EXPLORING HOW STUDENT ACTIVISTS EXPERIENCE MARGINALITY AND MATTERING DURING INTERACTIONS WITH STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Carli Rosati
Rice University

David J. Nguyen
Ohio University

Rose Troyer
Capital University

Quan Tran
Youngstown State University

Zachary Graman
Ohio University

Joseph Brenckle
Dartmouth College

This study examines student activists' interactions with student affairs professionals. Guided by Schlossberg's (1989) marginality and mattering framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 student activists. Student activists experienced marginalization in three ways (1) misperceptions of student organizing, (2) not feeling heard, and (3) lacking authentic interaction with student affairs professionals. The article concludes with a discussion of the myriad of ways that student affairs professionals can positively engage with student activists.

Please direct inquires about this manuscript to: David Nguyen, nguyen4@ohio.edu

Throughout the history of U.S. colleges and universities, students have turned to activism as a way to advance different social, political, or equity agendas (Broadhurst, 2014; Rhoads, 2016; Thelin, 2004). Despite this continued presence, some student affairs professionals continue to view activists as disrupting campus equilibrium or "detrimental to campus order and tranquility" (Astin, 1993, p. 48). Although these student activists are meeting a core aim of postsecondary education, which is to become civically engaged, they often are viewed and marginalized as troublemakers and chastised for raising awareness to persistent inequities (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005).

Previous research on student activism tends to focus on engagement and activism outcomes (Astin, 1993; Rhoads, 1998; Thelin, 2004). In addition, several researchers have documented how activism matters for fostering student development aims (Broadhurt, 2014), yet, activists often perceive student affairs professionals as detrimental to their advancement efforts (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Findings from several studies have pointed to a need for better understanding the needs of student activists and student affairs professionals, rather than struggle over decision-making (Rhoads, 1998, 2016; Ropers Huilman et al., 2005). For example, Hamrick (1998) suggested that student activists offer "alternate opinions, conclusions, and judgements" that can enrich discourse and dialogue while advocating for specific causes (p. 457). Despite their efforts in shaping campus policy, much of the decision making is left to campus administrators and student affairs professionals (Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron 2008; Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). Barnett and colleagues (2008) argued that student activists attempt to influence student affairs professionals in gaining support for campus change; however, they lack their power in shifting policy. Lacking decision-making and power can lead to activists lacking a sense of mattering when interacting with student affairs professionals that cannot help them bring about the change desired. More empirical insight is needed to examine the role of interactions between student activists and higher education administrators. Because more students arriving on college campuses are interested in engaging in activism than ever before (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016), this study explores the marginality and mattering experiences of student activists when engaging with student affairs professionals.

Background

Since the creation of U.S. higher education institutions, activism has been a fixture for students to express malcontent with campus and societal issues (Broadhurst, 2014; Rhoads, 1998; Thelin, 2004). Within the U.S., youth populations are often portrayed as politically disengaged, which is reflected in low voter turnout at polling stations. Nevertheless many college students enrolled in higher education institutions remain civically active across campuses and communities (Wong, 2015). For example, more than 160 protests took place across U.S. higher education institutions during Fall 2014 (Wong, 2015). Data from the 2015 Cooperative Institutional Research Program survey indicated that more than 8.5 percent of 141,189 incoming first-year students planned to participate in student protests while in college (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016, para. 4). The 8.5 percent represents an annual increase of nearly 3 percent from the 2014 installment. In short, colleges and universities remain a "natural incubator for protest" (Weiland, Guzman, & O'Meara, 2013, p. 7). As more and more students engage in activism, student affairs professionals must explore ways to serve and support these students.

The reasons why students become involved in activism vary. Several researchers have found student activism promotes student engagement (Astin, 1993; Friedman & Ayres, 2013; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Rhoads, Saenz & Carducci, 2005) and stu-

dent development (Biddix, 2014; Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009; Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017; Kezar, 2010; Pascarella, Salisbury, Martin, & Blaich, 2012). Astin's (1993) longitudinal research identified that students engaging in activism experienced significant development growth during their college-going careers. Similarly, Biddix (2014) identified the positive effects of activism on students' self-confidence, self-efficacy, and public speaking. Student activists engage in these behaviors to fight for justice and they rely on student affairs professionals to guide them within this process (Barnett et al., 2008; Ropers-Huilman et al, 2005).

