

## INTRODUCTION

# Student Activism, Diversity, and the Struggle for a Just Society

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This introductory article provides a historical overview of various student movements and forms of student activism from the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement to the present. Accordingly, the historical trajectory of student activism is framed in terms of 3 broad periods: the sixties, the postsixties, and the contemporary context. The author pays particular attention to student organizing to address racial inequality as well as other forms of diversity. The article serves as an introduction to this special issue and includes a brief summary of the remainder of the issue's content.

*Keywords:* student activism, student movements, student organizing, social justice, campus-based inequality

During the early 1990s, as a doctoral student in sociology and higher education, I began to systematically explore forms of activism and direct action on the part of U.S. college students. My dissertation work focused on gay and bisexual males, including most notably their coming out experiences and the subsequent engagement by a subpopulation of my sample in queer politics and related activism. As I noted in *Coming Out in College: The Struggle for a Queer Identity* (Rhoads, 1994), the book version of my dissertation, identifying as “queer” was in part a recognition of “a political effort designed to create greater awareness and achieve increased rights and visibility for all queer people” (p. 113). The queer students in my study engaged in a variety of direct action strategies, most notably organizing coming out rallies, queer pride events, protest demonstrations, and facilitating “straight talks” (consciousness raising presentations) throughout the

campus, including in classrooms and residence halls. The students also participated in the 1993 March on Washington for lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights. I too joined the march and recorded many of the students' experiences and reflections, some of which are included in *Coming Out in College*.

Studying gay and bisexual males was just the beginning of a long research journey focused on the role college students play in addressing a range of diversity issues. In *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Rhoads, 1998), I centered the struggles of students to address a variety of multicultural concerns that emerged on U.S. campuses during the 1990s. Cases of student activism included in *Freedom's Web* represented an array of issues related to race, gender, and sexual orientation, primarily in terms of campus opportunity structures that may promote or limit diversity. Around this time, I also conducted research on student outreach in the form of engagement in community service projects, leading to the book, *Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self* (Rhoads, 1997). More recently, my work in the area of student activism turned to student-initiated retention and recruitment projects in which I examined race- and ethnic-based student organizations and their contributions to strengthening college access and success (Maldonado,

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*Editor's Note.* This is an introduction to the special issue “Student Activism.” Please see the Table of Contents here: <http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/dhe/9/3/>.—RLW

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Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). With the help of several doctoral students (often with them taking the lead), I continue to work on studies of race- and ethnic-based organizing, as well as undocumented student and ally activism, and union-related organizing.

My work in the area of student activism and diversity was what led the editors of the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education (JDHE)* to ask me to serve as guest editor for this special issue. The goal of this issue is to examine current and recent trends in student activism as it pertains to advancing diversity. *JDHE's* initial call for papers stressed the importance of recent activism related to issues such as #BlackLivesMatter, sexual violence on campuses and Title IX, immigration reform and the Dreamers movement, and economic concerns such as those highlighted by the Occupy Wall Street movement, among other issues. Tragic killings of Black males such as Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Tamir Rice at the hands of police have been particularly compelling, as colleges and universities throughout the country have witnessed a rise in student organizing to address racism both in terms of local campuses and the broader society. But many of the contemporary challenges student organizers face have important historical antecedents, some of which I explore in this article. My historical analysis is in keeping with assumptions I hold as a critical theorist, including the contention that challenging oppression and marginality involves coming to terms with history and culture.

With the preceding in mind, my intent in this introductory article is to provide a historical overview of student activism in the United States as a way of framing this special issue. I pay particular attention to race and racial issues, but consider other aspects of diversity as well. The period of interest for me begins around the time of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) and then proceeds to the present. I place significant emphasis on key developments of the 1960s, given their long-lasting impact on political and cultural life in the United States. Following the historical overview, I summarize the key contributions of the other seven articles selected for this special issue.

The commitment of the editorial staff of *JDHE* and myself as guest editor reflects a belief that student activism deserves greater research attention than it typically receives, especially when

one considers the key role students have played and continue to play in forging diversity-related reforms. Furthermore, I have argued in previous work that scholars of higher education have not given adequate attention to the role of social movements—including student movements—in fostering the conditions for higher education reform (Rhoads, 2009; Rhoads & Liu, 2009; Rhoads, Saenz, & Carducci, 2005). Consequently, this special issue begins to address some of these concerns. We see the papers included herein contributing in significant ways to expanding knowledge of the complexities and importance of diversity-related student activism and movements.

