U.S. College Student Activism during an Era of Neoliberalism: A Qualitative Study of Students Against Sweatshops

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Abstract

This article sets out to examine the experiences of college student activists involved in Students Against Sweatshops on the Beautiful River University campus. Based on observation and interview fieldwork, the paper explores how students negotiate and understand their activism against the backdrop of neoliberalism. The paper concludes that being a contemporary student activist requires advanced time management skills and the capacity to ascribe multiple meanings to activities (for example, hanging out and doing activism simultaneously). This emphasis on using one's time wisely resonates with students who are surrounded by the language of neoliberal reform. By analysing how students prioritise activism, outreach to new members and develop friendships, and position themselves as part of an international network, I show that student activism is influenced by the neoliberal environment at Beautiful River University at the same time that student activists are working to resist and counter such practices.

Introduction

In this article, I set out to examine how undergraduate college students narrate and enact their on-campus activism in an era of neoliberal reform. I define neoliberalism as a political-economic philosophy that de-emphasises positive government intervention in the economy, focusing instead on achieving progress by encouraging free-market methods and fewer restrictions on business operations and economic development. Supporters of neoliberalism argue that free markets, free trade, and the unrestricted flow of capital will produce the greatest social, political and economic good (Hartwich, 2009).

The university campus is far from immune to this press of neoliberalism. Davies and Bansel (2007) argue that, "individuals . . . have been seduced by their own perceived powers of freedom and have, at the same time, let go of significant collective powers" (p.

249). It is, therefore, important to examine the actions of higher education students who offer organised resistance to open market ideology. One aspect of the changing landscape of U.S. higher education that has not been analyzed in depth is how on-campus undergraduate student activism has played out against this backdrop of neoliberalism.

Student activism is often defined as work done by students to impact political, economic, environmental and social change. Student activism often focuses on improving the educational landscape, or specifically on pressuring educational institutions to change curricula, funding schemes, and to amplify student voices and representation in decision-making (Rhoads 2000; Altbach 1968, 1970). While I do not assume that contemporary U.S. activism differs greatly from activism conducted by previous generations of students (for an historical discussion of student activism in the U.S. and in comparative perspective, see Altbach & Laufer, 1972), I do attempt to better understand how the current neoliberal atmosphere pervading U.S. higher education may impact present-day student activism.

In order to learn more about college student activism in the current economic landscape, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork (observations and in-depth interviews) with members of Students Against Sweatshops at Beautiful River University. The group will hereafter be referred to as BRUSAS; the university as BRU. All proper names, including the names of students, have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Conceptual Framework

Higher education and neoliberalism

Scholars working to understand the construction of undergraduate student identity at U.S. higher education institutions in the early 21st century have argued that the demands of individual consumerism have markedly changed students' experiences of college life. Research finds that student-consumers are migrating to high-end professional colleges or pre-professional programs such as law and medicine, leaving liberal arts programs to be staffed by part-time adjunct faculty (Slaughter, 2001). Additionally, those students who are in large undergraduate institutional settings face new challenges to which academic institutions have not adapted; students are inundated with choices, thereby promoting an individualistic, consumer-oriented approach to college life (Nathan, 2005).

Similar challenges are also presented to the university writ large, in terms of institutional and faculty competition for monies such as external grants and contracts, endowment funds, university-industry partnerships, institutional investment in professors' spin-off companies, and student tuition and fees (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999). Researchers have found that the emphasis on financial profits on campus from education, research, and

athletic endeavours are undermining core academic values and are penetrating higher education administrative decisions at every level (Bok, 2004; Engell & Dangerfield, 2005). In addition, academic careers of faculty members are deeply affected by this focus on profit-making. Slaughter and Leslie (1999) argue that faculty members are now situated squarely in the marketplace rather than between capital and labour.

While this article is concerned primarily with examining one instance of the neoliberal influence on U.S. higher education, it is important to note that research on this topic is global in scope. Critical education scholarship shows that the discourses and policies of privatisation, marketisation, performativity and the "enterprising individual" have international effects (Apple, 2001b). After the decline of the socialist and welfare-state models, "concerns about equity, accessibility, autonomy or the contribution of higher education to social transformation . . . have been overshadowed by concerns about excellence, efficiency, expenditures and rates of return" (Torres & Schugurensky, 2002, p. 429). Research finds that both national context and institutional configuration shape the promotion, resistance, and negotiation of this global trend, and that the ascendancy of neoliberalism and its associated discourses resulted in a fundamental shift in the way institutions of higher education have defined and justified their institutional existences (Olssen & Peters, 2005). In a global neoliberal environment, higher education is seen by governments as being a key driver in the knowledge economy.

