Moving from Chasm to Convergence: Benefits and Barriers to Academic Activism for Social Justice and Equity

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Abstract

There are many natural links between academic work and activism that can be used for social justice and equity, but remain underdeveloped in higher education. Using the concept of liminality and the inclusion of personal voice that is central in Scholarly Personal Narrative methodology, this article explores academic activism in multiple ways. First, a series of "purposeful conversations" with educators at the University of Malta suggest that the level of self-affiliation with activism is influenced by academic discipline and the presence of impactful successes related to activism. Challenges within academic activism include devaluing activism within academic structures, and balancing the roles and actions of academic, activism, and personal lives. Second, benefits of activism in student learning are described, including (a) using synoptic learning as a curricular organizing concept for intellectual development, equity, and social justice and (b) exploring activism as a robust organizing concept for student learning across disciplines. Third, systemic barriers (e.g., maintenance of privilege) and anti-activism as moral high ground (e.g., activism as dangerous, too radical, narrowly appropriate, and unnecessary) are identified using two examples of curricular approval processes at a Midwestern university. Fourth, strategies to disrupt barriers to academic activism suggested by these results are presented.

Keywords: Academic activism, systemic inequities, curriculum, Scholarly Personal Narrative, liminality, synoptic learning

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I am an academic activist. Even as I write the words as the author of this piece, I have a lingering reluctance to make the claim that I am an activist, fearing that I am unworthy to assert something that should be reserved for those who have risked more, done more, achieved more in creating change. For me, defining and owning my personal activism as an academic is a tough nut to crack. Describing the process "in a nutshell" is more complex than the idiom allows. I define activism for myself broadly, framed by a widely used quote by Marian Wright Edelman, Founder of the Children's Defense Fund, and two questions by social justice activist Paul Kivel. Edelman said, "Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation. You just need to be a flea against injustice." Being a flea for justice can take many forms. Despite the frequency of narrow definitions of what activism is, there are few impactful, positive deeds that are not activism.

Kivel (2011) asked, "What do you stand for? Who do you stand with?" (p. 316). In my experience, the first question is more easily answered than the second, as actions taken to "stand with" require applications of beliefs through behaviors that may not be easy. Who one stands *with* reveals the truth of what one believes, where "the rubber hits the road."

The scope of this article is shaped by the following additional context of who I am and what I do. My work as an academic activist emphasizes teaching and curricula with an always present eye toward improving issues of social justice and equity. Another focus is exploring institutional structural barriers to educational equity. The essence of what I believe about my own academic activism is that my *choices* in teaching, scholarship, and service are guided by a belief that what I can do has impact, whether immediate or long-term, whether visible to me or not. My *actions* are driven by persistence, and my *strategies* derive from application of skills where I am strongest. I am compelled to push through my reservations about considering myself an activist because activism can take many forms, and occurs in actions both large and small. As an educator, I believe that activism as a curricular organizing concept is underexplored as a way to assist students in linking their passions to their intellectual development, and that activism is a robust concept that can be used across many disciplines. As a member of the post-secondary community, I believe that there is considerable work to be done in colleges and universities in viewing activism as a relevant and essential part of meeting institutional visions and missions regarding equity and social justice, and in eliminating the structural barriers in institutional policies and practices that hinder that work.

Conceptual Approaches to Moving from Chasm to Convergence

Liminality

I am not alone in grappling with the challenges of identifying as an academic activist. Puar (in Greyser, 2012), Playet (2014), and Goldrick-Rab (2014), among others, reflect on the meaning of academic activism from their personal perspectives. A common theme in their words is the difficult process of defining and balancing the worlds of academia and activism, as if each world is on a different side of a chasm that can't be breached.

The sense of being "betwixt and between" is at the heart of liminality, a theoretical construct coined by anthropologist Victor Turner in the 1960s to refer to the ambiguity that occurs during the process of rituals, where one is at a threshold. Turner adds "outsiderhood" and "lowermost status" as connected to liminality in the following description.

> ...*liminality* represents the midpoint of transition in a status-sequence between two

positions, *outsiderhood* refers to actions and relationships which do not flow from a recognized social status but originate outside it, while *lowermost status* refers to the lowest rung in a system of social stratification in which unequal rewards are accorded to functionality differentiated positions (as cited in La Shure, 2005, para. 14).

