

Making Meaning of Student Activism: Student Activist and Administrator Perspectives

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College campuses have experienced a recent resurgence of student activism, particularly in response to some of President Donald Trump's executive orders as well as controversial speakers like Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos. Student activism presents both challenges and opportunities for higher education leaders seeking to engage productively in these often complex and highly charged issues. We conducted a phenomenological study of ten student activists and eight administrators at three universities to examine the meaning and goals they identify in their experience of campus activism. Findings indicated students identify their activist involvement as highly meaningful, especially with regard to what they feel they learn in college. Similarly, findings indicated administrators found their experience with student activists to be highly consequential in terms of both career satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We also found communication differences between student activists and administrators, even on topics where they generally agree. Given the frequently high stakes nature of contemporary student activism, we present recommendations for practice in the context of understanding these communication differences.

Introduction

Contemporary student activism creates both challenges and opportunities on college campuses. The issues that stimulate student activism vary widely as organizers target immigration bans, sexual assault, tuition increases, discrimination, investment in fossil fuels, the Israel-Palestine conflict, and a host of other concerns. Protests can be large or small, global or local, in person or online, single or multi issue. The only universals seem to be that activism is increasing on college campuses and that social media tends to amplify, complicate, and accelerate its message (Brazelton, Magolda, & Renn, 2012).

Student activists elicit public reactions ranging from respect and admiration to consternation and condemnation (Barnhardt, 2014). Similarly, student activists experience administrators' responses in myriad ways, including support, neutrality, and vitriol. However it is perceived, student activism often demands considerable institutional human and financial resources. Establishing parameters, responding to complaints, managing the press, working with law enforcement, and advising the student activists themselves requires both staff time and skill. Failure in any one of these areas can result in injury, litigation, negative press, and/or damaged relationships.

Despite the significant costs and benefits campus activism generates, there is relatively little research about administrators' and student activists' approaches to the phenomenon of activism itself. The scholarship that does exist tends to focus on administrator attitudes and student

learning; it is in this literature that we situated our study. The current study aimed to discover how student activists and administrators experienced campus activism so that we might better understand the strategies they employ in achieving their respective goals and resolving conflict. Hence, we addressed the following research questions in this study:

1. How do student activists and administrators make meaning of campus activism?
2. How do the ways student activists and administrators make meaning of campus activism inform the strategies they use in achieving their respective goals and resolving conflict?

Evolving Attitudes in Campus Responses to Student Activists

There is a discernable dominant narrative in the more recent literature on student activism, casting it in the context of student learning and characterizing it as generally positive (Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009). Many scholars now extol the benefits of student activism as a vehicle through which young people of all backgrounds learn the intellectual and practical tools required for citizenship in a democracy (Quaye, 2007). In a case study on what students learn from activism, Biddix, Somers, and Polman (2009) uncovered specific learning outcomes, including finding mutual agreement in a community, preserving and legitimating a broad range of perspectives, examining and developing personal values, affecting societal change, developing a sense of community, examining the tension between the individual and the collective, and committing to a sense of global citizenry.

In addition to positive educational benefits, researchers have found students' involvement in activism can benefit them personally. In Linder and Rodriguez's (2012) narrative research on women of color student activists, for example, participants reported their social justice work as a "safe space" (p. 393). In contrast to other places on campus where participants reported feeling marginalized, they identified their activist spaces as opportunities for connection and inclusion. This finding is consistent with the literature documenting historically disenfranchised students' continuing need for opportunities for connection beyond the mainstream campus culture (Ladson-Billings, 2012).

Increased diversification of higher education has been one of the most positive outcomes of activism on college campuses, a phenomenon that has undoubtedly played a significant role in shifting the discourse about activism. Consequently, both students and administrators have expanded their approaches to activism on college campuses. As the relationship between students and administrators evolved from authoritarian to advisory, generally, responses to student activism specifically reflected this shift.

As DeGroot (2014) pointed out, student activism occurred before the 1960s and often in reaction to students' opposition to institutional control and rigidity. Similarly, it was student protest that ended the tradition of *in loco parentis*, resulting in today's more collaborative relationships between students and administrators. A key part of this transformation has been reframing activism as an asset in student learning rather than a detriment.

