

ACTIVISM AS LEADERSHIP: SUPPORTING PROGRESSIVE ACTIVISTS WITHIN OUR WORK

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This empirical work is driven by a study on the experiences and motivation of a group of college-aged student activists. Using a cohort of 14 millennial-aged activists who organized their work in response to a rise of right-wing authoritarianism in national and state politics, this paper presents recommendations for how student affairs professionals working in activities-oriented functional areas can leverage these experiences to build capacity around engagement, leadership development, sense of belonging, and work in partnership with these communities to challenge unjust practices within the academy. Further, I argue that in order to do our work of supporting students in their educational ventures, we can no longer claim notions of political neutrality.

On November 16th, 2015, I received word that many of the students I had worked with were planning a walk-out. I had been organizing with some of these same students for an international game day as part of the kick-off for the institution-backed international education week, and we had been working together for months. When none of the students showed up to set up for the event, I was concerned and confused. Standing there in my confusion, I learned there was to be a walk-out, another episode in the campus-based activism that had been ignited across the country, starting at the University of Missouri where students and student-athletes staged a walk-out to protest the lack of action to challenge racism on campus (Frizzell, 2015). I walked with my supervisor to watch the walk-out but we had been explicitly told to not walk with the students and to not engage with them, to not appear to be taking their side in the walk-out.

The group of students walked from an academic building where they had gathered, across our historic quad and directly onto the patio of the university's administration building. They read a letter addressed to the president and disseminated it among the students who joined them in the walkout (Randall, 2017). Following the address, they delivered a copy to the administration. The letter contained a list of demands, reflecting the needs of a variety of marginalized communities that were often overlooked by the administration. The list became known as the #2020Vision, calling for their demands to be met by 2020.

Less than a year later, after the election of the 45th president of the United States, another moment of activism would coalesce. Friday the 4th of November, a group of students gathered on our university quad; the students called it a *vigil*. They met and spread the word through social media to students, faculty, and staff who might feel scared, hurt, or fearful in the wake of the election and invited them to be in solidarity with one another. As my supervisor and I had done when we learned about the walkout, we walked over but had been told explicitly by an upper administrator that we were not to go, that doing so would "increase the size" of the "target on my back" as a "troublemaker" at the institution. I was not able to do my job, which was to support marginalized students, nor was I able to be publicly in solidarity with others, like me, who felt scared, hurt, and fearful.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Situating Activism in History

Activism has long been a part of the student experience on college campuses; it is as "American as apple pie" (Ellsworth & Burns, 1970, p. 5). This is true of all institutional types (Cohen & Snyder, 2013; Thelin, 2011). From

the Great Butter Rebellion of the 18th century to the rise of activism on college campuses in the 1960s, students have used their voices to advocate for their needs and beliefs. Perhaps most prominent within the mind of many people is the role of student activists in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and with good reason, as many of the civil rights leaders during this era came out of the work of Black students, such as with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Freedom Rides, the Black Panther Party, and the Greensboro sit-ins (Astin et al., 1975; Carmichael & Thelwell, 2003; Carson, 1981; Seale, 1996; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004).

After the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s – activism on campus was latent for many years (Rhoads, 2000). However, in the 1990s student were also quite engaged on college campuses once again. During the 1990s – reflective of many of the activism on campus today, these movements were focused on issues of identity and became an outward rejection of the “force of conservatism” of the 1980s “that created an environment in which progressive-minded students saw little choice but to join arms to launch a countermovement” (Rhoads, 2000, p. 220). These movements during this era create a bridge to the activism that began in the new millennium through resonance.

Situating Activism Today

A resurgence of progressive student activism came about in the early part of the 2010s – on the tail end of high-profile international activist movements brought to the rest of the world through the use of social media such as Arab Spring (Gerbaudo, 2012; Idle & Nunns, 2011; Muñoz & Culton, 2016) and the Occupy movement. Millennial-aged activism was a bit different from those who came before them in the 90’s (Rhoads, 2000) and those of the 1960s. The activism of millennials “synthesizes the identity politics of the New Left of the 1960s and the traditional critiques of class inequality and capitalism associated with the Old Left of the 1930s” (Milkman, 2017, p. 25).