The words of academic activists in describing themselves frequently capture the sense of liminality. The response of Jasbir Puar, Professor of Women's Studies at Rutgers, to an interview question about the relationship between activism and academic work eloquently articulates the challenges of segmenting and defining academic life and activist life.

> The binary or the finite distinctions between academic work and activist analysis is an impossible one for me to inhabit. Like many in my position, I could not tell you where my activist analysis ends and my academic work begins, or vice versa. What interests me is how to address the productive nature of the binary between activism and academia and attend to the historically hierarchical relations of the two realms (Greyser, 2012, para. 2).

Playut (2014) describes her personal struggle and journey, including a longing for engagement with others.

> Having always been too academic for the activists and too activist for the academics I have spent most of my time trying to create a new understanding by straddling both worlds. I knew I was not alone . . . . but I had a hard time understanding if there was a "we." I knew there were people around who seemed to engage in activism *in spite* of their academic standing but it was harder to identify people who used their academic training and resources as part of their activism, and vice versa. Those whom I heard about and admired from a distance seemed far away and scattered – big names but not real. People whom I could read or listen to but not people with whom I could sit down and have a cup of coffee and *learn* with (para. 3).

Using the concept of liminality is promising in its centrality to shared challenges voiced by academic activists. It is also appropriate for the study of marginalized groups, and is emerging in cultural studies. For example, Rollack (2012) uses liminality in her work with critical race theory and counter-narrative. Morgan (2016) explores the relationship between satire and racial identity.

Scholarly Personal Narrative

In addition to academic activists being in a place of liminality, it can be argued that the scholarship of academic activism is similarly situated, lacking theoretical constructs or methodologies that are widely used across disciplines. Although most disciplines have theoretical frameworks that are used by activists within their academic field, the dearth of interdisciplinary theory specific to academic activism isolates academic activists from each other and reduces opportunities to provide examination of collective context, themes, meaning, and strategies.

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) is a qualitative methodology developed by Nash (2004) that blends personal stories, voice, and scholarship in narrative, allowing for integration and synthesis of meaning. SPN has increasingly been used as a methodology across disciplines to write about social justice, privilege, and marginalization (Nash and Viray, 2014; Hyater-Adams,

2012; Unger, 2014).

For each academic activist, there is a densely woven tapestry of experiences and beliefs that create their stories—stories that have meaning for both acts of activism and intellectual connections of activism within academic life. SPN provides a promising methodology to explore the liminality, breadth, and personal nature of academic activism, and to advance the development of shared theoretical constructs.

As I consider the development of my thinking as an academic activist in the context of SPN, I have been influenced by events in both my scholarly and personal lives that reflect points of chasm and convergence. In the next sections, I will highlight some of those events.

Conversations about Academic Activism at the University of Malta

Context and Process

Adding to the voices from the previous sections, the question, "What does academic activism look like, and how do academics view their own activism?" guided a series of conversations I had with educators at the University of Malta in December 2015. My interest in Malta began in the 1980s, when I spent several months there during a three-year period studying the impact of tourism on culture and built environment. Malta is a small European Union (EU) country with a rich history of activism in social, economic, and political issues. In my early work, which included contacts with educators at the University of Malta, I observed that the University is integrated into the cultural fabric of the country, where academics work closely with both government entities and non-government organizations (NGOs). I saw the unique challenges and opportunities for social change that were present in a small country, in contrast to larger countries such as the United States.

The small geographical scale of Malta, my knowledge of the culture, and the educational-political connections of the University made Malta ideal to explore academic activism beyond the literature and my own experiences. Prior to my 2015 trip, I perused University of Malta faculty vitas and scholarship to identify people with interests similar to my own, focusing on social, political, or educational equity and change. Initial contacts were made, and I had conversations (ranging from 45 minutes to two hours) with ten people. Four were from a newly formed, interdisciplinary university division, the Faculty of Social Wellbeing. Two were from the Faculty of Education. One was from History, another from the Humanities, and one from the Institute for Tourism, Travel, and Culture. A tenth person, a former Director of Tourism in the Ministry of Tourism, joined the tourism meeting.