While authoritarian and *in loco parentis* approaches eventually became ineffective on the administration side, these oppositional styles have outlived their purpose for students as well. Altbach and Cohen (1990) characterize the 1960's student organizers' tactics as too combative, positing them as ultimately ineffective for sustaining high levels of student activism beyond that time period.

Expanding activist strategies beyond direct protest has been an important result of this shift. Serving on university task forces, conducting educational programs, and finding other ways to work within the system to affect change have sometimes afforded student activists a wider platform for their agendas. As a result, student activists have been successful in achieving goals such as greater curricular diversity (Stepteau-Watson, 2012), gender-neutral bathrooms and housing (Hobson, 2014), and more inclusive services for students with disabilities (Cory, White, & Stuckey, 2010).

Researchers have found a positive correlation between students' perception of administrators' support and their willingness to work within the system to create change (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014). Conversely, administrators who fail to communicate positively with student activists may face a more combative situation, as students feel limited in their options for making their voice heard. When possible, collaborative relationships between student activists and administrators undoubtedly yield many benefits for both groups, including reduced risk of negative press specifically and more pleasant interactions generally.

Good Activism, Bad Activism?

There is another side to this seemingly sunny relationship between administrators and activists, though. Maira and Sze's (2012) analysis of what has become known as the "Pepper Spray Incident" at the University of California, Davis a few years ago illustrates the first critique. To summarize the case briefly, in the fall of 2011, many students at campuses within the University of California system engaged in large protests against the steep tuition hikes instituted by the Board of Regents. Most of these demonstrations occurred within the context of the larger Occupy¹ movement, which added a level of real or perceived combativeness to the situation. In response to the Occupy UC Davis student group's protest and takeover of a university building, campus police pepper sprayed largely peaceful students, sparking national outrage.

In their analysis of the university's response to Occupy UC Davis, Maira and Sze (2012) contrasted media coverage of this incident to coverage of campus police treatment of students engaged in similar behavior at the University of California, Berkeley: "For some observers, then, the shock of the pepper spraying stemmed from a perception that UC Davis is a quiescent campus where this assault was not supposed to happen" (p. 318). While UC Berkeley students protested the same issue (fee hikes specifically, the privatization of higher education generally) and were forcibly removed by police with batons, their protest did not elicit the same outcry about how students were treated. Thus, a problematic binary between good, quiet, well-behaved

¹ The Occupy Movement refers to a de-centralized resistance that began on September 17, 2011 in Zuccotti Park, located in New York City's Wall Street financial district. Best known for coining the "We are the 99%" slogan, this movement calls for protest against economic inequality.

student leaders and bad, loud, militant student activists was reified in this case. The former group is to be respected and listened to while the latter can be silenced, by force if necessary.

In the end, though, neither group gained traction with the actual content of their demands, which included the suspension of multiple fee hikes totaling over 40 percent in a two-year period. This failure to address adequately the nature of students' concerns is the second point made by those critiquing the perception of friendly administrator-activist relations. Clover's (2012) piece, also a postmortem on the pepper spray incident at the University of California, Davis, articulated how administrators can hide behind process concerns, effectively ignoring the substance of activists' demands:

The administration can offer a remedy, with tonalities of magnanimous self-correction: they can promise to be more thoughtful and diligent about respecting the right to protest, and thus seem to slip out of their position in the struggle, that is, as enthusiastic co-authors of the privatization process. They themselves turn to become a context, not a class antagonist. This is precisely what has happened. One suspects there will be some payouts to injured students, and that a cop or two will be pastured. And the matter will be tentatively resolved, despite the economic content remaining entirely unaddressed; thus, the administration wins by "losing." (p.4)

Students often know when they are being placated or steered toward discussions about process in order to avoid addressing the content of their concerns. To paraphrase an old adage, the absence of conflict should not be confused with authentic peace.

The protests at UC Berkeley and UC Davis highlight the complexities surrounding student activism. One can see how an administration cannot let the occupation of university property go on indefinitely regardless of how sympathetic individual administrators may be to the students' cause. On the other hand, educators tend to encourage young people to resist complacency and engage as active citizens in advocating for change; the UC students were attempting to do in response to an issue that had very real consequences for them. Hence, this case illustrates the complicated power relations that activists and administrators negotiate in the context of campus protests, a theme we explore in the next section.