Working through Grzanka, Blazer, and Adler’s (2015) framework of *identity choreography*, Webb (2017) argued that three themes bound contemporary college-aged activists together: social networks, identities, and resistance. Using identity choreography—descriptions of various knowledges and experiences that are used to constitute identities and the identities of others (Grzanka et al., 2015)—Webb (2017) explored how contemporary student activists used social media as a place for meaning-making and coalition-building. Webb determined that social network space is important to activist identity and resistance, a finding that echoes the research of other scholars (Bailey, 2017; Cabrera et al., 2017; Carney, 2016; Gerbaudo, 2012). Webb asserted that through social networks and motivation from resistance, student activists were “able to fight against these systems of oppression, find community even in places where it feels like their community is trying to be erased, and generally improve the lives of not only themselves but others to come” (2017, p. 38).

Since the origination of this project, there has been an influx of new scholarship on activism within higher education. Notably, Linder et al. (2019) used narrative inquiry to highlight the experiences of 26 student activists engaged in identity-oriented activism. They also found that rather than university administration attempting to learn from and work aside these leaders, the administration often named these student leaders *troublemakers* rather than acknowledging their engagement with university life. Cabrera et al. (2017) critiques the overt reliance on social media, and Twitter in particular, among college-aged activists. In particular, Cabrera and his co-authors draw upon the work of Freire (2000) to highlight the importance of conscientização – or the interplay between critical self-reflection and the praxis of engaging in collective action for liberation. For them, they wondered if those engaging in slacktivism – defined as “political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants” (Christensen, 2011, p. 1) can be activism. If those slacktivists cannot define activism, can they engage in conscientização? Something they believe, and I agree, is central to meaningful change. Ultimately they find, and I concur based on my work, that while digital engagement is important, “not all forms of online participation are equally effective at unlocking the potential of student activism” (Cabrera et al., 2017, p. 410). The artist-activists here were more able to build relationships with one another by coming together and finding connections with one another – often across activist commitments to engage in further activism. Particularly considering recent developments of the splintering of social media along ideological lines, organizing on social media may become even more fraught.

Other scholars before me had noted that administration can and should partner with student activists. Notably, Kezar (2010) used two previous studies (Gaston-Gayles et al., 2005; Slocum & Rhoads, 2009) to ask new questions about how and why administration partners with activists, but also how activism is part of the developmental trajectory of students. They ultimately concluded that “common and everyday experiences” that students engage in that are perhaps the most impactful, both in their own development and in that they “provide ongoing opportunities to practice activism, and teach students the everyday skills of being a good citizen” (Kezar, 2010, p. 476). This impactful study laid the groundwork for many others to explore how administration can work with, rather than work against student activists.

METHODOLOGY

This project used arts-based educational research (ABER) to understand the reasons why individuals got engaged in activist movements and the impact of their involvement in such movements. By engaging in collaborative art creation, I aimed to uncover the hows and whys of activism among college students. Some (Gerber et al., 2012; Haywood Jr., 2013) claim that ABER is itself its own research paradigm – set aside from both qualitative and quantitative frames that it exists as a *groundless theory* (Neilsen, 2004) that moves action through its aesthetic quality as art and the act of art creation conveys meaning (Barone & Eisner, 2011). This aesthetic-oriented paradigm has a strong focus on reflexivity and empathy oriented through the creation and consumption of the art (Dunlop, 2001). As such, through this project, like other ABER-oriented projects (Burge et al., 2016; Burnard et al., 2017; Lynch & Glass, 2020) the act of creation and the created product itself served as data. At the outset, participants were invited to join a research project entitled the “arts of resistance research”. I recruited those who would become the artists featured in this project by passing flyers on campus and attending RSO meetings after which I stayed around to answer any questions due to my insider (Villenas, 1996) orientation to campus, and to not perpetuate an extractive approach to research. Moreover, some of the students in these RSOs knew me through my work in the local community and campus.

Over 30 people expressed interest, but in the end, this project engaged 14 artist-activists. These 14 individuals were invited to a room in the student union based on their availability, and were given time and materials (paper, glue, glitter, stickers, tape, scissors, etc.) to create collage-based (Hopkins, 1997; Margolin, 2014; Scotti & Chilton, 2017) art that answered the question *how do emotions impact your engagement with activism?* Our second meeting met in an academic conference room in the WGS suite. An abbreviated listing of the 14 artists can be seen in Table 1 with self-articulated demographics in the order listed by the artist themselves.

These collaborative art-creation sessions were not focus groups - as the art, rather than dialogue, served to orient and build understandings. I used ABER to better comprehend and explore this subject in these politically contentious times. Because ABER “values nonhierarchical relationships” (Leavy, 2017, p. 10), it resonated with the collaborative commitments of this project as well as with my commitment to engaging in research informed by critical theory and feminism to “demand that research contribute[s] to the political struggles of oppressed groups” and as “democracy and the belief that those committed to that goal must exemplify their commitment to it in the practice of research” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1993, p. 254).