Purposeful Conversation

The term "purposeful conversation" has been used by Cookson (2009), who discusses the relationship of modern technology to the conversational approach in Socratic intellectual processes. For my conversations in Malta, my goal was to create a space for purposeful conversation that encompassed listening, reflecting, and learning from the faculty members there.

Each of the informal conversations was adapted to allow the educator to guide the direction, which allowed greater opportunity for them to articulate their personal beliefs and interests, disciplinary perspectives, and expertise. What emerged was indicative of true conversation—a

back and forth of engaging with ideas with peers, following up on interests, discussing teaching strategies and potential collaborations, taking twists and turns instead of a straight path. Questions were used to guide the conversations, but not all questions were asked of all educators. What are your personal activism interests? What strategies/perspectives do you use? What are issues in being both an educator and an activist? What are the biggest equity issues and challenges in Malta? What does activism look like? What are models of successful activism? How does activism connect to your teaching?

    Through speaking with each person about their histories and beliefs and what I learned separately from their public scholarship and work, I began to see patterns of similarities and differences in who self-identifies as an activist, perceptions of challenges, and curricular connections to activism.

Who Self-Identifies as an Activist?

    Three factors related to self-identification as an activist emerged from the collective conversations.
    Impact of level of self-identification as an activist. Faculty level of self-identification as activists was critical in their ability to think and talk about activism explicitly. Whether or not each person self-identified as an activist, and their definitions of activism, were related to (a) how explicitly activism was integrated into their academic discipline, and (b) their primary professional affiliations outside of the University. Not surprisingly, educators who were part of the Faculty of Social Wellbeing (FSW) were the most likely to identify themselves as activists, as their predispositions, expertise, and work aligned with traditional definitions of activism (e.g., social work, youth studies, gender studies). In one of my first interviews, an FSW educator greeted me with a smile, an extended hand, and intentionality in the clear statement of her identity. She said, "Hello. I am an educator activist."
        Similarly, educators whose work included collaboration with NGOs were more likely to identify as activists than those whose work focused within governmental agencies and/or their disciplinary and scholarly organizations. This difference likely reflects the impact of narrow definitions of what activism is and who activists are; again, the educators engaged in more traditional activism strategies are more likely to see themselves as activists.
    Passion as a foundational element to activism. During the course of the conversations, I realized that *passion* was what was shared by both those who viewed themselves as activists (activism-identified) and those who did not (disciplinary-identified). It became clear to me early on that my conversation topic of "academic activism" was somewhat puzzling for those who did not view themselves explicitly as activists. In one conversation, for example, I knew the person had spent many years involved in developing and applying an effective and impactful equity framework that had been used in many settings and countries. In the beginning of the conversation, he did not define activism as part of his work, but when I asked him to tell me about the framework, his responses clearly reflected both connections to activism processes and his passion for equity.
    Importance of impactful events. Most of the conversations included sharing of specific actions or events where each person felt their involvement contributed to positive outcomes or change. These were seminal events in being an activist or pursuing something that they cared about that propelled their work. For example, one faculty member, actively and publically involved in the European refuge crisis, described in detail the mobilization of activist social

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workers, lawyers, and educators to prevent the turning away of a group of refugees who had arrived on the Mediterranean Sea shore of Malta by boat. The unexpected event was met with swift and organized action by committed people, who successfully provided services and safe haven for the immigrants.

Challenges Within Academic Activism

A challenge to being an academic activist that was discussed by several educators is the level of valuing and rewarding activism within broad academic structures. Some of the educators expressed feelings of a lack of "fit" between their activism and academic lives, echoing the words of others presented earlier in this paper.

The impact of strong administrative support and valuing of faculty was evident. Administrators in the group articulated how they saw themselves as collaborators with their faculty in the intellectual engagement of their fields, as well as leaders in providing vision and support to scaffold faculty work. Conversations with the faculty members confirmed the value and appreciation of that approach—an approach that is in sharp contrast to administrative models that are authoritarian, "top down," and that emphasize hierarchy and compliance with external mandates at the expense of intellectual engagement.

A contrast to the United States that surfaced in the conversations was that there appear to be fewer corporatization and external mandates in higher education in Malta than what have proliferated in the United States during the last 20 years. Faculty in Malta continue to have a level of autonomy and academic freedom that allows them to make intellectually grounded choices that are respected.