### Student Activism in “The Sixties”

On February 1, 1960 four Black students at North Carolina A&T—David Richmond, Ezell Blair, Jr., Joseph McNeil, and Franklin McCain—occupied four lunch counter seats at Woolworths in downtown Greensboro. The seats were in the “Whites Only” section of the department store. Woolworths refused to serve them but the students did not relinquish their seats. When the department store closed the students left, only to return the next day to prolong their protest of segregated services. Newspapers throughout the United States reported the events in Greensboro and in subsequent days similar protests broke out throughout the South. The four North Carolina A&T students thus helped to launch what many believe to be the most important period of student activism, known to many as simply “The Sixties.”

As college students assumed center stage in protesting segregated facilities, the sit-in was restructured in the form of stand-ins in some locales, such as when students in the Nashville Student Movement (NSM) worked to integrate the city’s movie theaters. John Lewis, then student leader of the NSM and today U.S. Representative for Georgia’s 5th congressional district, described the strategy in his memoir *Walking with the Wind* (Lewis, 1998):

We would approach the ticket window of each theater, form a long line, and one by one ask for a seat inside. When refused, we would either return to the end of the line or move to a line at the next theater. Not only were we visibly demonstrating against the segregationist policies of these theaters, we were tying up their ticket lines as well. (p. 125)

While a student at American Baptist Theological Seminary, Lewis went on to participate in the 1961 Freedom Rides as groups of civil rights activists rode interstate buses throughout the South to integrate interstate bus terminals. The Freedom Rides followed the Supreme Court's, 1960 *Boynton v. Virginia* decision in which segregated bus terminals were ruled to be in violation of the Interstate Commerce Act.

Black students in particular played a pivotal role in shaping campus activism of the 1960s (Flowers, 1998; Morris, 1981). For example, Anne Moody, a student at Tougaloo College, helped to register voters and integrate segregated facilities while volunteering with mainstream civil rights organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (Moody, 1968) is considered a classic in terms of its first-hand account of segregated life in the South and the courage required to challenge it. In one passage she described her feelings after participating in a lunch-counter sit-in in Jackson, Mississippi:

After the sit-in, all I could think of was how sick Mississippi Whites were. They believed so much in the segregated Southern way of life, they would kill to preserve it. I sat there in the NAACP office and thought of how many times they had killed when this way of life was threatened. I knew that the killing had just begun. (p. 290)

Although Moody's activism was primarily tied to organizations promoting Gandhian civil disobedience, other Black students adopted more confrontational approaches while seeking to advance "Black Power." Stokely Carmichael, a Freedom Rider and later chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), played a major role in advancing Black Power as an idea and strategy, building on the thinking of writer and activist Richard Wright. In a speech delivered at UC Berkeley in November 1966, Carmichael described Black Power as a call to group empowerment, as opposed to what he saw as the kind of individualized struggle encouraged by the larger White-dominated society. He stressed that Blacks "are oppressed as a group because we are Black . . . and in order to get out of that oppression, one must feel the group power that one has" (Carmichael, 1968, p. 460). He saw Black Power in part as a form of self-representation, cathartic in

some sense: "We have to wage a psychological battle on the right for black people to define their own terms, define themselves as they see fit and organize themselves as they see fit" (p. 465).

The epitome of Black Power was captured by the Black Panther Party (BPP), originally organized in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two students at Merritt College in Oakland (the college was later renamed Oakland City College). The BPP produced a 10-point plan aimed at improving the living standards of Blacks, including demands that addressed full employment, decent housing, education that exposes the true nature and history of American society, exemptions from military service for Black men, and an end to police brutality and murder of Black people. The Panthers, of course, captured the attention of the U.S. media by deploying guns while monitoring police with the goal of deterring police brutality against Blacks. The story of how the Panthers raised money to buy guns in Oakland is shared by Bobby Seale in the documentary film *Berkeley in the Sixties*: He describes purchasing hundreds of Mao Tse-tung's (also Mao Zedong) *The Little Red Book* for 20 cents a piece with fellow Panthers Huey Newton and Bobby Hutton and then selling them for a dollar at Sather Gate on the UC Berkeley campus. But the BPP did much more than simply monitor police officers; they also developed and implemented food and clothing banks (provided for free), child development centers, free breakfast programs (for children), employment services, community health classes, and a variety of community-oriented counseling programs (Brown, 1992; Hilliard & Cole, 1993).