Table 1. Artist Listing

Name	Demographics as Shared	Pronouns
Angel_Rainbow_Daisy	Latinx, Woman, Immigrant	she/her/hers
CatsAreBetterThanDogs420	Queer, Trans, White	he/him/his and they/them/theirs
Claire	Queer, Woman, Low Income	she/her/hers
D.Prince	African American Male Straight	he/him/his
Homogoblin	Lesbian White Woman	she/her/hers
Ladybug	White Male	he/him/his
Leia	White Woman	she/her/hers
Makeda	Queer African American Woman	she/her/hers
Mark	African American	he/him/his
Mothman	Queer, Genderqueer, Demigirl, White	they/them/theirs or she/her/hers
Radically Soft	Queer, Trans, Jewish, Nonbinary, Neurodivergent	they/them/theirs or ze/hir/hirs
Sky Blue Banana	African, Jewish	she/her/hers
Sparkle Enby	Queer, Trans, Disabled, White	they/them/theirs
Tegan	Woman, White	she/her/hers

This art served as both methodology and data. They operated as the crux from which to build community and relationships and served as data to analyze the experiences of activism in which these artists engaged. Arts-based research allows us to not “draw near certain conclusions about states of affairs that generalize, but rather to secure technologies of mind that will enable us to peer more deeply into situations that might not be the same as the one that we study” (Eisner, 2007, p. 20). ABER can serve to deepen our knowledge and understanding of the world; it is messy, literally and figuratively (Eisner, 2007; Leavy, 2017).

Notions of rigor and trustworthiness are different from other methodologies. Eisner (2007) and Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor (2007) evoke ideas around five tensions that guide ABER. This was later expanded upon by Cahnmann-Taylor (2017) to condense these tensions into four principles to guide ABER. These four principles are (a) Subjectivity and Public Good, (b) Attribution and Ethical Good, (c) Impact and Aesthetic Good, and (d) Translation to Scientific Good. By engaging with these four principles – I ensured that my research engaged ethically and transparently to craft a project that would benefit others.

RESULTS

As art represented both data and methodology, the results are both visual and also embodied and spoken through the dialogue present during the collaborative art-creation sessions. Here I present three primary findings, echoing earlier study (Webb, 2017) who framed their study’s findings around notions of social networks, identities, and resistance. Here I think with these data about relationships, resistance, and identity betrayal.

Relationality: Between Artist and Scholartist

Strong relationships with one another occurred during this project. This was due in part to the medium and methodology – ABER. Art is hard, it is scary. We have been victimized by hegemony around many ideas, and art is no exception. As such, many artists expressed apprehension about their inability to produce art. One artist, Leia, mused about the “quiet shame” that permeated the room as the artists tried to translate what was in their heads into something tangible. Homogoblin expressed that attempting to create art is “really frustrating when [I] get [in my] head what I want it to look like, but I do not have the skills [to] translate it”. This sentiment was shared by many of the artists. CatsAreBetterThanDogs420 threw his art away several times, restarting at least four times. At one point, he remarked that now “I’m just ruining this”. Leia cried out in frustration that “this is incredibly difficult,” while Claire expressed frustration with the limitations of her abilities. She stated that “they’re supposed to, like, open—they’re supposed to nest,” speaking about her piece shown in Figure 1. Homogoblin was

likewise frustrated with her closet piece (Figure 2) because she could not decide where to put the speech bubble. Everywhere she tried to put it, she said, the bubble looked “like I’m farting the words.” For some of the artists, there was frustration around the execution of art skills. Claire, trying to create something three-dimensional, expressed exasperation, stating that she “used to be so much better at spatial things; now I can’t [do what I want to do]”.

Figure 1. *Claire’s Nesting Art.*



Figure 2. *Homogoblin’s Closet.*



There were, and are, aesthetic struggles in all stages of this project. First, as illustrated above by the artists themselves, but even now as I attempt to re/present these artistic representations created by the artists. Both Figures 1 and 2 are marked by their interactivity and their three-dimensionality, things that cannot be adequately presented here. Most of the artists struggled to portray what they wanted through art in their work, except Sparkle Enby (Figure 4). Sparkle Enby described themselves as a “practitioner of high art” and they considered themselves “meticulous to detriment.” Even self-proclaimed artists struggled with the creation of art for this project.

