Syrian conflict.” These illustrations further helped the participants reflect on how important history is and how it informs their activism today and at SU.

#### *Perceptions Domain*

An important domain that emerged from the participants were their perceptions of how administration, faculty, and staff viewed activism at SU. Collectively, the themes that emerged include institutional “cycle,” program/college impact, and lack of transparency.

The presence and continuation of an institutional cycle at SU was a dominant topic of conversation in the Black Lives Matter group. The participants defined the concept of institutional cycle at SU and how student leaders create plans for change and then graduate without sustaining it:

So I think that it’s really important to develop student leaders, leaders however you may define that, but like give people—the courage to say something about—maybe something I didn’t think about. I didn’t, you know, have all the tools to do, so they may come into these positions, they can carry on some of the stuff we talk about, some of the issues we face. Once we even figure out what that is and then maybe we will have to keep the cycle of having juniors and seniors talking about something and leaving, and the same thing happening the next year.

In this narrative, students are hyper-aware of the cycle in place at SU. Participants perceived this cycle as problematic and recognized that there is more work that key stakeholders could do to dismantle it and to better prepare student leaders at the institution to continue their work.

Students also perceived that administration, faculty, and staff provide various levels of support for activism based on their fields of study. One participant discussed her experience in her program and the excitement felt because of the support she received:

Faculty-wise, I'm in the Media School and the School of Global and International Studies, so I feel like I'm in an echo chamber because those are two academic colleges that definitely care a lot about the same issues that I care about.

This participant's experience within her academic colleges represent the importance of faculty support in activism. However, participants observed how the same level of support is not given to students who are in Business or in STEM fields at SU.

Additionally, student perceptions about administration, faculty, and staff directly correlate to lack of transparency. One participant discussed how her work with administration informed her perception on administration's lack of transparency:

I think that they're way too secretive. I mean, they don't tell us anything. Maybe that's just me because I'd like try to ask them for stuff that normal people would not ask them for but my general opinion of them is that they do care. I think they do care about us and about the issues that we do care about, but obviously, they always can do a better job with always being more transparent about what they can do and what they can't do and what they know.

The perception of faculty and staff was significantly different from the perceptions of administration. One participant mentioned that faculty and staff are "...much better than the administration, because we actually get to know them. Well, some of them open up to us, and understand and listen to us so I think they're much more understanding than the administration." This student perception of administration, faculty, and staff and the ways that they "show up" for students is important to consider when thinking about the level of support that student activists perceived from these stakeholders.

#### *Support Domain*

The support domain is focused on how students perceive support as effective or ineffective from administration, faculty, and staff. In regard to this domain, four themes arose: shallow support from administration, an overall lack of direction and information on who to consult when engaging in activism, investment in the movement, and curriculum support.

Some of the participants spoke to how they perceived support specifically from administrators as "fake" or "shallow". There was a sentiment administrators were not genuinely interested in supporting the activist efforts of students, specifically in regard to showing up in different spaces. For instance, in reference to an annual induction ceremony that occurs at the university, one student reflected on how they perceived administrative presence at the event: "If they were there, I feel like they were there to show face to the freshmen ... I feel like there aren't enough real support." Black Lives Matter focus group members recognized this induction ceremony as unique in their experience; thus, having administrators at the ceremony with what is perceived to be a lack of support is disruptive and contributes to a negative overall perception.

The perception that administrators show up in spaces to “show face” directly connects to participants’ discussions on the importance of investing in the movement. This is reflected by how administration, faculty, and staff physically show up in different spaces where activist programming and engagement occur. Majority of participants identified “showing up” and being visible at programs to be a critical part of being supportive. However, genuine investment and consistency were key in being visible at these programs as well. One participant discussed why they rarely think about administration and their roles:

Everything that I’ve seen make a difference on campus has come from students, so I truly trust students and their abilities more because I know that students don’t have as much to lose as administration does so you know, that’s why you see all these students always being active about issues...So it’s like I don’t think about the administration, so I guess everything that they’ve done has kind of lacked for me because I’ve never seen a protest that was like [SU President] is going to be there and speak about Black Lives Matter.