Negotiating Power

Activist and administrator identities in the context of power contribute to the conflicts that arise in the context of campus activism. The source of administrative power lies *within* the system while activists often find their power by *interrupting* systems. Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) articulated this phenomenon in their critical discourse analysis of institutional responses to student activism. In their study, students reported frustration with delayed meetings and frequent referrals, feeling they had to seek alternatives in order to be heard. As one student put it, "they keep ignoring us, so we're going to interrupt stuff and we're going to yell because then you'll have to listen" (p.285).

Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) contextualize their findings in Ahmed's (2012) work on the institutionalization of diversity work in higher education. Ahmed posits administrators employ the language of therapy and human resources in order to give the impression of a commitment to diversity without having to back it up with action. Nebulous words like *engagement* and *excellence* take the place of the substantive, institutional culture change often necessary to truly re-center marginalized populations. Hoffman and Mitchell demonstrate how Ahmed's scholarship manifested in their work: "These anecdotes suggest that the institution is able to demonstrate efforts and opportunities to hear students' grievances while simultaneously avoiding engagements with students that might challenge their authority. Power is reinforced as student frustration builds" (p.284).

The aforementioned literature illuminates how student activists and administrators may engage in parallel conversations even in situations where they agree on many points. Administrators' identities as guardians of systems and structures may cause them to seek resolution within the very entities activists mean to challenge. Similarly, student activists' identities as change agents may motivate them to miss opportunities for genuine collaboration.

Meaning Making and Activism: A Conceptual Framework

Baxter Magolda (2001), Kegan (1994) and Parks (2001), among others, suggest that life is a process of evolving forms of meaning making. Furthermore, meaning making exists on a range of adaptiveness. That is, developmental requirements in one context (e.g., as a teenager, living at home with parents) are likely to be different from the requirements for an adult providing leadership in a professional organization—whether educational, non-profit, or corporate. Baxter Magolda (2001) and Parks (2001), in particular, noted that college environments and experiences can shape the evolution of meaning making.

The literature (e.g., Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009) supports the notion that the roles, relationships, and strategic considerations inherent in activism present uniquely complex webs of developmental demands. It is in the space of the intersecting roles among peers and between activists and administrators that students and administrators are challenged to consider their personal and social identities, as well as consider the kinds of relationships they want to have with others. Furthermore, previous literature on activism (e.g., Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009) suggests that activists are likely to receive a deep education in the dynamics of the exercise of power. Indeed, complicated questions arise from contemporary campus contexts where the boundaries between student activists and administrators are not always clear. Matters of ambiguity of roles and complex strategies for building coalitions and exercising effective communication all are tied into the act of meaning-making related to the practice of activism.

Likewise, administrators who respond to activist experiences are faced with challenges that can promote or even require certain levels of developmental requirements (Harrison, 2010, 2013). Kegan (1994) highlighted the ways in which certain developmental demands grow out of complex adult roles such as partnering, parenting and leadership. Responding to student activism is, indeed, a complex endeavor, often creating tension between administrators' interests in supporting social justice concerns while also serving in a role that requires support for institutional conventions (Harrison, 2010, 2013).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how student activists and administrators make meaning out of their experiences with activism on college campuses, and how these meaning making frameworks shape activist and administrator behaviors. Phenomenology was chosen as the methodological approach for this study because it is particularly useful in studying meaning making. As Patton (2002) explained, phenomenology emphasizes “how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world” (p. 106). With its focus on open-ended questions designed to empower the participant to define the terms of the phenomenon under investigation, the principle goal of phenomenology is to more deeply understand the essence of an experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology is grounded in a postpositivist understanding of knowledge as constructed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Rather than conceiving of knowledge as certain and static, postpositivism posits knowledge as co-created by humans making meaning in ever-shifting contexts. Hence, understanding a phenomenon requires digging deeply into the constructed reality of those living it to understand how they ascribe meaning to their experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Another reason we selected phenomenology is its utility in examining topics with important policy and practice implications. As Cresswell (2007) explained:

The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices of policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of a phenomenon. (p. 60)

Given the heightened concerns about activism on college campuses in this current moment, we believed an approach that allowed us to examine the nuances of the phenomenon was particularly relevant. Policy built on deeper knowledge of a phenomenon has the potential to be more well-informed and effective (Reimers & McGinn, 1997).