Despite these aesthetic struggles, it was the awkward struggles here that helped to create community. Homogoblin, at one point, while working on her project, turned to me, and said that she “liked that you welcome all levels of artistic talent.” The group, which had been in a quiet lull, erupted in laughter. She remarked, laughing, “we’re not just identity inclusive; we’re also terrible artist inclusive.” This statement was important for two reasons. First, it spoke to the acceptance and affirmation of multiple identities in our space. Second, Homogoblin took ownership of the project & experience. When she used the words *we’re not*, she signaled a transition from self to group, taking some ownership of the space with her remark about the inclusivity of multiple identities and degrees of artistic talent. This also reflected the non-hierarchical element of ABER as indicated previously (Leavy, 2017). This moment presented a turning point in the project where the artists began to take ownership and be invested in the project, which, I believe, crafted a bond within the community that allowed for future collaborative artistic endeavors on the topic of their activism. This bond was central for moving forward with the project and has implications for our work within student affairs.

Student Leadership as Resistance

Resistance played a central role in the activism of these artists. This resistance centered on a rejection of discourses surrounding their identities. For some, their resistance existed beyond their own identity, with some of them, such as Leia and Makeda, calling for attention to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Particularly, the

word *resist*, related often to a culture of resistance against the Trump presidency, was used in the visual poem by Mothman and Ladybug (Figure 3), the art by Sparkle Enby (Figure 4), and the work by Leia. These pieces outright speak to resistance against an oppressive governmental system and a *growing force of conservatism* which like the student activists of the 1990s felt as if they had little choice but to create community and launch a countermovement (Rhoads, 2000).

Figure 3. *Mothman & Ladybug's Visual Poem*

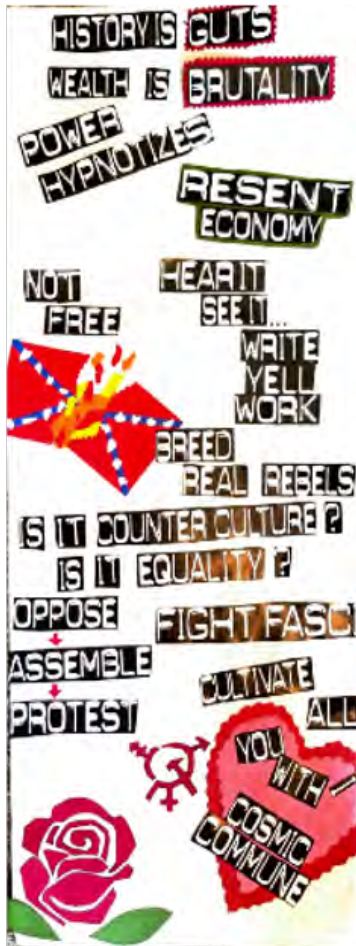


Figure 4. *Sparkle Enby's Resist.*



Activist Killjoys

Many of these artists spoke about serving as activist killjoys, challenging bias incidents that occurred on campus by refusing to be silent or happy about the status quo (Ahmed, 2017). This rejection of the status quo in different forms was present in many of these works of art: transgressing a status quo through the art of Angel_Rainbow_Daisy (Figure 5); expressing frustration with the status quo, as illustrated by the art of CatsAreBetterThanDogs420; or subverting the status quo, as seen in the art by Ladybug and Mothman, Leia, and Claire. Many of these students also challenged the institution itself. Mothman and Ladybug wanted to encourage SCPWI to stop selling apparel in the campus bookstore that originated in sweatshops. Leia was involved in campus conversations regarding sexual assault through her involvement in the leadership of the feminist student organization. Angel_Rainbow_Daisy organized events on campus to raise visibility for Latinx students, as well as to highlight the experiences of DREAMers. Many of the artists engaged in this project held leadership positions in progressive student organizations at SCPWI. Angel_Rainbow_Daisy was the two-time president of the Latinx student organization; Leia was the vice president of a campus feminist organization. During this project, CatsAreBetterThanDogs420 became co-president of the campus feminist organization. Claire, during her first time at SCPWI, was the vice president of the gay-straight alliance; and Ladybug was the founder of the democratic socialist student organization, replaced by Mothman when his term ended. Thus, student leadership was a salient experience for many of these students.

Figure 5. Angel_Rainbow_Daisy's Visual Poem.