Higher education institutions provide space for college students' to develop and foster civic growth and engagement (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Thelin, 2004). Student affairs professionals are usually tasked with supporting a myriad of student initiatives and interpreting institutional policies (Harrison, 2010; Harrison & Mather, 2017; Broadhurst et al., in press). Despite student affairs professionals' effort to encourage student civic engagement, researchers have documented misalignment between institutional leaders, including student affairs professionals, and the student goals central to activist efforts (Ahmed, 2012; Barnhardt, Sheets, & Pasquesi, 2015; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). For example, Barnhardt and colleagues (2015) examined how students' perception of institutional support for activist causes on campus increased civic commitment.

Student affairs professionals supporting and advising student activists can "exert a notable influence" in students feeling like their espoused values matter. Ropers-Huilman and colleagues (2005) explored how 26 student activists characterized the role of administrators in addressing students. Findings showed that students perceived administrators as gatekeepers, antagonists, supporters, and absentee leaders. Hoff-

man and Mitchell (2016) explored the discursive framing of how institutional leaders and student affairs professionals respond to student activism. Results showed that institutional leaders addressed the demands of students in nonperformative ways. Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) argued that while the university makes efforts to recruit diverse students, minoritized student populations are not met with the same amount of support once on campus. When the students attempted to voice their frustration to the administration, they were met with inaction, despite having taken the appropriate bureaucratic steps to address concerns. As a result, the majoritized narrative was not ruptured and the same "nonperformative" administrative responses were produced (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016, p. 283).

Student activists occupy an important, yet marginalized role within campus communities. They often intend to bring together different populations for the sake of advancing equity; however, their efforts may be misinterpreted by student affairs professionals and campus administrators (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student affairs professionals play an important role in providing "powerful opportunities [for student activists] to bring campus groups together around common dialogues rooted in advancing our understanding of democracy and multiculturalism" (Rhoads, 1998, p. 518). When activists do not feel like they matter to campus leaders, the students most marginalized by inaction may feel further disparaged (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Martin, 2014; Pasque & Vargas, 2014). This study explores: how do student activists experience marginality and mattering during interactions with student affairs professionals? The researchers focus attention on the activists' interactions with student affairs professionals and the feelings of marginality and mattering derived from the interactions.

Theoretical Framework
Schlossberg's (1989) theory of mar-

ginality and mattering guided the study's framing and data analysis. This theoretical perspective emerged from Schlossberg's evaluation of Astin's (1984) involvement theory postulates. Astin's emphasis on student involvement encouraged Schlossberg to think deeply about what might facilitate involvement. Schlossberg (1989) hypothesized that "involvement creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their own personal worth" (p. 5). She offered marginality and mattering as a concept for shaping community.

Marginality occurs when an individual does not feel central in a situation. Loss of centrality often occurs during a transition or new experience in one's life (Schlossberg, 1989). According to Schlossberg (1989), "[f]eeling marginal leads us to conclude that we do not matter or confuses us about the group to which we do" (p. 8).The situation may lead to feelings of inferiority and self-consciousness. However, feelings of marginality often occur as a temporal condition. As new experiences create marginality for individuals, social action works to deconstruct marginality. As students transition into college or university life, the vast amount of new experiences can evoke an intense loss of centrality. New roles in the classroom, the residence hall, and at student organization meetings elicit marginality. Over time, students ask questions, make friends and propose new ideas that make them central to these settings and marginality shifts to mattering.

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) define mattering as "the beliefs people have, whether right or wrong, that they matter to someone else, that they are the object of someone else's attention, and that others care about them and appreciate them" (p. 21). Building communities in which students feel as though they matter is essential to satisfaction and retention during the collegiate experience (Schlossberg, 1989).

Schlossberg originally developed this framework for application to adult populations; but over time, this framework has been adapted and utilized in higher education contexts. While no studies thus far have used her framework for studying the experiences of student activists, several studies have used marginality and mattering for minoritized student experiences (see Hadley, Hsu, Addison & Talbot, 2017; Huerta & Fishman, 2014). Findings from these studies yield nuanced insights into how students perceive marginality and mattering compared to the adult populations originally intended.