In addition to the impact of neoliberalism on institutions of higher education globally, some researchers have also argued that the U.S. neoliberal agenda is saturating the lived realities of people, and that this has important implications for education at every level (Apple, 2001a; Weis, 2004). By examining educational reform efforts such as vouchers, national curricula, and standardised testing, Apple (2001a) explores the coalition-building between neoliberals, neo-conservatives, the Christian right, and the new middle class and its impact on educational policy-making at the K-12 level. Similarly, Weis (2004) uses longitudinal ethnography to expose the lived, classed realities of people within the contexts of neoliberalism and globalisation, focusing on class fractions that have emerged during the global economic restructuring of the past 30 years.

Research on higher education and neoliberalism to date has examined the relationship between these two forces from the perspectives of many key stakeholders, and in light of many recent historical and socio-economic processes. In order to understand the context in which BRUSAS operates, it is also important to examine research on U.S. student activism.

U.S. student activism research: Past to present

While U.S. student activism of yesteryear is seared into popular memory, researchers have found that student activism has in fact been on the rise since the early 1990s

(Rhoads 1998). But the scope of student activism has always been a point of contention for academics, despite the excellent quantitative work of researchers of higher education (Astin ,1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Much research was conducted on U.S. student activism in the 1960s (Baird, 1970; Lipset & Altbach, 1967; Peterson 1966) and even these scholars disagree on the scope and extent of on-campus activism during what most consider the height of student activism in U.S. history (Rhoads 1998). It should come as no surprise, then, that there is disagreement on the nature and extent of contemporary student activism as well.

In the 1960s and 1970s, research produced a broad, multi-faceted, comparative framework for understanding the international impact of student activism on higher education specifically, and politics and society more broadly (Altbach, 1968, 1970). This research contended that student activism varied because of historical circumstance, level of socio-political development, and political and educational systems and that successful student activism depended on the perception of legitimacy that it managed to create.

Given the substantive socio-economic, political and cultural changes since that time, some scholars are beginning to reformulate this framework for contemporary student activism. For example, Rhoads (1998, 2003) argues that campus activism in the 1990s centred on multiculturalism and identity politics (Rhoads, 2000), and he explores student resistance to globalisation in the early 21st century through an analysis of three movements in which university students were pivotal (Rhodes, 2003), paying particular attention to the effects of globalisation on higher education and the relevance of the neoliberal critique offered by critical theorists and globalisation protestors.

Research on higher education student activism helps to illuminate a highly complex phenomenon. Given the breadth of the impact of neoliberal reform on higher education institutions, more research on specific instances of student activism during this era is critically important. While popular discourse on the topic tends to either dismiss student activism as non-existent or to highlight current work in a historical context, an examination of the experiences of contemporary student activists will help us to better understand the influence of neoliberalism on higher education. Of particular significance are groups like Students Against Sweatshops, who take an anti-corporate stance in their activism.

Students Against Sweatshops

The participants in this research project are members of a branch of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). USAS is an international movement of campuses and individual students fighting for sweatshop-free labour conditions and workers' rights. USAS defines the notion of a "sweatshop" broadly, arguing that sweatshops are not

limited to the apparel industry, but include a plethora of low-paid labour positions, such as outsourced custodial workers on university campuses. While "it is not possible to get a full list of all the schools where students are running campus anti-sweatshop campaigns" (Featherstone, 2002, pp. 114-115), there are at least 85 U.S. colleges and universities affiliated with USAS, and it is widely considered to be one of the largest student-led grassroots organizations in the country.

The SAS group at Beautiful River University (BRUSAS) has held several successful campaigns over the past six years, including an effort in 2004-05 to get the University to join the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC) and another more recent effort to force the university to switch from outsourced to unionised custodial workers. BRUSAS is not recognised as an official student group on campus. This is largely due to the role they play as a watchdog, exerting pressure to counter some university policies. It would be heretical, in the minds of most BRUSAS students, to operate within the official, university-sanctioned realm of student associations and organisations. Their outsider status creates, however, some negative implications for the group. They receive no money from BRU for their activities. BRUSAS relies instead on donations from allied professors at BRU, community supporters from the City of Beautiful River, and revenue from parties and other social events. Given their lack of official recognition, they rely on allied groups (including the Black Student Union, Engineers for a Sustainable World, and the Latino Student Association) to rent rooms and access other spaces (such as the Student Union) on-campus. Additionally, BRUSAS cannot depend on any of the standard methods for communicating their presence to new students, such as university-distributed orientation information about on-campus organisations. While their role as an agitator of the university requires BRUSAS to exist outside the recognised parameters of student groups, this is not without its drawbacks when it comes to accessing resources.