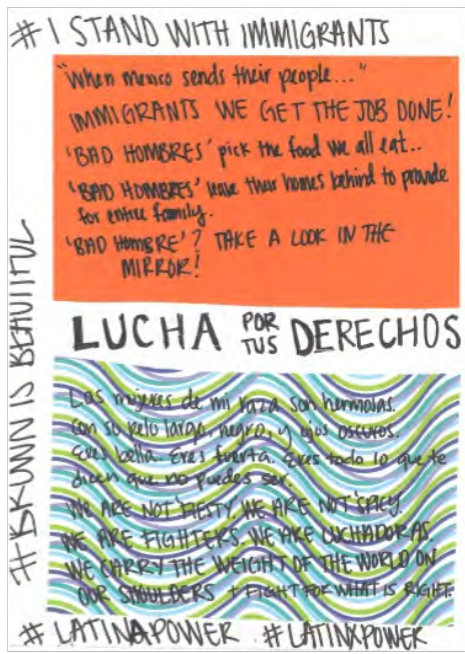


Figure 6. Leia's Graduation Cap.



All these artists were students at the same institution of higher education. Most were undergraduate students, a few graduate students, and one was a recent graduate. As such, it was not a surprise that the institution itself became a site of conversation. One piece of art stood out as specifically directed at SCPWI. This piece, by Leia (Figure 6), is an image of a black graduation cap on a red field. The words on the cap seem as if they are swirling down, and they read as follows:

Welcome to the University! Please enjoy your stay. Use your time here and engage with your peers in a meaningful way. Get involved, but only in the activities that maintain our current idea of a proper STATE values. Do get involved but don't speak out. Do speak up, but don't challenge oppressive behavior in professors and curriculum. Do involve in SA (sexual assault) awareness, but don't make people uncomfortable. Do enough to put on a resume, but never so much you disrupt the power structure.

Leia provided a critique of the way that SCPWI engaged with the neoliberal rhetoric of inclusion with her art. Starting with the phrase *Welcome to the University!*, Ahmed (2012) argued that those who need welcoming to a space, are not those who truly belong in that space, nor does that space belong to them. Further, the notion of *enjoy[ing] your stay*, supports lack of belonging, as it sounds as if one is *staying* at a hotel, therefore, the stay is temporary, whereas the institution, and perceivably its values will remain long after the person who is being welcomed has left. Leia wrote out *don't make people uncomfortable*, something she argued is central to activist work. This is important, as it shows that she did not feel welcomed into this space due, in part, to her activism. This is further supported by the *do enough to put on a resume, but never so much you disrupt power structure*. Thusly, Leia echoes the statement by Linder et al. that “rather than considering it a form of activism, involvement, engagement, or leadership” administrators “often resist minoritized students’ efforts to interrupt and address hostile climates and do not consider them the right kind of activists” (2019, p. 529). This sentiment by Leia both acknowledged the structures of power but understands that the institution did not want students upsetting the status quo.

Student Identity Betrayal

Mothman also had some deep critiques of SCPWI's history related to issues of inclusion. According to Mothman, incoming students created a GroupMe chat for the incoming class of 2020, and despite not being part of that class, Mothman was put in the group chat, because their friend knew that Mothman would want to challenge the racial slurs used in the group. Mothman was astonished that there were a lot of people sharing racist memes and using slurs. Mothman was so bothered by this that they reported the incident to the chief diversity officer at SCPWI. The

incident happened in the summer of 2016 when I worked on campus in the multicultural center, and I distinctly remember it despite there being no coverage of this event, a common occurrence for many events that occurred on campus. We would hear from students, but it was never addressed nor covered in the paper.

Makeda, who had transferred to SCPWI after this incident, was upset to hear that this had happened, but not surprised. The incident had been Mothman's first experience with SCPWI, and at that time they had no desire or plans to come to school here. When Mothman eventually ended up at SCPWI, they felt anxious about coming to campus already having a reputation because of this incident. The emotions of anxiety and fear seemed to drive Mothman to find community once they arrived on campus. They hoped to find others who were willing to share emotions and who had similar commitments with whom they could work and find community (Goodwin et al., 2001).

Mothman expressed that they didn't know how this incident was handled after they reported it, but that they "think those people still go to [SCPWI]." After Mothman disclosed this incident to the group, there was a back-and-forth conversation regarding frustrations with SCPWI's handling of racist events on campus over the past few years.

Makeda: Nothing ever really happens.

Mothman: That's the scary part, I think.

Makeda: Like ... when that stuff [racist incidents on campus] happens.

Mothman: It's kind of, like, swept under the rug. It's all about image control. That's really scary to me because people are having their lives threatened a lot.

Ladybug: It really just feels like we're, in my mind, like a political moment when people are kind of deciding ... their priorities. Like, we have these milquetoast liberals—like, in 2018 you really gotta make the decision. What are you more concerned with? Like, the appearance of SCPWI as an image, or [trails off].