The framework of marginality and mattering is essential to ensuring that student activists feel validated and supported at institutions of higher education. As student activists seek to create tension within their current structure, they already face the challenge of having marginalized thoughts on their campuses. There is an increased need to find support in a community of fellow activists. Feelings of mattering will allow student activists to further develop, politically and personally. In order for student activists to make a difference, they must feel like their voice matters.

Methodology

This qualitative research study explored how 10 self-identified student activists experienced marginality through interactions with student affairs professionals at a large, public institution in the midwestern United States. Since few studies have considered how interactions with student affairs professionals hinder student activists' behaviors, a constructivist epistemology guided this qualitative study's methodological approach. A constructivist orientation provides interview participants with a space to ascribe meanings to the events and interactions experienced by the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Constructivist approaches provide an opportunity "to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meaning into a few categories or ideas" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Constructivist approaches are

well-suited for this inquiry as we underscore how activists ascribe and assign meaning to their interactions with student affairs professionals.

Institutional Context

This study occurred at a large, midwestern public institution in the United States ("Midwestern U"), classified by the Carnegie Classification system as a doctoral university with higher research activity. The institution enrolls more than 20,000 undergraduate students during the most recent academic year. Midwestern U has a history of being a politically active campus where many students are highly involved and expressive of bipartisan politics. To support myriad student political interests, the institution hosts more than 20 different political and activist groups officially registered through the student activities office. In addition, the surrounding community has several social justice oriented groups that also use an activist approach.

The typical Midwestern U undergraduate students is 18-24 years and is a full-time student. The undergraduate population is 51% female to 49% male. Midwestern U is a predominately white institution, with 82.5% of the main campus undergraduate population identifying as White, 8.9% identifying as Black, 6.5% identifying as Multiracial, and 4.5% identifying as Hispanic. International students compose 4.6% of the undergraduate student population. The university has a large first-generation student population of approximately one-third of the matriculating class each year.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Before beginning this study, the researchers received approval from Midwestern U's institutional review board. Participant recruitment occurred through direct outreach to two student activist groups. To attract interest in the study, the researchers sent personalized emails describing the study to two activist-centric student organizations -- Alpha and Beta -- at Midwestern U. These two student groups are categorized as social justice organizations, working in particular with a feminist orientation. These student activist organizations were selected because they often engage student affairs professionals in discussions regarding equity issues occurring at Midwestern U. Alpha's organizational mission focuses on campus educational initiatives by hosting speakers to discuss reproductive justice, as well as engaging in local, state, and federal engagement through revision of public policy. Beta's mission focuses on the coordination of direct-action campus events, such as organizing sit-ins, protests, and rallies to discuss inequality on campus. Organizers from both organizations invited the researchers to attend weekly meetings and share information about the study. At weekly meetings, the researchers discussed the project aims and invited anyone interested to complete an interest form. Fifteen students expressed interest in participating.

The researchers sought a purposeful sample that would respond to the study's research questions. The use of sampling criteria yielded a purposeful sample addressing the study's aims, which was to select and interview student activists that would frequently interface with student affairs professionals (Patton, 2002). To this end, the researchers selected activists holding leadership roles within Alpha and Beta because these students often work closely with student affairs professionals to plan on-campus events, including rallies and protests. Alpha and Beta worked respectively and collaboratively to organize events to call on the Dean of Students, Vice President of Student Affairs, or the President to create change on campus. While Midwestern U did not require the activist organization to be advised by professional student affairs professionals, these organizations often consulted with student affairs professionals about planned events and campus happenings.

Ten student activists participated in the study. Table 1 displays demographic profiles for participants. Students ranged in

age from 19 to 22 years old. All identified as cisgender women. Nine of 10 participants identified as white. Sexuality varied from heterosexual (3), bisexual (4), pansexual (2), and queer (4). Academic standing skewed towards more senior students (7), which was expected since we sought sample of students leading these different organizations. Student's self-described their political affiliations as democrat (2), leftist (3), socialist (4), liberal (1), independent (2). All demographic characteristics represent participants self-reporting to open-ended survey questions. All participants have been assigned a pseudonym.