Beautiful River University

Beautiful River University is a so-called "super university", with over 27,000 students currently enrolled in one of the largest public research institutions in the North-eastern United States. BRU operates under a two-campus model, with most of the non-medical programs located on one immense campus (East, with a size of approximately 18 square kilometres), and with medical and dental programs concentrated on the other (West). Most on-campus undergraduate student housing and virtually all administrative offices are located on the East Campus, and most of BRUSAS' efforts are also concentrated on the East Campus. While BRU is located within a metropolitan area (Beautiful River) and the West Campus is within the borders of the City of Beautiful River, the East Campus area is relatively isolated because of its location in a second-ring suburb. Some BRUSAS members, as well as other members of the local community, criticise the 1960s decision to locate the East Campus in a suburb because it stimulated growth in a suburban area rather than downtown Beautiful River.

BRU has a history of student activism dating to the 1960s, but its bifurcated campus arrangement, along with the large size of the student body and the large geographical land mass of the East Campus, are held by some as explanations for its apathetic student body in the early 21st century. On the BRU campus, BRUSAS is widely recognised as the most prominent of progressive student activist groups.

Research Methods and Design

Data collection and analysis

I contacted members of the leadership group of BRUSAS via e-mail after finding their names in a student newspaper article. I explained that I was interested in conducting research on the experiences of student activists, and asked if they might allow me to observe their meetings and do in-depth semi-structured interviews with some of the key group members. Approximately three weeks after my initial request, the group allowed me access and I began observing BRUSAS leadership team meetings. The group also holds "action" meetings once a week where students who are more peripherally involved in the group can come to hang fliers for rallies or participate in other short-term projects for BRUSAS. I observed these meetings as well.[1]

After I completed all observations, I contacted members of the leadership team and asked if they would be willing to sit down and talk to me about their activism in an individual interview. Five members of the (approximately, sometimes fluctuating) ten-person team agreed to be interviewed.[2]

Rebecca is one of five participants in this study whom I both observed and interviewed. Rebecca and the other four (Kelly, Mary, Chris and Dylan) are all white students. Three of them identify their upbringing as middle to upper middle class (Rebecca, Kelly and Dylan) and two of them identify as working class (Chris and Mary). All five of the students range in age from 19 to 22. I interviewed three women and two men but the leadership group has four women and six men in total.

As for the other members of BRUSAS, they are almost all white. Chris informed me, "We're still almost an entirely white group. There are a couple of non-white folks that come to meetings somewhat frequently but we're definitely mostly white." Most BRUSAS students are also between the ages of 18 and 23, and there are approximately an equal number of men and women participants.[3]

Student Activism in an Era of Neoliberalism

The student activism of BRUSAS can be understood by examining three interconnected ideas. In this section, I first discuss the notion of *making time*, or prioritizing activism. I then move into discussing the related ideas of *friendship and BRUSAS recruitment.* One of the ways in which students make time for activism is by also viewing it as a social opportunity. Finally I conclude with an analysis of *role of United SAS* in providing an umbrella network for individual campus organizations as they resist the hegemonic growth of neoliberalism on the university campus. Students say that they feel that their time, which is at a premium, is used well because of the affiliation with a larger network, and that they have made friends at other colleges and universities through USAS.

My research shows that prioritising activism – fitting or slotting it in to a very demanding schedule – is of key importance to the student leaders of BRUSAS, and that they often prioritise activism over university coursework. I also found that student leaders in BRUSAS place emphasis on the friendship-building opportunities available to them as group members, and I discovered that how students are recruited into the group is deeply connected to the issue of friendship. Additionally, students sometimes rationalise their participation in BRUSAS by noting that it is an international effort, and that their activism is tied into a much larger and therefore more influential network of activists.

Making time: Student activists or activist students?