Mothman: People's lives.

Ladybug: Yeah, people's lives [hesitates] and justice. And it feels more—I don't know, like, if not more dramatic than ever, we like reaching for the [trails off]

Leia: Like, performative?

Ladybug: Yeah. Because it is like things are getting worse. We've got more Nazis out in the streets than in recent years, and it's going to keep getting worse.

I don't know what happened as a result of the GroupMe chat, but I know that when students at SCPWI expressed racist, nativist, or otherwise oppressive sentiments, rarely did they ever have to deal with any consequences. In the summer of 2016, an incoming student yelled "Build the wall" at a woman on campus in hijab. This incoming student was part of a small group in an extended orientation program, and thus easily identifiable, but no action was taken. Often, when something of this nature would happen, students of color would rise to the defense of the target of the oppressive act, and then the administration would reach out to the perpetrator to ensure he or she was safe from the students of color.

The oppressive statements did not always come from students. During data collection, a class was talking about public assistance, and the professor erroneously stated that the majority of individuals on public assistance are people of color (Jan, 2017). When a Black woman's cell phone rang, the professor reportedly said, "That may be the welfare office calling you now" (Dear, 2018, p. n.p.; Gaither, 2018). The president of SCPWI and the university's official Twitter account reached out to the student quickly, however, this professor has a history of racist and sexist incidents on campus according to Leia. This episode served, in part, to generate the art of Leia (Figure 6). She recounted that this art reflected "thinking about graduation and thinking about everything that's happening with Professor [Smith] and [his] department, who I hate." Leia has taken courses by him because she has a double major, one of which is in his home department, and two of his courses are required. According to her, "he's made incredibly inappropriate comments and said, like, very very not OK things in classes and said very horrifying things, and no one would listen to me when I told them". When Leia told the department chair or other faculty in his department about him saying horrid things, they would often respond by saying, "It's just the way it is, and he's just very conservative and has those views." And I was like, "You can't say those things." Despite Professor Smith being contingent faculty, he was continually asked back to teach in the department, despite this high-profile case of racist language deployed in a class setting.

The experiences shared by these artists are examples of some of the narratives I have heard from students over my time working at SCPWI. I had heard a recording of a senior administrator calling an undergraduate student activist “uppity” on a voicemail after they believed that they had hung up the phone. Despite this, some students did still trust and believe in some of the work that student affairs educators, and in particular those in activities spaces, were doing for the benefit of underserved student populations, despite the institutional betrayal (Linder, Quaye, Lange, et al., 2019) that continued to happen before, during, and after this project.

MEANING OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Solidary is...

Like the opening vignette of my experiences working in a multicultural center focused particularly on using activities as a teaching tool for equity and justice education, many of us who work with disenfranchised student populations have experienced our own experiences of marginalization and push-back on our acts of support for these/our communities (Weiser, 2019). The nature of educational administration proposes a set of guidelines in which political neutrality is expected. However, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously stated “if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” There is no such thing as neutrality, there is only active anti-oppression or oppression. How do educators ally themselves with the students whom they purport to support without losing employment? Despite the risks, there is a moral obligation, particularly for those of us who hold privileged status(s) to leverage those to challenge unjust actions within the academy.

... Not a Four-Letter Word

Many of the artists were rightfully suspicious of any office on campus that was related to equity or diversity issues. Mothman stated that this was due to the way that the institution had historically handled these issues, that they were guided by notions of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Mothman stated that the “Board of Trustees try to frame it [discussions about oppression] in a way that will help them, and that’s where I think it gets insidious.” Mothman went on to state that the “grand culture at [SCPWI] is something that’s kind of insidious” and that it was the “exact same culture of my high school. High school was a really scary experience for me and was a place where I was bullied a lot, and, like, that’s why I didn’t want to go to [SCPWI] initially.” Despite this, some administrators do work *with* student activists to attempt to change their institutions.

However, it is no secret that in the academy, openly ideological work is precarious work (Adsit et al., 2015). This is not just true for staff members. Steven Salaita was denied a faculty position due to posts on his personal Twitter account relating to the Israel-Palestine conflict (Lubet, 2017). How do student affairs professionals and other university administrators show support for students who engage in openly ideological political agendas that, if institutionally supported, may jeopardize university branding (Ahmed, 2012; Stripling, 2018) and/or state funding (Kimbler, 2018)? To accede to an apolitical stance in our work deferring “inquiry in favor of the prestige that attends responsible complaisance” (Salaita, 2014, p. 232) is to side with oppression rather than liberation.