Participants and Data Collection

Ten students and eight administrators from three institutions of higher education participated in this study. We selected the institutions as research sites based on their diversity in size, geography, history, and public/private status. Using pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of all participants, the first institution, Midwest University (MU), is a long-standing, well-respected public institution in the rural Midwest. Its location in a fairly conservative state belies its history of left-leaning activism. Approximately 20,000 students are enrolled there, with approximately 80% of them being undergraduates.

The second institution, Southern University (SU), is a selective, private university in a large city in the Southern region of the United States. Approximately 5,000 undergraduate students and

3,000 graduate students are enrolled at SU, which is historically affiliated with a major Protestant denomination.

The final institution, Western University (WU), is a highly selective, private research university on the West Coast. The student enrollment at WU is approximately 16,000 students, with graduate students slightly outnumbering undergraduates. The participants are summarized in the tables below.

Table 1
Student and Administrator Participants at Each Institution

Student	Year	Administrator	Position
Midwest University			
Erin	Senior	Charleigh	Dean of Students
Jeff	Grad	Scott	VP of Student Affairs
Kate	Senior	Dania	LGBT Center Director
Mike	Senior		
Southern University			
Donnie	Senior	Brittany	Associate VP of Student Affairs
Jason	Senior	Robert	Director of Student Activities
Maria	Senior		
Western University			
Dave	Senior	Ricardo	Director of Student Activities
Kevin	Senior	Lauren	Director of Residence Life
Teresa	Senior	Fred	Associate Director of Residence Life

We first reached out to professional contacts at each university and invited them to interview and to identify colleagues who would be willing to be interviewed. We also asked each of them to identify students who they recognized as activists on their campuses. We invited participants via email, introducing ourselves and explaining the study. We conducted in-person interviews (one for each participant) with students and administrators at MU and SKYPE interviews with participants at WU and SU over a 6-month period. We sent the interview questions to participants prior to the scheduled interviews so they had the opportunity to think about the topics should they choose to do so. Interviews ranged from approximately 40 to 75 minutes.

Instruments

In terms of question development, we built the questions around themes in the scholarly literature on student activism and the concept of meaning-making. For example, for the student participants, we divided the interview questions into pre-, during, and post-experience to facilitate students’ exploration of their motivations, challenges, growth, and learning. We asked what prompted them to engage in activism; how they related to others (i.e., both peers and administrators), and how their thinking about activism had evolved.

We asked similar questions of the administrators, encouraging them to reflect on how experiences working with student activists have shaped their understanding of their roles pertaining to activism throughout their careers. We framed many of our questions to this group

around the concept of balance, as this was a strong theme in both the literature and in news stories on administrators' experience responding to student activism. For example, both scholarship and news stories tended to highlight antagonistic interactions between activists and institutional agents (e.g., Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Maira & Sze, 2012). So, we asked how they balanced roles such as supporting students while maintaining order on campus. We followed up on the theme in the administrator interviews, asking questions designed to encourage reflection on both strategy and thought processes relevant to balancing the multiple constituencies student affairs professionals serve. This was prompted by both our scholarship and lived experience as student affairs professionals; the tension between both advocating for students and upholding university policies and expectations frequently emerges as a significant issue.

Data Analysis

While previous scholarship and practical experience with a topic can be assets, they can also bias scholars at all stages in the research process. The literature in which we chose to ground the study, the questions we constructed, the interview processes we engaged in, and the analysis we conducted were all informed by our previous experience with student activism. Hence, we took some measures to address researcher bias, particularly in the analysis phase. First, we kept researcher journals, a practice Given (2008) recommends as a way to increase trustworthiness.

We recorded and transcribed, verbatim, all interviews. We then each read through the transcripts independently, providing initial codes and writing analytic memos. We then shared our codes and analytic memos, and collectively identified the emergent ideas that were the most relevant to the primary focus: the meaning making of our participants. We then began to write, organizing our findings around the identified salient ideas and themes.