As I began my fieldwork with BRUSAS, I was repeatedly struck by the verbal negotiations that students make between activism, school, work, and free time. This is particularly evident amongst the leadership of BRUSAS who spend anywhere from 5 to 25 hours a week on group activities. One student, in discussing whether or not she would participate in an event if it were scheduled on a particular day, says, "This Friday I have a test so it would kind of suck to go on Thursday." Similarly, in my field notes from November 2005, I note how students manage demands on their time, such as schoolwork and part-time employment,

There is negotiating . . . one student has a day planner out, another says, "Finals! Argh!" and holds her head in her hands. Another student says, "Later on in the semester I have a lot of papers to do and I work retail so I don't know how active I'll be."

It is evident from my observations that BRUSAS students constantly juggle multiple competing demands, and that activism is woven into calendars with never-ending "to-do" lists. This is best expressed by Kelly, who, when I asked her if she has difficulty making time for her activist work, tells me, "Not since I re-found my Palm Pilot! . . . I stick it in between classes. I'm always writing e-mails, planning meetings, and going to meetings."

When the leaders of the group recruit new membership, they stress that involvement with BRUSAS does not have to be all-encompassing, thereby exhibiting awareness of the demands on students' time and offering a continuum of activist opportunities for those interested. These opportunities range from attending an action meeting and folding pamphlets to attending a leadership meeting and developing long-term strategies for the organization. Chris, who has been active in BRUSAS since *before* he arrived on campus (he grew up in the area and was involved with a Sweatshop Awareness Project in high school which connected him to BRUSAS approximately 6 years ago), talks about the action meeting as, "an opportunity for people to come in and do some of the more simplistic sides of the activism".

For the core student leaders of BRUSAS, however, it is not simply a matter of deciding whether or not to help distribute event flyers once a week. Their time commitments are much greater. BRUSAS student leader Dylan tells me, "By joining BRUSAS and by staying in for another semester, I'm saying to myself, 'Okay, I'm taking another class.' So while I've only had 15 credits through the university, I've really looked at it like I have 18 credits. It's an extracurricular activity which takes a lot of time." Students' personal negotiations to justify their time commitments to BRUSAS are intricate and often involve a weighing of time spent on official coursework against activist work.

For example, for Chris the priority is not to be a *student activist*, but rather an *activist student*. By inverting the term, Chris renegotiates the relationship between school and activism. This is a concept that resonates with the other student leaders of BRUSAS; every single one of them mentions the idea of being an "activist student" when I ask them how they negotiate the competing demands on their time. Chris talks extensively about prioritising his BRUSAS work over his school work in part because he believes his activist work will open doors for him after college. While Chris expresses deep moral conviction about his student activism, he also sees his activities as helping to build a career, which may indicate the influence of neoliberal ideology on students' thinking. Depending on what kind of career Chris and the other members of BRUSAS choose, however, it is also possible that their college activism will be a conduit for future political advocacy.

Finally, another important element of making time for activism (be it as student activists *or* activist students) is related to the friendships developed by students in BRUSAS. Students who devote a large amount of time to BRUSAS do not view it as cutting into their leisure time, or as a trade-off between having friends and being in BRUSAS. Kelly notes,

> One thing that BRUSAS offers . . . is that . . . it's not dorky for you to go, "Hey man, I can't go to the movie tonight; I have to write a media release." People wouldn't be, like, "What?!" People would be, like, "Okay, cool. Hey, do you need help with that?"

Members of the BRUSAS leadership team have actually defined their community around their activism; I term this *ascribing multiple meanings to* their otherwise hectic schedules, so that sometimes "doing activism" and "hanging out" are one and the same. As Dylan says, "I think that people definitely like that they're going to enter our group, they're going to make some change, and they also might make some friends out of it."

All of these negotiations around time, and the practicality and efficiency with which students approach and schedule their activism are arguably examples of how neoliberalism (which calls for increased efficiency through open-market competition, among other things) filter into people's lives. At the same time that students resist corporate control through their activism, they are bounded by and, indeed, may adopt some aspects of the neoliberal ideology that permeates the broader university setting. The BRUSAS students constantly negotiate this tension, and attempt to maintain their activism while simultaneously managing competing demands on their time. This finding supports Nathan's (2005) contention that the demands of consumerism have changed students' college experiences. This tension is seen also when students ascribe multiple meanings to their activism and friendship, and when they brainstorm strategies for increasing BRUSAS membership.