Data Collection

Transcripts from in-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews formed the study's primary data. Transcripts were also supplemented with personal artifacts (e.g., photographs) and institutional documents (e.g. photographs, campus maps, event brochures, institutional policies, and campus newspaper articles) collected from the student organizations and analyzed field notes/analytic memos. Before beginning each interview, a researcher discussed the study's informed consent and addressed participant's questions. The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants to generate understandings of their activist experiences at Midwestern U. The semi-structured interview format provided the interviewer with the ability to ask follow-up questions to probe more deeply on surface-level response while providing clarity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This interview type also provided study participants with a space to offer new insights not previously scripted into the interview protocol. The interview guide consisted of three segments: (1) rapport building about when the student began interested in activism, (2) activism engagement at Midwestern U, and (3) specific interactions with student affairs professionals. This article focuses largely on the final segment of the interview guide. Examples of interview questions are included in Appendix A.

Given the study's aims, the researchers prompted participants for personal stories and experiences conveying in-depth meaning. The researchers sought to understand how student activists perceived marginalization and mattering through activist activities. Near the end of the interview, the researchers opened an electronic map of Midwestern U's campus. They asked the students to notate places where the activists felt like they mattered and did not matter on campus. Each interviewer then engaged the participant in a discussion of why they selected a particular space. On average, audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Data analysis

Before data analysis commenced, the researchers transcribed the 10 interviews verbatim. Open-coding was the first step of our qualitative data analysis process, which allowed researchers to develop broad categories based on a line-by-line reading of the interview transcriptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We independently read interview transcripts and made notes about emergent ideas about the different ways in which student activists perceived experiences of marginality and mattering during interactions with student affairs professionals. This approach generated 18 different codes that activists experienced moments and interactions of marginality and mattering.

Next, the researchers met to discuss the emergent codes and ideas embedded within the study data. During this discussion, the researchers collaboratively constructed a coding scheme that captures the discrete ways student activists perceived marginalization and mattering from student affairs professionals. Individual open codes were moved underneath larger thematic representations via the axial coding process. Axial coding allows researchers to continue to ask questions about emerging themes and organize subthemes under larger categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). After construct-

ing the coding scheme, all interview transcriptions were uploaded to Dedoose, an online qualitative software program. Each researcher independently reviewed every transcript again and applied the coding scheme.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of study findings, the researchers utilized six approaches including consensus coding, analytic triangulation, data saturation, expert consultation, member checking and reflexive discussions (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). During open and axial coding, the researchers met and discussed noticings within the study data. Consensus-building played an important role in establishing themes within study data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Only when agreed-upon, a code was adopted into the study's codebook. Second, the research team employed analytic triangulation, where each interview transcript was reviewed by all researchers within the authorship group (Patton, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Third, interviewing participants continued until saturation was reached (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Fourth, the researchers consulted a qualitative expert throughout the study's conception, design, data collection, and analyses. Fifth, the researchers checked their findings with key participants to ensure appropriate interpretation. Lastly, the researchers engaged in periodic discussions centering their social identities and how these identities might influence analyses.

The positionalities of our research team consisted of three cisgender women and three cisgender men. Four team members identified as White, one Asian-American, and one bi-racial. Two researchers were actively involved in activist efforts on campus during their undergraduate career. All researchers now work full-time or hold a faculty role within higher education and student affairs.

Limitations

While the researchers believe the research design to be sound, it is not without limitations. First, this cross-sectional study occurred at a single institution in the Midwestern U.S. Second, all study participants in this study identified as cisgender women. A more heterogeneous sample across gender identity may yield differing results. Third, the study sample was comprised of mostly white women. A more diverse sample may offer different experiences with activism, although the participation proportion reflect the institutional demography. Finally, the researchers interviewed students from feminist activist organizations on campus for the study, it is important to note that there may be differences between this type of activist work and others, both on this campus and across campuses. In future research, it would be beneficial to study a larger, more diverse population of students from several universities.