We also employed member checking as a trustworthiness measure, sending transcriptions of interviews to participants to offer the opportunity to clarify meaning. Cresswell and Miller (2000) support member checking as a way to confirm researchers accurately captured participants' experiences in their own words.

Results

The large scope of this study, and particularly the inclusion of both students and administrators, led us to situate the findings through two broad, salient themes: *activism as a high impact learning practice* (students and administrators) and *goals of activism*.

Activism as a High Impact Learning Practice

While there were differences between how the student activists and administrators in our study experienced activism, activism as a high impact learning practice emerged as a theme in both groups. The complex challenges that arose in the context of activism such as defining issues, communicating between and among constituencies, and negotiating politics caused students and administrators alike to reflect on their values. As a result, activism contained a highly emotional element for both administrators and activists in this study.

Participants in both groups reported experiencing a wide range of emotions, using words and phrases like “diminished,” “crying,” “satisfaction,” “fulfilling,” and “angry” in addition to quite a few expletives. Sometimes these words were used to describe their own experiences. Frequently, participants’ strong emotions occurred on behalf of others. Dania shared an example of this phenomenon when talking about their need to protect student activists involved in a conflict about the school’s annual Take Back the Night march:

I’d rather take the bulk of the criticism and backlash than the students. The students have enough going on in their lives without having to deal with hate mail and letters to the editor and all of these things. I know it’s not technically my job, but I told the students who were organizing Take Back the Night to feel free to just forward all that stuff to me and I’ll just deal with it. And that helped them feel better, feeling that they had someone who had their back.

Findings revealed student activists and administrators frequently engaged in this kind of role negotiation, constantly reevaluating responsibilities in an effort to be fair. The process of weighing decisions, assigning roles, and working through the myriad nuances that arise in the context of campus activism thus engaged students and administrators alike in reflective practice on their respective campuses.

Students. The student activists in this study were serious about learning. They routinely made meaning of their activist work in the context of their academic lives. Kate, an honors college student, captured the essence of this finding in her description of how much she valued opportunities to discuss her activist work:

I’ve been interviewed a lot about my activism. I’m grateful for all these opportunities to reflect on what I’m doing. I get a lot of opportunities to recall things I’ve read and how I’ve put them into practice. All of these things make me think new thoughts.

Kate demonstrated her connection between theory and practice several times throughout the interview, referencing complex scholarly works and articulating clearly how they informed her thinking. She also researched the interviewer before our meeting, preparing some questions of her own about our perspectives on activism and social change.

Deep life lessons occurred that were not necessarily tied to academics, as well. Activists at all three universities described the nuances of political landscapes, both explicit and subtle alliances, and the general complexities associated with gaining credibility and power in advancing interests. All of these issues came together in Donnie’s description of a particular activist action at SU. In this case, Donnie and his colleagues in the LGBT community protested a particular food chain’s presence on the college campus. This chain’s owner had received national notoriety because of his stance against the “gay lifestyle.” In their protests, Donnie recognized that the protesters were bumping up against powerful interests, including university trustees who were friends of the owner of this national restaurant chain.

Because of this high level opposition, upper-level university administrators who were sympathetic to the protestors’ cause were supportive behind the scenes, but were not in a position

to publically advance the students' concerns. With the quiet support of administrators, and their own passion for the cause, the students persevered through a sustained campaign against the restaurant's campus presence, and even enlisted powerful media sources in their large, metropolitan area. Eventually, the students' sustained protests led to the departure of the business from the campus. Through this long process of working with many partners, Donnie demonstrated important learning:

I really learned to be more humble in activism because often we come in with our own ideas of how we want to do things and we think it's the best way but, we really have to set ourselves aside and listen to others and listen to other leaders and understand that we're not the only ones with a plan. We're not the only leaders and also, as a leader, I learned to really use my own voice because I have a lot of, because of the privilege given to me in this position. . . I really have a loud voice. A lot of people hear me when I talk but there's a lot of other voices that get silenced and so, [I learned] to really use my voice to bring out the voices of others.

The types of learning emerging from activist participation varied according to whether students viewed activism activities as primarily as an educational/programmatic endeavor, or as manifested through protests that were less focused on education and more on wrestling over institutional power.