The personal dimensions of balancing the roles of academic, activism, and personal lives varied in the conversations, but essentially focused on making choices for time and energy on professional matters, and in how to incorporate activism into teaching and writing. Most of the activist-identified educators spent considerable time in community engagement. A primary concern for faculty was the challenge of deciding where to focus when, as one educator put it, "so much work needs to be done." A secondary focus across multiple conversations was on determining the "fit" of their work to University rewards systems.

Curricular Connections to Activism

Not surprisingly, the level of curricular connections to activism made by educators varied. Educators who self-identified as activists talked about the importance of including the connections between personal activism and social justice in the content and pedagogy of their courses; content and activism were explicitly linked. Educators who did not self-identify as activists emphasized the content of the disciplines, with varying degrees of explicit inclusion of activism.

Collectively, the conversations enriched my thinking about the range of intellectual and disciplinary perspectives that are linked to activism and what is shared in academic activism across cultures. They also contributed to my belief that there are many unexplored opportunities to use academic activism to enhance student learning.

The Case for Academic Activism in Student Learning

Activism as a Curricular Organizing Concept

When students care about something, they are on fire to learn. Anatomically, when intensely focused, cells in the brain impact other cells, making connections faster, memory retrieval quicker, and shielding out extraneous stimuli easier. The opposite experience of tedious work, metaphorically referred to as "mind numbing," is based on those anatomical factors that enhance deep thinking. And, although the goal of educators is rarely to intentionally create experiences that are perceived as tedious for students, it happens, particularly when students do not see the learning as relevant, important, or interesting.

Synoptic Learning

Finding the "sweet spot" to achieve deep thinking and maximize student learning is elusive. It requires awareness of new information—seeing what was previously unseen—and connecting that information in meaningful ways through analysis and synthesis. This approach—synoptic learning—focuses on making connections and exploring complexities by blending and considering what is unified and together (the prefix "syn") and what is seen ("optic").

The word "synoptic" has been applied to learning, for example in assessing integration of student learning (Principles of Assessment, n.d.) and in connecting learning from two or more areas or learning modules (Press, 2014). Synoptic learning is ideal for equity and social justice work, which requires both awareness of new information and concepts, and understanding multiple perspectives. Moving from awareness and understanding to developing action and strategies is enhanced by exploring and applying the tenets and rich history of activism movements, and can allow students to achieve deeper meaning from their own learning.

Activism as a Robust Concept for Intellectual Development

Most academics are intellectually engaged and passionate about their field, and through their academic content and "ways of knowing and doing" have the ability and expertise to make explicit connections between issues and activism. Methodologies and content vary, but academic disciplines have at their heart the relationship of deep understanding of what has been and is to the meaning for the present and future.

Connecting activism to intellectualism is also possible *across* disciplinary fields. If intellectualism at its core is "thinking about thinking," then college students experiencing activism from a variety of intellectual perspectives across disciplinary fields in have great potential in contributing to their own intellectual development.

Philosopher Albert Camus (1965) describes an intellectual as "someone whose mind watches itself." Seeking equity and social justice is an intellectual endeavor. The intellectual process of the mind watching itself can be applied to self-examination of choices related to activism and its impact, and well as to developing strategies and pedagogies for curricular applications.

Barriers to Academic Activism

Context

The concept of "the mind watching itself" as an act of intellectualism can also be extended to the role of "the mind watching others," with "others" including the behaviors, policies, and practices of inequality in post-secondary institutions. Structural barriers within institutions are rooted in privilege, and fueled by narrow definitions of what activism is and who activists are.

There is often a disconnect between answers to the questions discussed earlier, "What do you stand for?" and "Who do you stand with?", in colleges and universities. From institutional mission statements to personal declarations supporting equity, public statements frequently do not align with actions.

Dismantling structural inequities requires examination of the details within the policies and practices of institutions. The "stories" within institutions, documented by public materials, are frequently replicated elsewhere, and are therefore important in providing insight into pervasive privileged practices in higher education. The following two stories of curriculum development provide examples of barriers in course approval processes. Arguably, course approval processes are "ground zero" for curricular change; what is approved or not approved defines the curriculum, and the curriculum shapes what is learned and valued. The first story focuses on the approval process of a university-wide dominant privilege course; the second details the approval process of a department-level course on activism.