The BPP also played a critical role in shaping university curricula, getting involved in promoting the Black Student Union (BSU) movement and the development of Black Studies programs (Biondi, 2012; Joseph, 2003; Rojas, 2007). This was the case at San Francisco State College (SFSC), now San Francisco State University, in the late 1960s, when the BPP and SNCC supported the efforts of student activists such as SFSC's BSU leader Jimmy Garrett. Included among a host of direct action tactics promoted by Garrett and other student activists were campus demonstrations, consciousness-raising programs and lectures (aimed at advancing Black nationalism), the development and offering of

student-led Black-themed courses, and the disruption of classes in the form of a student strike (Biondi, 2012; Rojas, 2007). Taking full advantage of opportunities offered through SFSC's Experimental College, student activists created the first Black Studies curriculum. The fact that the earliest Black Studies programs were advanced primarily by student activists offers evidence of the power students hold when committed and well organized.

The Chicano/a Student Movement (CSM) also gained strength in the late 1960s, with Los Angeles arguably serving as a touchstone for the broader movement. CSM organizing strategies often encompassed collaborations among students at both the university and high school levels. This was the case in 1968 when college students from university-based student organizations such as the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) and the Mexican American Student Association (MASA), along with support of the community-based Brown Berets, helped to organize a walkout by more than 10,000 students at several East LA high schools (known to many as the "East LA blowouts"). The students' concerns focused on deplorable educational conditions, including overcrowded classrooms, a lack of cultural understanding among teachers, dilapidated buildings, and racism on the part of teachers and administrators aimed at undermining educational and career aspirations.

Seeking to refashion narratives about Chicano/a student activism, in light of previous scholars neglecting the work of *Chicanas*, Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998) analyzed the East LA blowouts by focusing on the critical role women played in organizing and advancing the overall movement. Using a methodology combining oral history and "critical feminisms . . . strongly influenced by women of color" (p. 114), Delgado Bernal highlighted the contributions of eight key female students. As part of reconceptualizing grassroots leadership, she delineated five contributions involving developing consciousness, holding an office, networking, organizing, and acting as a spokesperson (p. 124). Delgado Bernal not only sought to refashion historical narratives by incorporating women's counter stories, but essentially she worked to challenge androcentric notions of leadership in the context of activism.

The fact that women might be excluded from historical analyses of the 1960s student movements is hardly surprising, especially when reading accounts of women's marginality within the CRM and Peace Movement (in opposition to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War). For example, in *Personal Politics*, Sara Evans (1980) pointed to shortcomings within both the CRM and the New Left that limited the roles of women, but which ultimately helped give rise to a stronger Women's Liberation Movement. In James Miller's (1994) treatment of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), he documented how female activists in SDS sought refuge in women's restrooms at various conferences and meetings as a means to escape male chauvinism. Doug McAdam's (1988) *Freedom Summer*, which focused on a major civil rights initiative led by activist and organizer Robert Moses, revealed similar forms of bias against women evident in the day-to-day interactions and endeavors of student activists (see also McAdam, 1992). And more broadly speaking, Michelle Wallace's (1999) *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, originally published in 1978, called out Black Power politics for the silencing of Black women's subjectivity, which she argued was the result of Black assimilation into U.S. society and a loss of cultural continuity.

The experience of marginality within movements supposedly driven by egalitarian values contributed to a growing awareness among women activists that they too needed their own struggle, in part adding verve to an increasingly influential Women's Liberation Movement. Consequently, as various race- and ethnic-based student organizations in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s sought to develop academic programs to meet their needs, female students and faculty also organized to push colleges and universities to adopt Women's Studies programs as well as address a wide array of issues affecting women's lives (Boxer, 1998). Given the important role of campus organizing around women's issues, it is not surprising that many of the bastions of women's liberation were college towns sprinkled across New England and the Midwest (Evans, 1980). These movements though tended to reflect a limited positionality rooted in White middle-class values, which

eventually became the target of criticism by feminist scholars of color such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde, among others. Their work called attention to the importance of intersectionality, both in terms of scholarship and activism; issues of intersectionality continue to influence the thinking and organizing of contemporary student activists.

The final year of the decade of the 1960s was a pivotal one for race- and ethnic-based student organizing. This was the year Mexican American students and activists met in Santa Barbara and produced *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, essentially a manifesto delineating strategies and responsibilities for Chicano/a student activists and a defining document for student organizations such as the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, or MEChA, as it is more commonly known. The year 1969 also was a pivotal one for the nation's American Indian population as about 400 activists, including many California college students, occupied the abandoned Alcatraz Island, claiming it in the name of an existing treaty promising all abandoned federal land be returned to American Indians. Although the Alcatraz Island occupation was not carried out officially by the American Indian Movement, AIM nonetheless benefited from the successful 19-month occupation in terms of generating increased interest and commitment to the ongoing struggle of American Indians. The year also marked the culmination of the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) strike at SFSC leading to the founding one of the first Black Studies programs. Finally, 1969 for many marks the rise of a truly forceful Gay Liberation Movement with its birth often linked to the Stonewall Rebellion in Greenwich Village in June. Although it was not a student-led revolt, it became a key event in establishing a more assertive and prideful approach among student activists committed to gay liberation.