Administrators. Activism also emerged as a highly consequential phenomenon for the administrators in the study. The ways in which administrators viewed their roles working with activists varied greatly. When asked what his experience was with student activism, one administrator stated, "I try to get my students more engaged with activism and issues." On the other hand, some administrators focused more heavily on the role of managing what they saw as disruptive behavior and related public relations concerns.

Brittany, Robert, and Dania focused on their role as educators and facilitators of activism. Brittany highlighted the role activism plays in education and personal development, and she emphasized the value her institution placed on free speech. Similarly, Robert shared his interest in promoting engagement in social issues on campus, even when their issues were identified as university policies and practices.

Dania described their (chosen pronoun) own learning process through engaging with current student activists. Having themselves been a passionate activist on LGBTQ+ issues as a student, Dania noted:

Now I'm the adult in the situation and the mentor, when not too long ago I was the person with their energy and wanting to take over the world. And so it's pretty interesting to now be on the opposite side and finding different ways to help their voices become more effective and re-funnel their passion.

This attempt to balance "energy" with "adult" responsibilities emerged frequently in our conversations with administrators at MU. They discussed feeling torn in their roles as advocates for students and upholders of university policies. They were often sympathetic to student

activists' causes and expressed frustration about having to temper their support with caution about what was expected of them as employees at their institution.

All of the administrators at MU felt they dedicated significant time and energy to responding to activism. Administrators expressed varying degrees of comfort with their own knowledge about activists' issues and needs. Administrators also articulated different attitudes toward activist work, using words like "confusing" and "frustrating" as well as "admirable" and "educational."

Goals of Activism

This learning phenomenon among students was fueled by passionate commitment to causes. Student participants viewed the pursuit of human rights and social justice as core life values. For some of the participants, these values were nurtured through experiences of facing personal discrimination. Other participants noted that human rights values were cultivated early in life. For example, Erin described developing commitment as a child in Hebrew school, where student engagement in social justice work was programmed into the curriculum.

Among the administrators, the goals were also divergent. As Ricardo said, "I'm always trying to find ways to engage my students in activism." On the other hand, Scott, who was passionate about students gaining more appreciation for diversity and other such outcomes, was challenged by what he perceived as students' direct affronts to institutional policy and governance.

Generally speaking, while administrators expressed a longing to resolve issues, saying things like, "Let's focus on what we can do" and "I try to steer them toward more realistic goals." Activists, on the other hand, aimed to raise issues, as indicated by statements like, "It's important not to settle" and "Even if we can't get what we want, we raised awareness." Hence conflict between the groups sometimes existed, and often had as much to do with disparate goals as with the issues themselves. This theme was expressed clearly in the interview with Scott at MU:

It's frustrating when they [student activists] protest things for the sake of protesting. Or at least that's what it seems like. I just want them to tell us what they want. Even if it's unrealistic. Even if it's not going to happen. Because at least then I know what I'm working with. But when they just protest meeting after meeting...it gets frustrating. Some of them will compromise and that's when we can be productive and move forward. But some of them won't and it's hard for me to let go of those situations and realize I can't fix them or reach them.

On the other hand, findings revealed that students at MU sought to disrupt what they interchangeably referred to as "the status quo" and "business as usual." While they protested around particular issues, they spoke of playing the "long game." For instance, Jeff talked about the university as just one specific site for his more general goal of promoting socialism in institutions broadly:

That glorious day is not when tuition gets cut in half and everyone takes a pay cut. The glorious day is when that happens and then we all together go after a bigger enemy. It's hard to make the argument to the public that they should continue to pour more money

into an institution that gives its president a 60k bonus and a 6% raise every year while hiking tuition. The most important thing is that it [student activism] is preparing people for a much bigger fight. That's the fight over capitalism. I think the people who think it's out of the question should read their history books.

Although Jeff's perspective was generally shared among the MU activists, the tone among the activists at SU and WU was less about wide scale social change than about the education of individuals and, in the case of the food chain at SU, about a specific change action.