Results

Every participant shared stories and their perceptions regarding marginality and mattering. Findings elucidate three ways student activists felt mattering and marginalization during interactions with student affairs professionals. First, participants described how student affairs hold misperceptions of student organizing. Second, activists did not feel heard by student affairs professionals. Finally, activists elaborated on experiences where they felt the interaction was not authentic. In interpreting our findings participants used the terms student affairs professionals and administration interchangeably. This point should be noted as you interpret the findings we present.

Misperceptions of Student Organizing

Many participants mentioned feeling a disconnect between engaging in activism and perceptions of support by student affairs professionals. Interviewees perceived student affairs professionals as viewing student activists' organization efforts as a gathering of angry, upset individuals rather than seeing their efforts as an expression of

their rights and advocacy. In turn, the student activists perceived these misinterpretations as a form of marginalization. Angela discussed how she felt campus administrators would describe activist groups:

> I think that a lot of [student affairs professionals] just view, for example, protesting as angry, crazy people getting together to just destroy stuff and I think a lot of people think that that's all that activists do is, like, try to rile [fellow students] up into crazy protests.

While protests and rallies may be synonymous with activism and the ways students organize, activists felt their intentions were misconstrued and often dismissed as legitimate efforts by student affairs professionals. Instead, participants believed that activism should take multiple forms to inform multiple audiences. Student activists, like Erin, described activism as figuring out "how you reach out to people and get them to work with you" for a more equitable society.

Participants felt frustrated with mispeceptions of student activism by student affairs professionals. Ingrid shared, "[w]hen I hear these things – when I hear administrators portray these stereotypes of activists my initial response is just, like, whatever you don't get it." The participants felt typecasted as a homogenous group rather than viewing themselves as unique and different. The different perceptions held by activists and student affairs professionals contributed to activists feeling like their efforts did not matter.

Student affairs professionals are called on to support students in a multitude of ways. The student activists felt their engagement was marginalized because the values of both groups do not align. On one hand, student activists felt that student affairs professionals were there to "ensure the fiscal and social well-being of the school, not necessarily to protect vulnerable members of the campus community or to right social wrongs" (Heather). For the activists like Heather, she felt that it was the student activists' "job to push [student affairs pro-

fessionals] to do these things." On the other hand, student affairs professionals must balance job requirements against their values, especially when they conflict. Part of student affairs professionals work is to ensure the safety and well-being of students, and at times, these job aims outweigh student demands.

Not Feeling Heard by Student Affairs Professionals

Activists throughout the study frequently discussed the need to use activism as a way of educating campus constituents on important issues, but not really feeling heard. The most common way not feeling heard occurred was through inaction on the part of student affairs professionals. Participants frequently raised student activists being arrested for protesting as a point of contention between student affairs professionals and student activists. In response to the arrests, Midwestern U's president sent a letter to university constituencies indicating that while the institution supports a diverse campus and freedom of speech, it would not intercede in the legal proceedings of the arrested students. Diane shared her displeasure with insufficient support for student activists at Midwestern U:

> Like, why is that such a hard concept for people to understand? An ideal administration... would be actually proactive and not just this fake idea of inclusion and diversity. We are not a very diverse campus; we are not a very safe campus – for women or LGBT students or black students.

Similarly, Angela discussed feeling supported 50 percent of the time, but felt that student affairs professionals should enter into a dialogue about these topics and in taking such action, "that would go a long way in making some compromise between the two [students and university] possible."

Like many institutions, Midwestern U has instituted programming to address campus and societal issues. However, all 10 participants described ways in which the approach

to having a campus conversation was "a cop out" (Brittany) that did not have tangible outcomes associated with these events. Brittany described how she felt these educational opportunities countered the goal of educating people:

> I think one thing they could do is listen to us more when we talk about things that are happening on campus. [Student affairs professionals] are not actually addressing what we're having to say. They're just kind of like, 'Oh, you can come talk to us in this tiny room for an hour. You know that's enough right?'

Brittany and other participants felt this approach represented performative inaction perceived that the work of student activists did not matter on campus. The intent of these activists groups was to activate change, yet, they felt performative events where students could come and discuss for an hour promoted futile change. In summary, many student activists believed these conversations were inadequate for addressing larger campus issues and circularly refers back to the students who would ordinarily participate in these events.