"The Sixties"—as a form of zeitgeist—is often seen as extending into the early to mid-1970s, perhaps up until the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops from Saigon in April, 1975 (Gitlin, 1987). Although civil rights initiatives were key in defining this era of activism, antiwar efforts targeting U.S. involvement in Vietnam were also critical in shaping this

period of youth-led upheaval. Campus-based antiwar activism grew from many of the largest university campuses such as the University of Wisconsin and the University of California Berkeley. Just as Black Power influenced a more confrontational approach to civil rights organizing, antiwar efforts led by college students too adopted more aggressive tactics, adopting slogans such as "Bring the War Home" and "From Protest to Resistance." The shift in strategy to actually trying to block or prevent the U.S. government from waging war in Vietnam largely emerged out of frustration with civil disobedience tactics and perception that U.S. military involvement in Vietnam was in fact increasing as the decade unfolded. Early antiwar strategies captured by the use of petitions, rallies, sit-ins, and teach-ins, such as those organized by the UC Berkeley Vietnam Day Committee (VDC) in May, 1965 (Degroot, 1998), and then later evidenced by draft-card-burning demonstrations (following reenactment of the Selective Service Act in 1967), did not seem to have the impact student organizers sought. Frustration thus contributed to the rise of the Weathermen (also known as the "Weatherman" and "Weather Underground"), a group within SDS that gained control of the organization and proceeded to wage war against the U.S. government mainly by bombing federal buildings (Heineman, 1993).

There continues to be disagreement about the degree to which student-led antiwar activism—both in terms of peaceful protest and more confrontational tactics—actually impacted U.S. policy in Vietnam, but there is no disputing the fact that J. Edgar Hoover, former FBI Director, saw the antiwar movement, as well as the civil rights movement, as clear threats to domestic security, as he defined it. The perceived threat of protest movements led Hoover to launch COINTELPRO—the FBI's counter intelligence program employing covert and illegal tactics to undermine various organizations contributing to antiwar and civil rights movements (U.S. Senate, 1976).

### Post-Sixties Student Activism

As civil rights struggle faced growing opposition in the form of rising conservatism

against progressive social change and legislation (Apple, 2000; Rhoads, Saenz, & Carducci, 2005), the movement to expand women's rights continued throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s and shared the stage to some extent with a growing Gay Liberation Movement. Some of the first gay organizations to show up on university campuses, and following in the footsteps of the Stonewall Rebellion, adopted the term "homophile" such as at Pennsylvania State University, where the key organization in the early 1970s was "Homophiles of Penn State" or "HOPS." The organization served to protect and advance rights and equal opportunities for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, while also seeking to raise campus awareness. Activists in HOPS had much to confront in the early 1970s, given the nature of societal attitudes toward homosexuality, including the fact that the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II)* classified homosexuality as a mental illness until 1974. HOPS actually offers a good example of the challenges confronting LGB students of the 1970s, as was highlighted in *Coming Out in College*. Although my research focused on the emergence of a more activist-oriented queer movement among gay and bisexual students during the early 1990s, in reviewing the history of Penn State relative to its treatment of LGB students I came upon a particularly egregious case offering insight into the kinds of challenges student activists such as those in HOPS faced in the 1970s.

Joseph Acanfora was a Penn State undergraduate education major conducting his student teaching assignment (a necessity for graduating with a teaching certificate at Penn State) in 1972 when the university pulled him from his site after finding out he was a member of HOPS. After a board of six deans constituting Penn State's Teacher Certification Council split their vote on whether to certify Acanfora, the case went before Pennsylvania Secretary of Education, John C. Pitterenger, who eventually decided in Acanfora's favor. Some 20 years later, queer students in Penn State's Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Alliance (LGBSA) continued to battle a hostile campus climate as they pushed a highly resistance Board of Trustees and Pres-

ident Joab Thomas to add a sexual orientation clause to the university's statement of nondiscrimination. Ultimately, they were successful, but not until years of consciousness raising activities in the form of gay pride rallies, marches, kiss-ins, and straight talks. A threat to take over the president's office also helped, at least according to several queer activists in LGBSA (Rhoads, 1994).