While some administrators struggled with the emotionally charged nature of student activism on their campus, others expressed a more detached perspective. Charleigh, for example, discussed her work with student activists in the following manner:

I appreciate that students who are at these protests often care about things that matter. And I often agree with them on the positions they take. I'm fairly successful in working with them, I guess, because maybe they feel that vibe coming from me. And the ones who don't want to work with me...the ones who are more combative...I guess I'm okay with them not liking me because it's not always personal.

Perhaps ironically, Charleigh's ability to maintain some personal distance allowed her to communicate effectively with student activists because she did not see herself as needing to be on the defense. She worked with those who were willing to engage in dialogue with her and respected the wishes of those who did not.

Erin, a student activist at MU, lent credence to Charleigh's self-report by describing her response to activists in contrast with that of the university president. Erin characterized the president's behavior during his open office hours as dismissive, describing how he put his hand up to silent students, gave "canned" answers, and appeared to be lethargic. Erin used the words "crushed" and "radicalized" to express her own and her peers' feelings after interactions with the president. Charleigh, on the other hand, asked questions and made what Erin called "productive conflict" possible by conveying thoughtful attention.

Findings indicate some student activists made it a point to emphasize they did not care whether administrators were nice or not; that it was the issue that mattered to them. For these students, conflict was inevitable because they perceived themselves as participating in a class system that needed to be overturned. Some administrators found this perspective perplexing and/or frustrating, limiting both groups' ability to strategize solutions. If one group views conflict as something to embrace while the other views it as something to avoid, it becomes difficult to even get to the issue because the process means something different to both groups. Our analysis showed that it was often this difference in meaning that helped or hindered both student activists and administrators in their respective strategies regarding campus activism.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how student activists and administrators made meaning of their experiences with campus activism and how that meaning making shaped their

engagement. A key finding was that student activists and administrators alike experienced activism as a highly consequential phenomenon. Both groups reported high levels of reflection, strategizing, and change as a result of their engagement with campus activism.

The high impact nature of activism emerged as a consistent finding among both student activists and administrators. This result supports the literature describing the highly consequential ways in which activism impacts diverse constituencies across college campuses (Briscoe, Gupta, & Anner, 2015). Activism often heightened anxiety for administrators in this study, who frequently referenced safety and legal concerns. However, consistent with Broadhurst and Martin's (2014) findings, results from this study also indicate administrators viewed activism positively at times for its contribution to students' citizenship development.

Student activists' meaning making process with regard to their participation in activism was less ambivalent. Our findings indicate they viewed the experience as positive, particularly with regard to enhancing their academic work. Student activists used phrases like "real, relevant, and tangible," and "applying what I'm learning" to explain how they connected what they discussed in class to their activism. Our findings were also consistent with Linder and Rodriguez's (2012) work on safe spaces as results indicated student activists formed close-knit communities as parts of groups where they could express shared values.

Differences in goals emerged as a major theme between student activists' and administrators' experience of campus activism. Some of the data supported Broadhurst and Martin's (2014) findings that open, appreciative communication between activists and administrators facilitated conflict resolution. Other data supported Clover's (2012) analysis regarding activists feeling manipulated by administrators' communication strategies. Diversity within activist and administrator experiences of student activism emerged as a consistent theme in this study.

Campus response (McCarthy, 2016) and contributions to student learning (Biddix, 2014) exist as major themes in the scholarly literature on student activism. In terms of campus response, our study's findings are consistent with the research, identifying constructive communication as a key element in administrators' ability to work with student activists. Our findings were also consistent with the scholarship demonstrating a positive relationship between students' participation in activism and enhanced learning.

The results of this study potentially open new lines of inquiry about the role of emotion in how students and administrators make meaning in their experiences of activism. As highly charged as student activism can be, literature on this specific topic is sparse. When emotion is mentioned, it tends to be included with material about communication processes more generally. But our findings identify emotion as a specific part of the meaning-making process. For example, Erin's contrast of her experience with the president and dean of students contained less description of their words and more focus on their affect. Although we tend to think of effective communication in terms of clarity, Erin's criticism of the president was not about his ability to be clear. Similarly, Scott's frustration with the student activists was not about the content of their demands as much as their heated rhetoric and lack of positive response to his attempts at problem solving.