Maintaining Privilege

"*Developing strategies for social change is not an appropriate goal for any university course; universities are not political organizations.*" (personal communication, March 12, 2008). This statement, imbedded in a sea of words, were the key to unlocking why and how a course I proposed was experiencing unexpected resistance from an approval committee. It was an Honors Program course on dominant privilege in the United States, and had, upon first review, appeared to be sailing through the process. The questions from the review committee were limited "usual suspects"— "clarify here, add a bit there." Revisions were made quickly and easily, and a few weeks later, I received a lengthy response from the committee, now expressing grave concerns about the course. One member's feedback was included verbatim (but without the member's name), and included the preceding quote.

Confused, I reviewed the public vitas of Committee members. One member included a link to a personal web page, which included links to Rush Limbaugh, Laura Ingraham, and Ann Coulter. It also included links to the National Association of Scholars (NAS) and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). NAS includes "watchlists" of university programs perceived as having liberal agendas (their Argus project), and FIRE has a long history of targeting college programs that support inclusivity and reject hate speech.

Privileged perspectives as normal and neutral. What is privileged in colleges and universities and perceptions of what is neutral were likely at the heart of the comment of the committee member, as well as in the beliefs of NAS, FIRE, and similar organizations. What in curriculum is privileged? What is considered normative? Examining patterns provides insight into these questions. Attacks on curricula are not new. Horowitz (2004, 2006) argued over a decade ago that conservative perspectives were being silenced in favor of liberalism on college campuses; using labels of "conservative" and "liberal" belied the complexity of issues and

existence of levels of privilege, racism, and marginalization. In 2007, entire issues of the *Journal of Teacher Education* (Volume 58, Issue 5) and the *Journal of Educational Controversy* (Volume 2, Issue 2) were devoted to a controversy surrounding the removal of the term "social justice" from the primary education accreditation organization.

More recently, the organization Turning Point USA has adapted the strategies of FIRE, creating a "watch list" of over 200 college and university professors viewed as having liberal agendas. There are Turning Point chapters on many college campuses. On their website, they describe themselves as follows:

> Turning Point USA is a 24/7-365 activist organization. Our staff and students travel to campuses in all 50 states to identify young conservatives, connect them with local chapters and resources, advertise conservative values, engage in face-to-face and peer-to-peer conversations about the pressing issues facing our country (Turning Point USA, 2016, para. 2).

Potential bias in committee structures. In colleges and universities, privilege can be protected by committee structures and decision making that lack transparency and accountability. Decisions about curricula, internal grants, and many other faculty initiatives are made behind closed doors, generally with limited feedback provided. The case of the dominant privilege course was an exception; in most cases, reviewers do not so explicitly post their political leanings on their websites.

The malevolence of benevolence to privilege. It was apparent through the written feedback to me that the person who indicated that he would not support the proposal was an outlier, but the other committee members did not substantively challenge him. The written feedback to me stated:

> In the end, the committee tabled the proposal again and instructed me [the Honors staff person] to ask for 'substantial' revisions. They asked me to stress, though, that they do support the course as being offered in Honors — as one member put it, 'this course needs to be taught'—and they hope that you're willing to undertake the revisions (personal communication, March 12, 2008).

The preceding statement reflects a classic disconnect between "What do you stand for?" and "Who do you stand with?" The burden of identifying and responding to the faulty assumptions of the outlier shifted from the committee to me. Although the reason for the committee not taking responsibility is unknown, it likely reflected a desire to keep goodwill on the committee, coupled with a lack of authenticity in care about the dominant privilege course approval. What is known is that Committee members did not take a strong internal stand, therefore risking nonapproval of the course that they said "needs to be taught." In committee structures, there are many places to hide, which is a structural barrier that impacts curriculum in many ways. My 3600-word response to the committee was carefully constructed to respond to the ersatz and politically-motivated challenges. It yielded swift approval of the dominant privilege course.