Friendship and BRUSAS recruitment

If the student leaders of BRUSAS believe that joining the group presents opportunities for friendship, it becomes important to look at who joins the group and how they are recruited. One of the membership recruitment strategies used by the group is the opportunity to party together as members of BRUSAS. At a general recruitment meeting held in January 2006, one student leader discusses the benefits of participating in BRUSAS. He mentions learning skills like leadership, organizing, facilitating meetings, and talking to media, and gaining more advanced skills through workshops, and travel opportunities (USAS events). He also talks about getting to affect change, make great friends, and party together. He stresses, "We have great parties."

Dylan discusses this strategy for drawing students into BRUSAS. He tells me,

> There's definitely a certain amount of outreach that is done with the idea of "Let's try to have fun.". . . It helps if [we're] friends. If [we] can go out and talk about, "How about if we try this idea?" over a drink, and if [we] see each other frequently, it helps a lot.

BRUSAS intentionally recruits potential student activists by stressing that they are a group of fun-loving, friendly people. But this outreach method of ascribing multiple meanings to activism (so that it is at once about anti-sweatshop work *and* making friends and going to parties) may be an example of how the growth of neoliberalism impacts

BRUSAS. The leaders advertise BRUSAS as a group where one might accomplish several goals all at once. For students with very busy schedules, this kind of efficiency is appealing. It allows students to feel that they are "maximizing their investment in higher education" (Slaughter, 2001, p. 24), an important achievement given the high cost of a U.S. college education.

So who are the students who respond positively to these outreach attempts? Do the BRUSAS student leaders perceive there to be any difficulties with recruiting new membership? When I ask this in an interview, Chris tells me, "Ah, now the problems start when you get to that question!" He explains that some of the difficulties BRUSAS has with diversifying their membership to include an equal representation of men and women, students of colour and white students, and students across the class spectrum, are directly connected to their methods of reaching out to new members. Rebecca explains this further:

> I think that there are some problems with the way that we recruit simply because if you look at our group, it's almost entirely a white group . . . it's this very white group so that's something that we're trying to work on without tokenizing people; without being, like, "Oh, you're black! Come join our group!" But it's so much in our society that the races are separated that we find it difficult to attract different types of people because we're so in this mindset of what attracts us, that we don't know how to attract different people.

Rebecca's point that racism is a larger societal ill that cannot be solved exclusively by a small group of undergraduate student activists is an important one. It is essential neither to undermine the type of activist work that BRUSAS does nor to downplay the anti-oppression stance that the group takes, as these are important aspects of combating racism and other forms of prejudice. There are, however, tangible ways in which student groups can recruit and retain people of colour, and future research would do well to examine how students involved in this and other progressive activist groups have ignored or down-played the relationship between ideology and Whiteness. Ultimately, an "anti-racist" group with a limited or non-existent population of people of colour is severely constrained in its ability to combat racism.

In addition to the important relationship between friendship and recruitment, another way in which the neoliberal framework impacts student activism is in the focus of the activist work itself and the importance of the structure of United Students Against Sweatshops.

United SAS

United Students Against Sweatshops has been in existence as an anti-corporate activist organisation since 1998. USAS' goal is to "harness . . . [student] creativity, irony, and media

savvy to launch a well-organised, thoughtful, and morally outraged resistance to corporate power" (Featherstone, 2002). Several members of the BRUSAS leadership team are actively involved in the national organisation, so the ties between the group at BRU and the umbrella organisation are well-established, and BRUSAS members have a lot to say about the impact of being affiliated with a national organisation. Organisationally, students believe that participation in USAS offers them the wisdom of experience and greater leverage to affect local change. Personally, students talk about how it is eye-opening and rejuvenating to attend conferences and meet other student activists.

Dylan stresses that being connected to USAS provides BRUSAS with organisational direction and the chance to learn from the past successes and failures of other university SAS groups because "a lot of groups and campuses that aren't connected to USAS . . . have no direction, they really don't go anywhere". These notions of direction and effectiveness are a strategy for increasing the influence of SAS and again resonate with the neoliberal emphasis on efficiency of purpose.

But the benefits of having a large network of activists with which to work extend beyond applying the lessons learned to BRUSAS' campaigns. Chris discusses how the network provides each of the smaller groups with greater leverage to affect change:

> I don't think we could create that exact change on our campus without being involved in a national network that's strategically moving forward in some of the same places . . . Our entire campaign to affiliate with the WRC, that wouldn't pressure any company to do anything better for worker's rights if it was just one school doing it.