However, one participant mentioned how their perception of support from her instructor was positively impacted by seeing the instructor in various spaces:

And she’s like super involved with Middle Way House and domestic violence and things like that and she is so open to talking to anyone about like...She’s helped out, she’s spoken at some events I’ve been to. She’s always helping out, like oh do you know anyone that can do this and she truly, truly cares about not just teaching students but like implementing this in students’ lives and making sure they actually do something about it.

This quote from the participant affirms that perceptions of support are also influenced by visibility and how faculty and staff attempts to integrate critical dialogue around issues into their curricular and co-curricular experiences. Faculty and staff were viewed as positively supporting activism when they were either seen at different protests or programs, or were willing to bring up conversations around social issues inside the classroom; thus, initiating support for activism through integration into the learning environment.

Finally, some students mentioned that a critical barrier that often stood in the way of their activist efforts was not having a clear direction on how to organize and engage in activism on campus. Specifically, one student explained that they did not understand the organizational structure and when they reached out to administration and faculty for support, they were often shouldered with the responsibility of figuring it out for themselves:

I think you said ‘nobody knows org charts and nobody knows who to talk to’, and so I think that, that is a way that we are not being supported by faculty and staff.

Because the faculty member does know where to go and does know who to talk to and they're not telling us.

Multiple participants affirmed this sentiment of not knowing where to go or who to consult for information on organizing and instituting tangible changes on campus.

#### *Engagement Domain*

The engagement domain highlights the ways participants are involved in individual forms of activism. Our final research question touches on this component of engagement and how it relates to student's perceived support from administration, faculty, and staff. We found three different themes within this domain: programming, existing in the majority space, and not identifying as an activist.

As community members at SU, participants pointed to programming as part of their activist engagement. One participant said:

[W]hen I partake in protests or discussions or if I go to the events, that's what I see myself doing like helping others, so that other people who don't understand their issues that they become aware that these issues exist and that these issues are what people are facing and there are things that I can do to help people that are undergoing these issues, or issues that are involved with their identities.

For the majority of participants, programming represented action-orientated instances where they could educate themselves and others on different social issues. Some participants shared that they believe existing programming on campus to be shallow and passive, missing out on the opportunity to actively engage with those who do not fully understand an issue. Participants also believed that programming should be a way to demonstrate unity for a specific movement.

Participants' accounts of existing in a majority space while holding a marginalized identity showed up in the focus group discussions. One participant stated that programming became a form of "infiltrating" spaces dominated by majority identities and shouldering the responsibility of calling out problematic instances as a person of color. Another participant who shared the experience of existing in a majority space expressed that this forced her to educate herself on issues faced by individuals who shared her social identities in order to educate others.

Our final theme centered on multiple individuals hesitating to identify themselves as activists. Some participants pointed to having much more to learn. Others pointed to sacrifices made by historical examples of activists. It was easy for participants to identify other individuals as activists who are creating change in some way, but hesitated when placing themselves within that group of individuals. One member in the final focus group also brought up an important point about the work she was doing. This participant stated "... to me, I don't necessarily like to identify as an activist just because a lot of the things that we are advocating for are essential human needs." This student was incredulous as to



how the needs she was advocating for were not already protected and granted to individuals.

### **Limitations**

There exist several limitations in this research study that need to be acknowledged. As a constructivist framework dictates, we as researchers strived to recognize and value the experiences and realities of our participants. Our research participants consisted of only cis-gender women. This provides a challenge for how we think about our data and use it to construct a narrative of student's construction of activism and the support they feel from administration, faculty, and staff. We are missing the story and voice of other identities across the gender spectrum. As a result, our domains and themes are lacking multiple perspectives, which can be a point for further research.

The participants within each focus group knew each other from working together in their specific organization. Due to our sampling and recruitment methods we recognized early on that this would be a limitation for the discussions and our findings. Our research questions hoped to tease out individual experiences and feelings around activism and perceived support for activism from administration, faculty, and staff. However, participants' shared experiences might have steered the conversation towards those shared experiences and failed to tease out the nuances of individual experiences outside of the shared context.