In considering its evolution, Daloz (2004) places meaning making as well as transformative learning in the context of engagement for the common good. Activism surely can be interpreted in this context. According to Daloz, acculturation occurs first within families and then into larger communities. Within these larger communities, we are exposed to differences, and, particularly in the phenomenon of activism, into conflict. Conflict provides a particular context for growth, as it prompts “critical reflection on our own formation to a larger sense of self—one that identifies with all people and ultimately with all of life” (Daloz, p. 105). Growth through conflict, as well as alliances, is evident in the stories of the students, particularly as they interact with power structures, sometimes represented by the administrators in the study. The tension between viewing the administrators as “other,” on the one hand, and humanizing them, on the other hand, provides a valuable experience in cognitive dissonance.

Daloz (2004) argued that personal transformation is an essential aspect of social change, and this occurs in the context of “reflective discourse.” This study both provided a context for participants to engage in reflective discourse, but also to demonstrate the rich, ongoing discourse that has been part of their experience with activism. Daloz further noted that there are emotional, social, and cognitive components that are part and parcel of the experience of transformation. Daloz’ notion of different dimensions of the human experience being deeply connected in development is consonant with Baxter Magolda (2002), Kegan (1994), and Parks (2000). Again, the research participants reflect challenge in multiple dimensions of their lives, and the administrators are situated in important roles to provide support and space for helping students work through these tremendous transformative growth opportunities.

Implications

While student activism is often examined in terms of campus response and strategy, the results of this study suggest that the areas of communication and emotion warrant further research. Ruff’s (2016) recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* piece titled *The Mental and Academic Costs of Campus Activism*, for example, speaks to the price student activists often pay for taking on issues with deep personal relevance to them. While both the scholarly literature, as well as our current study, reveal benefits to student activism in terms of meaning making and connection, the emotional costs remain an under-explored area of research.

Higher education leaders owe it to our students to understand more deeply the consequences faced by students who take it upon themselves to educate, lead hunger strikes, and engage in other forms of activism on our campuses. We sometimes send mixed messages to students, encouraging them both to avoid apathy and get involved while discouraging civil disobedience and/or activities that might cause the institution negative press or disruption. Deeper and more authentic dialogue about the complexities of student activism seems warranted, particularly in this current moment of heightened encounters between student activists and administrators on many campuses.

More specifically, we feel the theme of disparate goals between activists and administrators is a particularly relevant area we uncovered in this research. Typically, we tend to think of conflicts between people as mostly related to the issue at hand. For example, students might believe the university should divest its investment holdings from companies that do business with Israel and

campus leaders may take another position on the issue and/or believe the divestment strategy would cause too much financial loss and alienate too many donors.

Yet conflicts between student activists and administrators appear equally heated on issues where people generally agree, such as sexual assault. Hence the tension may sometimes have less to do with the issue and more to do with the way activists and administrators view social change more generally. If one group feels interrupting the status quo is the right path while the other is working to resolve the issue and move on, the groups will work at cross purposes even when they share similar positions. These different approaches regarding working within a system versus interrogating the system itself are important to surface, acknowledge, name, and address. Greater understanding between student activists and university administrators is needed to navigate these differences in goals and strategies.

Future Research

Based on the findings presented in this study, we believe many of the parallel conversations student activists and administrators often have could be reduced through a more nuanced understanding of each group's communication patterns. Hence we recommend future research that incorporates a cross-cultural communications framework in examining more deeply the underlying assumptions that may help or hinder communication between activists and administrators.

Similarly, we advocate for a more interdisciplinary approach to scholarship on campus activism more generally. Student activism contains communication, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that have been thus far underexplored. A higher education framework is useful for examining policy and political implications, but could be augmented by offering a more nuanced examination of this increasingly relevant phenomenon in the scholarly literature of a variety of disciplines.

Summary and Conclusion

In this study, we set out to understand how student activists and higher education administrators made meaning of their experiences with campus activism. Findings indicated students identify their activist involvement as highly meaningful, especially with regard to what they feel they learn in college. Similarly, findings indicated administrators found their experience with student activists to be highly consequential in terms of both career satisfaction and dissatisfaction. We also found activists and administrators often speak different languages, even on issues where they generally agree. Recommendations for future research and practice include delving more deeply into these communication differences in order to more fully inform effective communication around campus activism, particularly if current trends of increased involvement continue.

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