An institution in the southeast, the University of Tennessee, lost state funding for its Office of Diversity and Inclusion, which in turn decimated funding for the LGBT Resource Center. After the institution secured private funding to help support the resource center, as well as several other progressive programs, such as a safe sex week, the university president was pushed out, a move many saw as a conservative backlash to her support of progressive ideals (Stripling, 2018). In this one case, we see several ways that institutions support conservative ideologies (Adsit et al., 2015; Kimbler, 2018; Lubet, 2017; Stripling, 2018). Further, the support given to George Mason University, by the Koch Foundation, illustrates how conservative politics influence academia (Larimer, 2018) and reifies an effect of no support for marginalized students and working for progressive issues. Money from the Koch Foundation helped George Mason University grow from a small commuter school to a major public university and a center of libertarian scholarship. Additionally, these monies were not just given to George Mason University; they created faculty positions for which the Koch brothers sat on the selection committees (Green & Saul, 2018).

State institutions, while not existing in a vacuum, must not accede too quickly to conservative political pressures. Instead, we need to ensure that progressive initiatives have alternative sources of funding so that when a threat comes, there are ways of maintaining services for marginalized groups. Further, in cases like that of George Mason University, we need to not only ensure that monies given to institutions of higher education are transparent, but also encourage progressive donors to give to higher education. These are battles in an ongoing culture war, using economic support as a weapon being waged on college campuses by the political right. And they must be responded to. Community spaces for higher education professionals who work for the inclusion of marginalized students need support. Like the artists illustrated in this project, these educators need a community to engage in fellowship with to form alliances and build a network for activism to respond to hostile acts from the political right.

In Action

Crafting recommendations based on a study such as this is tenuous work, as ABER does not attempt to draw conclusions that generalize, but to peer deeply into situations to deepen our knowledge of the world (Eisner, 2007). Despite this caution, based on my understanding of the world based on these data and my experiences in working with student leader activists I propose three ideas for institutions and educational leaders to support students. First, we must consider how we can partner and engage with student activists and support their work. Second, we should be aware of the issues that students face. Finally, we should acknowledge the importance of activism as an important part of student leadership experiences within higher education.

Partnering

In all acts, there is always the possibility of harm. As one artist, Radically Soft, illustrated in their art piece (Figure 7), “Know better. Do Better.” The full quote from Maya Angelou reads in its entirety, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” As university leaders, too often we are complicit in a system that was built through chattel slavery and still profits from this history (Wilder, 2014). Like Homogoblin, who in her statement shifted ownership of this project from *a you* to *an us*, we can and should work collaboratively with student activists to challenge oppressive histories and presents within higher education. Many leaders, me included, have been complicit in the shutting down and silencing of activism. When our employment hinges on the precarity between ideology and obedience, we may accede to the latter. This is perhaps truer for younger professionals, who may not have the cushion of tenure or senior status that could allow them to challenge the hegemonic systems that maintain contemporary higher education.

As such, we should consider ways to enact ways that we can protect administrators who engage in partnership with activists. It is fraught to receive conflicting messaging about our role as educators – the how, if, and to what extent we should be supporting student activists (Linder, Quaye, Lange, et al., 2019). However, faculty have been benefiting from and engaging in activist-oriented scholarship. Student affairs educators would do well to also partner with these faculty who can provide cover and assistance from universities that might be less inclined to support staff members in more precarious employment situations. Not only is it more effective to work *with* activists rather than against (Kezar, 2010), it is in the benefit of student affairs broadly. ACPA in 2016 brought together a group of people to discuss the future of the association, and broadly the field of student affairs, out of this conversation they developed a document that serves as a starting point to challenge and change our field (Quaye et al., 2019). This document provides guideposts to consider what racial justice and decolonization can mean for student affairs educators. This document asks us the question of what “possibilities lie ahead if we know each other as humans? What future can we imagine together? How much more do we all gain by engaging our interconnected pursuit of racial justice and decolonization?” (Quaye et al., 2019, p. 20). These questions should guide our partnerships with student activists specifically, but students and one another more broadly.

Figure 7. *Radically Soft's Art.*



Relationships

Cabrera et al (2017) noted that self-reflection is a central part of engaging in activism, for Quaye et al (2019) self-reflection and awareness mean that we as educators recognize that we are the *leaders we've been waiting for* and to be able and willing to dismantle the resistance within ourselves to authentic engagement with collaborative engagement with others, including our students. We have come to believe that we are alone and thus often do not engage in collaborative work, that we need to reify power through our relationships with others, including our students. Status quo approaches to hierarchal relationships reify power and ought to be questioned.