Next, the environment in which focus groups were conducted changed each time. Due to scheduling and physical space availability, each focus group was conducted in a different location. Locations switched from a personal office, to a study room, to a classroom within a residence center. Each of these locations lend themselves to different levels of comfort and confidentiality for the participants involved. We know that physical environment plays a role in how students feel and engage. We also recognized that because of different identities, a space might have felt safe for some individuals and less safe for others.

Additionally, we must recognize the significance of national events in how this might have influenced focus group conversations. The 2016 Presidential Election occurred during our data collecting period and two focus groups occurred after this event. The dialogue surrounding national events and the presidential election might impact our findings.

Our participants easily identified and named examples of faculty and administration in their discussion but failed to do the same with staff. Because staff was not as thoroughly mentioned by the student participants, the themes and recommendations surrounding staff might carry less weight.

### **Recommendations**

Through the perspectives of the participants, an additional aspect of our inquiry generated suggestions for how administration, faculty, and staff can best support student activism at SU. The first recommendation for administration, faculty, and staff is showing purposeful visibility. Through being visibly present, the administration, faculty,

and staff show support in students' strides toward social changes. Some participants indicated that administration, faculty, and staff following through on their words of support in action demonstrates commitment to the causes.

Students also look for partnerships with administration, faculty, and staff to engage the institution and utilize resources to accomplish the goals of student activist organizations. In this partnership, the administration, faculty, and staff would maintain effective communication with the student leaders and organizations, whereas students would provide feedback and assist in administration, faculty, and staff's effort in supporting activism. Additionally, several participants pointed out that it is important for all student activists and relevant organizations to support each other's causes and stand in solidarity with one another. The administration, faculty, and staff should assume the role in encouraging students to form this supportive community across cultures and movements.

Finally, the participants believe an integration of a holistic social justice lens into the work of administration, faculty, and staff can help the campus overall to be more engaged in activism. This looks different for each type of institutional agent. For instance, administration should have the awareness of ongoing social issues and respond appropriately to the needs of various student populations on campus. Faculty members can incorporate a social justice lens into the curriculum regardless of discipline; with that, faculty members should also encourage discussions on current issues' impact on students' reality. As for staff members, they are instrumental in empowering students with tangible resources as well as knowledge to help students create an environment that is conducive to activist movements and change.

Along with the recommended suggestions, the research team recognizes potential challenges for administration, faculty, and staff to enact and embody support for student activism. Faculty members may not know how to incorporate a social justice lens into their curricula for students at various levels of development. Administration, faculty, and staff can potentially also experience conflict in their professional identity while being in support of student activism. Finally, the nature and the discipline of professional positions may limit administration, faculty, and staff's ability to fully invest in providing students with resources to foster student activism.

## **Implications for research**

### *Positionality*

Student affairs educators should be consistently involved in self-work and developing a sense of self-awareness in order to best support students. Being aware of how one's position and social identity impacts action is critical. Watt (2007) encourages student affairs professionals who want to be social justice advocates to "raise their awareness and reevaluate the dominant value system that operates within the American culture" (p. 115). In order to support activism around particular social justice issues, one has to consider how their identity may impact the way they identify and potentially

contribute to perpetuating oppressive campus environments. If an individual in power fails to recognize their positionality, missed opportunities for authentic support of students from marginalized backgrounds can occur. Patton & Bondi (2015) discussed the detriment of individuals with privileged identities failing to recognize their own participation in oppressive behaviors and positionality within systems of power. Recognizing the complexity of identity in conjunction with one's role as a student affairs administrator, faculty, or staff is critical to strengthening credibility and accountability with students.

### *Graduate Preparation Programs*

Graduate programs can prepare graduate students with opportunities to engage with learning more about student activism and how to engage in it from a graduate assistantship role. Daniel (2007) suggested that graduate programs need to prepare students to work and learn in a multicultural society as demographic changes in the country continue to develop. This claim regarding shifts in demographics does not exclude campus environments. Therefore, graduate students, regardless of identity, are entering environments in which underrepresented student presence is growing (Means, Bryant, Crutchfield, Jones, & Ade, 2016), which may mean growth in student activism. Graduate preparation programs can afford students with opportunities through assistantships and classroom discussions to engage in learning more about how to support student activism from their unique lens and perspective. Graduate preparation programs in higher education can construct environments inside and outside the classroom that promote meaningful discussions centered on creating and assessing environments, supporting students, and critical self-reflection.