The divestment movement of the 1980s connected U.S. student activism to a more international cause, as students around the country engaged in direct action activities aimed at forcing universities to end their investments in companies doing business in South Africa. A mainstay of student strategies was the construction of shanty towns on campuses as a means of raising awareness about the impoverished lives of Blacks in South Africa under the brutal system of apartheid. Student organizing at Columbia University was one such example when in April, 1985 student activists participating in the Coalition for a Free South Africa (CFSA), founded at Columbia in 1981, conducted a blockade of Hamilton Hall that lasted three weeks. Five months following the end of CFSA's blockade, Columbia's trustees divested (Hirsch, 1990).

In *Freedom's Web* (1998), I sought to capture the tenor of student activism during the early to mid-1990s, which I argued built on the energy generated by the divestment movement while extending the democratic ideals associated with the earlier Civil Rights Movement (CRM). A difference though with student organizing of the 1990s—by comparison to the 1960s—was a shift from a focus on rights to paying greater attention to opportunity, especially in terms of improving higher education access and campus climates for underrepresented and marginalized populations. Ideals linked to multiculturalism and cultural diversity were the defining concerns, highlighted by several cases in *Freedom's Web*.

A central goal of *Freedom's Web* (1998) was to counter arguments advanced by scholars of both conservative and liberal ilk—including the likes of Nathan Glazer (1997) and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (1992)—that U.S. campuses were "balkanized" by forms of "ethnic tribalism" representing a betrayal of the American dream of a pluralist democracy (essen-

tially, the “melting pot” idea). Accordingly, I pointed to several significant campus movements including protests at Rutgers University in which a multiracial coalition of students (United Student Coalition or USC), led by African American students, challenged racist comments made by then Rutgers President Francis Lawrence. Another case involved UCLA students organizing across racial lines (Conscious Students of Color or CSC) to push for the elevation of Chicano Studies from interdepartmental program to a lone-standing academic department. Michigan State University’s Native American students, assisted in significant ways by members of MSU’s MEChA, engaged in an extended mid-1990s battle with then Republican governor John Engler over his intent to end the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver Program (MITWP). Other cases of student activism, including the 1990 Mills College Strike and the Free Burma Coalition (FBC), an international movement centered at the University of Wisconsin, revealed the willingness of students to work across racial and ethnic lines—and even national lines in the case of the FBC—in the name of equity and advancing democracy.

In light of charges of rejecting the American pluralist dream, it is no wonder that today’s student activists, often led by students of color working in opposition to the idea of a color-blind society, have come to see the “melting pot” suggestion as a form of micro-aggression resistant to recognizing the racial diversity of U.S. society (Schmidt, 2015). Indeed, racial issues, including the struggle for racial equality and opposition to difficult-to-extinguish racism, have come to play a central role in contemporary student activism.

### The Contemporary Context

In the early years of the 21st century, the University of Michigan (UM) and two court cases relating to the consideration of race in university admissions—*Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*—revealed the deep commitment of African American student activists to addressing racial equality. Coalescing around BAMN (Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration and Immigration Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary), student organizers engaged in a variety of protests in support of affirmative

action, including organizing a 50,000 person proaffirmative action march on Washington, DC in April, 2003 (organized in conjunction with the original California-based BAMN). The roots of African American student activism at UM though extended back to the late 1960s in the form of the Black Action Movement or BAM, which waged a long struggle to diversify the university racially as well as challenge racism on campus. BAM demands over a period of three decades not only focused on the makeup and experiences of the student body, but also raised issues about faculty of color underrepresentation. In part, it was the response of the university to BAM’s demands and a belief in the necessity of the university to diversify through affirmative action that ultimately led to challenges brought by White applicants in the *Grutter* and *Gratz* cases. The verdict, of course, was that the university could focus on diversifying the student body, but only in a manner consistent with more holistic application reviews conducted by the UM Law School (*Grutter*).

The direct action of BAMN is consistent with an argument offered by Rhoads, Saenz, and Carducci (2005), who contended that social movements better explain the success or failure of reforms such as affirmative action, and that claims of constitutionality often serve to mask the ideology and politics undergirding support or opposition to particular reforms. Given such a context, they argued that the activism of BAMN among other progressive groups is critical to advancing equity-oriented reform. In building their argument, they posited that progressive reforms associated with the earlier CRM, enacted legislatively and policy-wise in the form of the Great Society, represented the effectiveness of social movement politics. Affirmative action, for example, emerged in the context of an increasingly influential CRM, combined with growing urban rebellion by Black Americans dissatisfied with the opportunity structure and racism of U.S. society. But no sooner than progressive politics asserted itself, conservatism offered an aggressive counter response to affirmative action and other social reforms characteristic of a progressive era. This shift, which Apple (2000) described as the “conservative restoration,” was clearly

tied to ideologically driven political organizing. As Rhoads et al. (2005) noted:

The 1980s . . . signaled a change in the prevailing political and judicial winds. In time, 12 years of judicial appointments under Presidents Reagan and George Bush effectively reshaped the ideological landscape of the federal bench and provided the impetus for opponents to renew their attacks on affirmative action. (p. 205)

The authors concluded that support from organizations such as BAMN “may prove crucial in preserving and strengthening affirmative action in the coming years” (p. 214).<sup>1</sup>

More recently, BAMN has played a key role in challenging declines in the quality and opportunity structure of public education, while also protesting police violence in minority communities, especially against males of color. BAMN at UC Berkeley, for example, organized a campus rally in March, 2015, making a number of demands, including the following: adoption of a UC Berkeley/Oakland 10% plan, make UC Berkeley a sanctuary for undocumented students and workers by denying Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) access to the university, stop racist attacks against youth of color, and remove Janet Napolitano as President of the UC. Another demand was to “jail the killer cops,” with students stressing that “a badge is not a license to kill.”<sup>2</sup>

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was an economically driven struggle born in 2011 and involving protests on Wall Street over the growing power of corporations and the wealthiest one percent to control much of life for the remaining 99%, including economic and social policies. The original movement quickly produced hundreds of offshoots, with student-led encampments forming at many of the nation’s colleges and universities. One of the most noteworthy cases were the protests of students at the University of California Davis and the horrific decision by campus police to pepper spray nonviolent student protesters engaged in a sit-in (Bell, 2011). Although student activists generally stood in solidarity with the fundamental concerns of the OWS movement, including support for labor and poor communities, they further translated the movement’s vision “by organizing on campuses to fight back against tuition hikes and the general privatization of colleges and universities” (McCarthy, 2012, p. 50). As

was the case with the later #BlackLivesMatter movement, OWS was greatly strengthened by social media, especially Twitter, with such influence described as “Twitter revolutions” (Tremayne, 2014, p. 111).

#BlackLivesMatter, a movement founded by Patrisse Cullors-Brignac, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi, also has sought to address police violence. Initially, it started simply as a hashtag appearing subsequent to the trial and acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin under Florida’s controversial “Stand Your Ground” law. Other deaths, specifically at the hands of police officers (Zimmerman was a neighborhood watch coordinator in a gated community), including the Ferguson, Missouri shooting of Michael Brown, the Staten Island chokehold death of Eric Garner, and the Cleveland police shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, among others, have further fueled the activism of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Tometi, Garza, and Cullors-Brignac (2015) explained their rationale:

When we founded #BlackLivesMatter in 2013, we wanted to create a political space within and among our communities for activism that could stand firmly on the shoulders of movements that have come before us, such as the civil rights movement, while innovating on its strategies, practices and approaches to finally centralize the leadership of those existing at the margins of our economy and our society.

The article went on to share that all three founders are Black women with two identifying as queer and a third emphasizing her Nigerian American identity. The three women stress the intersectionality of marginalized identities as part of their strategic vision, noting that,

Black trans people, Black queer people, Black immigrants, Black incarcerated people and formerly incarcerated people, Black millennials, Black women, low income Black people, and Black people with disabili-

<sup>1</sup> On the day this article was completed and submitted for the final production stage for publication the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 4-3 in favor of the use of race-conscious admissions in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*. The decision came some four months after the passing of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a staunch opponent of affirmative action.

<sup>2</sup> Points here derive from BAMN’s web site: <http://www.bamn.com/social-justice/uc-berkeley-march-public-education-for-all-not-segregation-privatization-and-police-repression>



ties are at the front, exercising a new leadership that is bold, innovative, and radical.

The Black Lives Matter website describes this as a “tactic to (re)build the Black liberation movement.”<sup>3</sup> The #BlackLivesMatter movement also serves to highlight the ways in which social media have transformed direct action organizing.