Lacking Authentic Interaction with Student Affairs Professionals

While students specific words varied, every participant discussed feeling like the interactions with student affairs professionals lacked authenticity. The ways inauthentic interactions emerged became particularly salient when face-to-face interactions with student affairs professionals deviated from the public personas of the these professionals. For example, Courtney shared an example of how she perceived an inauthentic interaction between a student affairs professional and student activists:

> I think they're really hypocritical about it. You have [Student Affairs professional] up here with her pity tweet saying she stands up against discrimination, but she couldn't take the time to talk to students. She couldn't take the time to denounce islamaphobia she'd rather

have students get arrested. It's just really weird to me...they act like they really care and they put up these fronts like they do but they don't because if they did care we wouldn't be protesting anything.

Courtney believed that activists were authentically conveying student feelings of marginalization and need for organizing to Midwestern U's student affairs professional staff, but these interactions were not reciprocated. While student activists acknowledged engaging authentically might prove difficult, these interactions would go a long way to cementing collaboration rather than confrontation between student activists and administrators.

Another way student activists' perceived marginality through lacking authentic interaction is the length of time for change to occur. Jessica talked about interacting with campus administrators and student affairs professionals on several policies, such as sanctuary campus, immigration and visa status, and protected classes. Jessica discussed the process of fomenting change at Midwestern U:

> One piece that I've been working on is meeting with the [Student Affairs Office] to include immigration and visa status as protected classes in the nondiscrimination policy. I've been going to meetings and sitting down [with administrators]. It's frustrating because [Midwestern U] admins and officials [feel like] part of their job is to like slow down student movements. They just drag it out and it's like until they're ready and able to.

At the next meeting, Jessica followed up with the director at the next meeting to see how the plan was unfolding. She was dismayed to learn that this professional did not actually want to engage the community in real time:

> so what do I need to do to make this happen? I want to start this process. Let's go. And [director] says well actually it's like up to me and I need to research and decide if this is appropriate...Like the

administrators say that they want they want to meet with [student activists], right? They want to meet with us. They want to work with us. When it comes down to when you actually do that and actually have conversations with them. Like don't really want to work with you. So that's a challenge.

Jessica expresses frustration with how long it takes to engender change at Midwestern U. Through the change process, she experienced inauthentic interactions with student affairs professionals that were not making changes rapidly enough for her hopes. Participants in this study perceived marginalization through inauthentic and tumultuous interactions. The student activists believed that the student affairs professionals would prolong policy changes because they believed the student affairs professionals were trying to hold out until after the students graduated and then would no longer need to address a specific issue.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to explore how student activists perceived experiences of marginalization and mattering during interactions with student affairs professionals. Activists in this study repeatedly described intense feelings associated with feeling misunderstood, not being heard, and lacking authentic interaction by student affairs professionals. Students described the organic nature through which their organizations emerged in response to larger societal and campus-centric issues. Student activists frequently felt that the student affairs professionals appointed to supporting these organizations misperceived the point of student organizing. This finding extolls the importance of student affairs professionals understanding the importance of why students coalesce for a common purpose. Student activism has been present as long as higher education institutions have existed and activism has been a primary tool for responding to inequities (Rhoads, 2016; Thelin, 2004). Engaging in activism can profoundly

benefit students involvement and learning opportunities (Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Renn & Ozaki, 2010).

Activists have played a role in creating more equitable conditions for a variety of movements: in loco parentis (Degroot, 2014), gender neutral bathrooms and housing (Hobson, 2014; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015), and disability and accessibility issues (Kimball et al., 2016). While legal issues may have helped to foment change, student activists ensured aspects of reasonable accommodation were met. Our findings suggest taking time to listen to students would lessen the animosity between students and administrators. Administrators could benefits from using students as an indicator of what issues are becoming central to the student body. By being in tune with the activist population, administrators could have a proactive plan instead of reactive response to pressing concerns on campus and in popular culture. Data illustrates how transparency in decision-making processes while engaging with students can support more collaboration between student affairs professionals and activists.

Study results present directions for future research. This study centers a marginality and mattering framework to understand student activists' experiences. Since the sample for this study comes from feminist student groups, future research might explore differences between how feminist activist groups experience marginality and mattering differently than more generally focused organizations. Using a feminist perspective might also yield new and interesting insights into student activist research.