### *Listen to and Uplift Student Voices*

Student affairs professionals should find opportunities to listen to the needs of students in order to remain attentive to how students are experiencing their environment. Place-identity theory holds that both negative and positive experiences within an environment shape identity and the collection of memories, ideas, values, and feelings influence one's thoughts about their environments (Proshansky et al., 1983). Student affairs professionals should keep this framework in mind when validating and affirming the experiences of students in their environments. By listening to student concerns, administrators, faculty, and staff members can recognize why students are organizing around a particular issue in the first place; thus, initiating proactive response methods instead of relying on reactive responses to concerns on campus. Listening to students on campus helps establish collaborative partnerships and shared responsibility over creating equitable environments for students. Administrators can work to take on some of the burden from students of transforming campus environments. Hernandez (2013) mentioned that at a particular university, the burden of knowing how to best support Latinas/os was often placed on the shoulders of students who had to voice their needs and constantly hold the university accountable when basic needs were not met. This idea of students having to shoulder sole responsibility of knowing how to support themselves can be dismantled through student affairs professionals being proactive and attentive to the

needs of students so that innovative policies, programs, and structures can be created to address issues.

### *Recognize Activism as a Learning Experience*

Students engaging in activism and activist work is inherently an educational process. Some of the participants in the focus groups mentioned that activism could take many different forms. From marching to engaging in dialogue via social media, students can participate in activism in multiple ways. Because of the complexity of what activism looks like, administrators, faculty, and staff can explore innovative and creative ways to integrate forms of activism into different spaces. Kuh (1996) coined the idea of creating “seamless learning environments” (p. 136) that promote the integration of intentional curricular goals with student experience outside the classroom. Participating in activism is one way that students can engage in learning more about ways to raise critical consciousness, understand how organizational structures operate, and develop strategies to assess campus environments.

Kuh (2008) suggested that learning communities are key examples of high-impact practices in which the learning across courses is integrated with discussion around questions that matter outside of the classroom. Since activism often happens outside the classroom, institutional leaders can work together to foster environments where activism can be integrated into learning communities on campus. In these learning environments, administrators, faculty, and staff should be intentional in validating students’ engagement in whatever form of activism they decide to participate in as inherently educational and developmental. Validating students’ expression of their concerns is critical for student affairs professionals to reflect on.

### *Student Activism Enacts Institutional and Social Change*

Organizing in the name of activism seeks to transform environments for the betterment of everyone. Student activism on campus can be one of the many components that push for changes towards creating equitable and socially just campus environments. Current students can use their voices in conjunction with support from administration, faculty, and staff to transform environments with meaningful implications for future students. Kezar (2008) suggests in order to truly enact change, “leaders need to operate in both transformational (provide vision, appeal to common values) and transactional ways (measure progress, hold people accountable)” (p.8). We would argue that student affairs administrators, faculty, and staff could utilize this multi-dimensional frame of supporting institutional change on campus. Because student affairs administrators, faculty, and staff could be considered institutional leaders on campus, they have the agency to integrate institutional values and accountability measures that reflect social change into their work.

Harper and Hurtado (2007) remind readers that transformational change is deep and pervasive; meaning it reflects a shift in values and assumptions that influence how the university operates and indicates that change is felt across the institutions in the work of administrators, faculty, and staff. The deep change that Harper and Hurtado describes can be reflected in the intentional ways that administrators, faculty, and staff support

activism on campus. Kezar (2008) suggests that the unique context of higher education serves as a successful space to drive for transformational change. Higher education can serve as a model from which other forms of transformational change in society can come into fruition.

## Conclusion

Student activism in institutions of higher learning has always provided opportunities for students to advocate for social change and to stand in solidarity for one another. Despite the changing focus and expression of activism in higher education, the collegiate environment has witnessed the meaningful activist work from students (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The findings in our research illuminated the ways in which student activists define activism; the types of experiences that influence their activism; the perceptions students have of administration, faculty, and staff members in support of activism; and the ways in which students would like to see the institution support activism. This demonstrates the critical role that higher education professionals and educators play in engaging students in activism and their responsibilities to advocate for a collegiate environment that is conducive to student activism.

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