Anti-Activism as Moral High Ground

"I am ethically opposed to putting our students at risk of being fired by talking about activism. We should be teaching our students to be compliant, not activists."
"I will support this proposal only if the word 'activism' is replaced by 'advocacy.'"
"What are your credential to teach this course? Have you ever been a Principal? A Superintendent?" (Department faculty, personal communication, April 22, 2015)

A public departmental discussion of a proposed course entitled "Educators as Activists" included the preceding three comments, each from a different faculty member. Explicit in each comment was perceptions of the professional responsibility to protect teacher education students at a public Predominantly White Institution (PWI) from the consequences of activism. Each comment represented a common and damaging stance based on narrow and unexamined assumptions and stereotypes. And, although each of the three people's discussions included some iteration of "I am for equity and social justice ("What do I stand for?), the arguments clearly did not "stand with" activism.

Activism as dangerous. The premise of an unethical nature of teaching activism created a false "for students" and "against students" dichotomy. Anyone supporting the course would, under the logic of the premise, be against the best interests of students. The idea of activism as dangerous reflects both a stereotypical view of activism and a paternalistic view of education that suggests that students shouldn't be given information and are unable to process and apply what they learn in making informed decisions.

Activism as too radical. Promoting an "activism lite" compromise of "advocacy" trivializes the meaning and impact of activism movements and the serious, intentional work that is and has historically been part of them. While distinctions between advocacy and activism are appropriate to explore and were included in the course materials presented to faculty, that exploration was disregarded in favor of stereotypes and previously held beliefs.

Activism as appropriate for a selected few. Publically questioning the qualifications of a colleague to teach a course was unprecedented in the department, and reflected both a sense of entitlement and a narrow understanding of activism. The related comment suggesting that being a school administrator was somehow prerequisite to teaching an activism course was both bewildering and arcane.

Activism as unnecessary. Inherent in all three comments—activism as dangerous, too radical, and only appropriate for some—was a trivialization of the work of activists and the issues they address. Suggesting that future teachers should not be exposed to activism denies the realities of the many equity and social justice issues impacting students, their families, and their communities. The majority of faculty members agreed. When the vote was taken, the course was approved, 16 in favor and three against the proposal.

Strategies for Moving from Chasm to Convergence

Moving from chasm to convergence calls for not only learning about challenges within academic activism that create the chasm, but acting on that learning to move toward convergence. The perspectives presented in this writing from the views of academic activists, the need for academic activism to support student learning, and the barriers that exist for academic activists within the political and disciplinary contexts of colleges and universities include challenges and benefits to academic activism. The perspectives evoke a variety of strategies that can be used for personal and collective academic activism, including the following.

Use who you are, what you know, and what you do. Academics know their disciplines and the challenges within them, and are situated with depth of knowledge to create and use strategies for activism that are contextually appropriate to their fields and institutions.

Be vigilant about the necessary details that need to be known to disrupt institutional higher education barriers. Be the mind watching itself and others. Barriers are often hidden (or are in

plain sight) behind long-standing institutional practices. Work to ask the questions to expose them. When barriers are counter to stated university goals, use those goals to center questions and disruption. Use privilege as an organizing concept to consider who benefits and who doesn't benefit from decisions and policies within the institution.

Apply your voice (written and oral), both in your institution and in your discipline, to move academic activism from liminality to centrality. If you are in a field where activism is already central and part of the scholarship and pedagogy, consider developing interdisciplinary relationships to broader the impact of your disciplinary knowledge base on activism. Academic activism as a focus of your scholarship can contribute to creating theoretical or conceptual frameworks in academic activism.

Build a support network of other academic activists to thwart feelings of isolation. Others are out there. Collaborate. Write together. Learn together. Within your institution, consider opportunities for faculty learning communities. Beyond your institution, explore connections in national and international interdisciplinary networks, such as the International Network of Scholar Activists (INOSA).

Work to support activism as a conceptual framework for student intellectualism, both in your existing courses and in your departmental curriculum. Engage students in thinking about themselves as activists through their intellectual work and in community engagement.

Learn to recognize outlier perspectives that focus on maintaining privilege or taking an anti-activism stance so that they have less impact in derailing or deflecting discussions and positive action. Consensus is great when it can happen, but time and energy devoted to outliers limits authentic, productive conversation.

Finally, take a breath. Articulate your own view of your academic activism. Who you are can only be defined by you. Your expertise, experiences, and passions are unique. If you choose to be an academic activist, then you *are an academic activist*.

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