Just as relationships were centrally important to the activist work that these artists engaged in, educators can use Wilson's (2008) idea of relationality to consider how we can be accountable to and with the students with whom we work. We must recognize the interconnectivity of people and their environment. Any time spent getting to know students is time well-spent (Noddings, 2012). Knowing the experiences of students means listening without having to ask – watching and not making students do the laborious act of teaching. They are here to learn, not teach.

Just as these artists acknowledged the relationships they built with one another, they also acknowledged when they felt as if they were betrayed by their institution and its agents. Returning to Leia's graduation cap, we can think about how she signaled that the institution made her, and other activists feel as if they didn't belong, something that is indicative of the betrayal many of these students felt. This form of betrayal is rooted in the lack of acknowledgment of the humanity and experiences of the activists, but also a tension between student activism - with its aim to foster social change through pressure, and governance (Cabrera et al., 2017). Through authentic relationships, we can partner with student activists rather than being in opposition and foster a sense of belonging, which is linked to student success (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Student affairs educators are well positioned to provide logistical, historical, educational, and emotional help, we must only reorient ourselves to be able to provide these services at the intersection of leadership for political and social change. Listening to students is a radical act when they often feel ignored or betrayed.

Activism is Part of Leadership

Small acts of activism teach citizenship skills and are more likely to create the change that activists desire (Kezar, 2010). Activism was part of the leadership portfolio for many of these, and other students. Like the students highlighted by Linder et al (2019), often these students were not seen as leaders on their campus, but as demanding (Randall, 2017; WeTheProtesters, 2015) *troublemakers* who would never be satisfied. Moreover, recent

scholarship on student leadership (Guthrie et al., 2017; Osteen et al., 2016) centers engagement in the act of transgressing normative boundaries within leadership education to consider leadership as the practice of freedom and to challenge oppressive hegemonies. We should utilize the conceptual frames of the Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Model (CRLM) to support student activists and acknowledge activism's role in dismantling the whiteness that is inherent in university leadership cultures. Even if, as Cabrera et al (2017) argue, few actually engage in activism. However, for those that do – the experience is centrally important to their collegiate experience. Activism has long been part of higher education (Ellsworth & Burns, 1970; Thelin, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2004) and many activists in the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s were students themselves (Astin et al., 1975; Carmichael & Thelwell, 2003; Carson, 1981; Seale, 1996). Therefore, to consider activism on campus as a fad is to disregard and disrespect the work of those who came before us.

Marching Forward

Commitment to activism is complicated. We are all complicit at particular times and in particular spaces. Activism is a risk for young adults, as it is for university administrators and faculty members. Being out as an activist is a choice and one that must be considered seriously. If allies are serious about standing in solidarity we must not shy away from marching in solidarity, even when the institution demands that we stand back. As Audre Lorde wrote, “When we speak, we are afraid our words will not be heard nor welcomed but when we are silent, we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive” (Lorde, 1995).

I saw first-hand how SCPWI hampered the activism of students. The work of creating more inclusive spaces for marginalized groups is often on the backs of those very communities (Weiser, 2017). Moreover, some feel that they cannot share their emotions or plans with their mentors, and they instead sequester themselves in a “hell hole” (Randall, 2017). Some of these students are not comfortable being out or challenging White supremacist narratives, due largely to their experiences of being shut down, or of the institution coming to the defense of White supremacist narratives. As such, student affairs educators must bolster their commitment to supporting and working in solidarity with these student activists. With the continual ascendance of right-wing exclusionary rhetorics attacking education writ-large, why must we continue to adhere to a politics of neutrality? If by being neutral in situations of injustice we choose the side of the oppressor, why must education, which is inherently a political act (Apple, 2010; Bourdieu, 1999; Gramsci, 1971), align itself with “neutrality?” It is clear through the literature that the right has continually eroded acts of inclusion within education, and education itself over the last 40 years, beginning at least with the industry-led A Nation at Risk (Gardner, 1983), that claimed that the foundations of our society are being “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.” This document began a time of industry intervention in the purpose of education as either a public good or a private commodity (Labaree, 1997).

If education is, as I argue, part of a democratic society, then education must be for the public good. Education for equity and diversity is essential to education across the continuum of levels. Solidarity is NOT a four-letter word, and educators must work in tandem with student activists to increase the capacity for inclusion and equity within college campuses. Student affairs educators in activities-oriented positions are well-positioned to design experiences to help foster critical thinking about student leadership and activism within a campus community.

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