Kelly sums up this notion that the existence of USAS offers organisational support and strength in numbers by saying, "USAS is a very necessary thing for a lot of people to be attached to all at once for solidarity purposes."

On a more personal level, the BRUSAS student leaders feel that USAS has, in the words of Chris, "helped me to learn a lot of skills that I've . . . been able to pass on to the group." Rebecca focuses on how the national activities energise her and help her to see the scope of USAS' impact. She says, "Activism can be so stressful and so frustrating at times . . . But you see, oh, this school's doing a piece, and this school's doing a piece, and you combine them all and it's actually doing something."

Rebecca and the other student leaders of BRUSAS maintain that an umbrella organisation is an important strategy for exerting pressure on universities, but it also helps them to measure and quantify their activism. Such measurements are increasingly important as neoliberal reform encourages and often requires quantifiable assessment of progress (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002).

Conclusion

When undertaking this research, I set out to understand more about the character of student activism, and the experiences and narrations of undergraduate student activists. My research shows that on-campus activism at BRU is in transition. The influence of the neoliberal project on higher education has been well-documented by scholars. My research of an on-campus student activist group at Beautiful River University finds that prioritizing activism, friendship and group recruitment processes, and the existence of an international umbrella organisation are all key elements in understanding student activism during an era of neoliberalism in higher education institutions.

Davies and Bansel (2007) argue that,

> . . . neoliberalism both competes with other discourses and cannibalises them in such a way that neoliberalism itself appears more desirable, or more innocent than it is . . . neoliberalism is nevertheless widely taken up as natural and inevitable. Its moral ascendancy is not generally challenged except where it is overriding and negating deeply held values of professional practice. (p. 258)

The students of BRUSAS use elements of neoliberal discourse (particularly notions such as efficiency and choice) within a context where the moral ascendancy of neoliberalism *is* actually challenged, rather than considered natural or inevitable. The effect is that students appear to utilise neoliberal tools to further the anti-neoliberal agenda of Students Against Sweatshops.

What, then, is the future of student activism in this era of neoliberal economic reform? What are the long-term effects of neoliberalism on student activism broadly and on anti-corporate activists like the members of BRUSAS in particular? I have made preliminary discoveries, but more research is needed to fully answer these questions. In particular, future critical ethnographic research would do well to consider the ways in which student activism may work to challenge the neoliberal assumptions that students bring with them when they enter a university setting. In this analysis I have shown the ways in which certain aspects of neoliberalism have influenced student activism, but it is crucial that we begin to analyse the ways in which student activism may act as a transformative process to challenge and reform the pervasive and insidious encroachment of neoliberalism on U.S. higher education institutions. BRUSAS student activists are university stakeholders who, despite being influenced by existing economic structures in some ways, are also unique because they hold an alternative vision of the future of U.S. universities. Researchers in the field of critical education studies need to better understand student activism in the early 21st century so that we are able to explain these alternative visions for the higher education institutions we call home.

Endnotes

[1] I wrote extensive and detailed field notes during and after each observation, and coded these field notes into thematic categories using N*VIVO qualitative software. The interviews were conducted on the BRU campus in a small, private office.

[2] The interviews ranged in length from one to two hours. The interview protocol I used was derived in two ways: I first developed general categories of questions based on my review of existing literature; I then expanded and refined the questions based on my observational fieldwork. In the interview sessions I did not hold exclusively to this protocol, nor did I ask the questions in identical order each time. With the permission of participants, I audio taped and transcribed all interviews. After I transcribed these interviews, I coded them using the same thematic categories as with the observations and analysed the data with N*VIVO qualitative software. I conducted the bulk of my field work from October 2005 through February 2006.

[3] One other important element pertaining to methods has to do with how the students in BRUSAS perceived and interacted with me as the researcher. I am considerably older than the average BRUSAS member (approximately ten years). At first, the students seemed wary and a bit guarded around me. However, I have a much younger brother who is also a student at BRU and I learned during my fieldwork that he has friends in common with some of the members of BRUSAS. This, along with my own work on progressive campaigns on the BRU campus and as a community activist in the City of Beautiful River, became known to some of the BRUSAS members during my fieldwork. The BRUSAS students also asked me questions about my own background, and learned that I was born and raised in Beautiful River, that I attended an out-of-state undergraduate institution known for its on-campus progressive student activism, that I was a Peace Corps Volunteer several years ago, and that I have been involved with several activist organizations well-known to the students.

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