Although not specifically a campus movement, #BlackLivesMatter certainly has found much support at colleges and universities throughout the country. For example, faculty at Dartmouth College constructed a new course focused on racial inequality and violence in America titled “10 Weeks, 10 Professors: #BlackLivesMatter.” A professor commented on the impetus for the course: “It reflects faculty support for student activism over the past several years around issues of inclusion, social justice, and campus climate” (Dickerson, 2015). A student-led example of support for #BlackLivesMatter took place in April, 2015 during Cal Day, when students in UC Berkeley’s Black Student Union (BSU) blocked entrance to the campus at Sather Gate, while holding the banner “#BlackLivesMatter,” and temporarily inconveniencing visitors. “This inconvenience is nothing compared to the inconvenience that black students feel on this campus,” explained Myles Santifer, chair of the BSU (Wen, 2015). These sorts of campus protests have become quite common, including at Harvard University, where student activists hoped to avoid “the slow fizzle that ended the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011” by implementing a series of protests including a die-in with the goal of bringing “new momentum to the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement” (Bohlen, 2014).

Another key struggle taken up by contemporary student activists concerns the plight of undocumented students. The issues here have been examined by a number of scholars who have identified several major challenges facing undocumented college students, including limited financial aid, inadequate institutional resources, inability to seek employment to support their education, and psychological distress tied to their undocumented status (Albrecht, 2007; Olivérez, 2006; Perez, 2009; Perez & Cortes, 2011). Although numerous Asian American and Chicano/a student organizations have actively supported improved conditions for undocu-

mented students, including the passage of legislation enabling them to benefit from federal and state financial aid programs, perhaps the greatest progress has come through undocumented students pursuing their own forms of activism. Often described as “Dreamers,” because of their support for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, students have risked deportation to raise awareness of a host of immigration-related issues (Chen & Rhoads, 2016).

Early on, Dreamers focused primarily on passage of the DREAM Act, but as the movement evolved it took on a broader more long-term vision:

The civil disobedience reflects how the undocumented youth movement has transitioned and transformed—from a movement that was initially focused on building support for the DREAM Act to one that has increasingly used direct action to bring attention to broader issues of immigrant, civil, and human rights as a strategy for social and policy change. (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 14)

The activism of Dreamers, and the risks they take, has inspired others to become more engaged as well. For example, and based primarily on the initiative of one of my doctoral students, we found that an institutional allies movement of supportive faculty and staff was largely the outgrowth of undocumented student activism. Indeed, nearly everyone interviewed as part of the project acknowledged that if not for undocumented student organizing there likely would not have been an allies movement at the university studied (Chen & Rhoads, 2016).

Although race- and immigrant-related equity concerns have marked a good deal of student activism during the early part of the 21st century, violence against women and related Title IX issues have also been highly influential in generating student direct action. Few such protests drew more publicity than Columbia University undergraduate student Emma Sulkowicz carrying her mattress on her back around campus to protest the university’s treatment of rape allegations she made against a fellow Columbia student. As Lauren Gambino (2015), writing for *The Guardian*, noted,

Sulkowicz and her mattress became a powerful symbol of the movement to reform campus sexual assault

<sup>3</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/>

proceedings after she decided to drag it around campus for her visual arts senior thesis, titled *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. She vowed to carry the mattress across the university's New York campus and into classes until the school expelled the man she accused of raping her.

The actions of Sulkowicz, along with other reactions by universities to sexual assaults, raised issues about the challenges U.S. colleges and universities face in seeking to aggressively confront accused students as part of supporting victims, while balancing the rights of the accused. Many campus activists seeking to further victim's rights have pushed for more aggressive university policies against the accused, and student activists have brought great pressure on both government and university officials. For example, in July, 2013 a small group of students and former students protested outside the Department of Education in Washington, DC, calling on the department's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) "to better enforce federal laws to protect students from sexual assault." The protesters were surprised when Under Secretary Martha Kanter approached them and received box after box containing over 115,000 signed petitions in support of their cause (Grasgreen, 2013). Beyond Title IX-focused campaigns, annual campus events such as Take Back the Night marches and The Clothesline Project help to raise awareness about sexual assault and violence against women more generally.

When in the past campus assault cases may have simply been swept under the rug, today's activists (often sexual assault victims themselves) are taking full advantage of social media to share their stories as well as key information. Arguably, there is a sea change in attitudes leading to greater action by students and increased attention from both politicians and university administrators. Student organizers "have waged a grass-roots but sophisticated lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill. . . . Victims of sexual assault, once stigmatized, are gaining courage to challenge institutions publicly, representing a generational and cultural shift" (Steinhauer, 2014). There is modest evidence to support such a claim: In May, 2014, a story in the *New York Times* reported that 55 colleges and universities were in fact under investigation for their handling of sexual assault cases, including Harvard, Princeton, Florida State, Ohio State, and UC

Berkeley (Pérez-Peña & Taylor, 2014). Clearly, student activism was having an impact.