Several opportunities for improving student affairs practice emanate from this study's findings. First, student affairs practitioners should consider the ways in which student activists are advised and mentored. Schlossberg (1989) discussed the connections between marginality and mattering and the creation of community. Given the importance of community, it is imperative

for student activists to have social support from campus community leaders. For this reason, we believe developing an advising/mentorship relationship between student and professional would be beneficial in fostering open communication and understanding institutional processes for change.

A second implication for student affairs practice relates to how institutions respond to student needs. When participants discussed ways that an institution like Midwestern U could become more welcoming to diverse student needs, they offered a consistent response. Specifically, student affairs professionals should spend more time listening to the concerns of students and openly address systemic injustice. All participants discussed events open to the campus community where university administrators facilitated conversations on difficult topics. Students perceived these events to be inauthentic, or a "cop out," because event attendees were shepherded into "tiny rooms for an hour" to address campus issues. These feelings of inferiority, according to Schlossberg (1989), play into these activist students feeling like they are marginalized and do not have the "ear" of the university. In other words, the interviewees felt administrators are only providing a space for watered-down conversation that is already taking place in more robust ways within the activist community (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). Additionally, student activists felt frustration that meeting with administrators through "proper channels" was still met with inaction furthering the idea that they do not matter to the administration on campus. In this way, students find themselves in a paradox. When students demand substantive conversation or change on the part of administration through protest, they are met with administrative suggestions to utilize formalized channels; and when students attempt to utilize these formal channels, they are still met with inaction.

Third, institutions should incorporate student opinions regarding specific decisions affecting students on campus. By in-

cluding students to partake in the governing process throughout the university, a sense of ownership can be fostered in the overall culture of the campus (Kezar, 2010). Students want to feel included in the process of institutional policy making, not as if they are only being invited to participate for show. Making an active attempt to listen to students opinions would contribute to their perceptions of mattering on campus (Ahmed, 2012; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Students who are being heard will feel both important and like they matter to the campus.

Finally, participants raised inauthentic interactions and commitment to diversity and inclusion as a specific source of marginalization. Schlossberg (1989) discussed that institutional policies make every student on campus feel valued. In this study, student activists do not appear to feel valued by their policies around diversity and inclusion. Though the university has invested significant time into a diverse campus campaign, nearly all participants did not feel the administration is addressing *actual* diversity along identity markers different from race. Administrators should look towards student activists' commitment to diversity initiatives as a way to strengthen and align institutional agenda towards equity instead of simply addressing what Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) call cosmetic diversity. Administrators should more clearly define and communicate a definition of diversity. While "diversity" as a common term to institutional lexicons can be defined several ways, this definition should not to be confused with a social justice oriented "diversity" that focuses on creating a campus climate that is inclusive to populations that have been historically and purposefully marginalized from pursuing higher education. Establishing actionable items that work towards diversity and inclusion would begin with listening to student experiences and then discussing tangible changes for policy – items that would not only bring "diverse" students to campus, but resources

that would help them persist. To support a socially-just campus, the university must *first* address social injustices, such as institutionalized racism, patriarchal structures, and heteronormative assumptions. Discussion of diversity and inclusion in any other way simply works to make it more palatable to majoritized community, which perpetuates these unequal structures.

Conclusion

This study offered a nuanced perspective of how student activists interact with student affairs professionals. Findings suggest that student affairs professionals tasked with supporting student activists may be further marginalizing student activists. As more students coming to college consider engaging in student activism, student affairs must reconsider its approach to working with and supporting student activists. Practitioners, scholars, and activists can use these findings to identify synergistic ways for balancing the requirements of activists while refraining from further marginalizing these students.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview Questions

- When did you first become involved/ interested in activism?
- What are some challenges and/or successes you (or your student organization) face in regards to activism on-campus?
- Can you describe the methods your student organization uses to engage in campus conversations through activism? In your opinion, how are the tactics used within your organization effective on this campus?
- How do you feel administrators/faculty/staff at Midwestern U view activism? Is it valued or ignored?
- Please describe your relationship with student affairs professionals.