There have been other notable manifestations of contemporary student activism, including in the international realm, such as the ongoing tension surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which has generated widespread student rallies and counter rallies throughout the United States. But conceptions of student activism should go beyond simply public demonstrations or protests. Although less likely to generate newspaper headlines, college students working in low-income and disadvantaged communities may constitute one of the most common forms of campus-based activism. For example, college students across the country commonly volunteer in organized activities and programs to support academic achievement and college going, typically at high schools in underrepresented minority communities. Such projects in many instances also offer academic support for underrepresented students already enrolled in college and many are student-initiated and student-run and typically affiliated with race- and ethnic-based student organizations (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). The roots of such projects often go back to a previous generation of students involved in the early Ethnic Studies programs, given that many such programs stressed supporting and maintaining close ties with communities of color.

### Summary Comments

The title for this article comes from an undergraduate course I teach at UCLA, a course I have taught for going on two decades now. Typically, I offer the course in the fall and it tends to enroll 75 to 80 students, many of them self-defined student activists. Class discussions can be intense, as we deal with a host of sensitive and highly politicized issues, including the complex ways in which racism continues to operate on U.S. campuses. Such discussions necessitate that I be at my best in terms of keeping up with what's going on in their lives and in terms of closely following campus movements such as Concerned Student 1950, #BlackLivesMatter, and Carry That Weight. Based on my experience teaching the course, plus years of research on student activism, including the work for this article and special issue, there are several points to keep in mind.

First, it is necessary to recognize the serious risks student activists often assume as they engage in direct action strategies to forge campus and broader social change. Ranging from threat of life and limb, to emotional and psychological strain, to the basic costs of neglecting one's studies as a consequence of devoting time and energy to organizing, students clearly incur serious costs. But their decision making rarely involves a cost-benefit analysis, as Hirsch (1990) pointed out in his study of the divestment movement at Columbia University: "Increased costs do not always result in decreased participation in the movement; protesters often respond to threats of repression by developing a greater willingness to ignore personal costs in favor of the collective struggle" (p. 244). At times, the costs can be deeply personal, such as when Nashville Student Movement leader, John Lewis, became alienated from his parents as a consequence of his efforts to challenge Jim Crow laws:

I lost my family that spring of 1960. When my parents got word that I had been arrested—I wrote them a letter from the Nashville jail explaining what had happened and that I was acting in accordance with my Christian faith—they were shocked. Shocked and ashamed. My mother made no distinction between being jailed for drunkenness and being jailed for demonstrating for civil rights. "You went to school to get an education," she wrote me back. "You should get out of this movement, just get out of that mess." (Lewis, 1998, p. 115)

But, of course, Lewis was getting an "education," one that contributed to his eventual decision to serve his country as a Georgia Congressman.

Second, although involvement in student activism can at times detract from a student's academic pursuits given time constraints and intense distractions, clearly such students have vast opportunities for developing more advanced organizational and social skills. I have seen evidence of this time and time again, based both on my research as well as interactions with student organizers in my course. The sophisticated insights and forms of knowledge acquired in facilitating and guiding an array of student actors toward a collective endeavor should not be underestimated. These are complex learning outcomes that are unlikely to be developed through course readings and class discussions. For example, understanding the meaningful ways in which social identities influence lived experience and interpretations of various events are powerful insights into the human condition.

A third point to consider is the need for a broad definition of student activism and recognition that a good deal of contemporary engagement in campus change strategies involves forms of outreach to marginalized and disadvantaged communities and populations. Some of the students involved in efforts such as student-initiated recruitment and retention projects may be less likely to take to the streets, but they can be just as committed to social change as their more visible and outspoken peers.

Fourth, social media and the tools of the Internet clearly are transforming contemporary student activism. The "digital era" requires high-tech skills and media literacy, as today's student activists seek to take full advantage of the tools at their disposal (Tremayne, 2014). From Occupy Wall Street to #BlackLivesMatter to *The Black Bruins (Spoken Word)*—*Sy Stokes*—the latter a video production by UCLA students in protest of the underrepresentation of African American males on campus—students demonstrate the sophisticated deployment of technology and media.

A final point to consider is the continuing role social justice idealism plays as the defining frame of reference for student activism. And issues of diversity are front and center in terms of how social justice is considered. Accordingly, racism continues to be the most powerful and compelling force in necessitating student organizing for a just society, but also issues linked to sexism, classism, and heterosexism shape the work of contemporary student activists. Recent campus movements noted in this article profoundly highlight the frustrating reality that many of the most powerful forms of social inequality are deeply entrenched within U.S. society. But despite the seemingly intractable quality of discrimination, student activists continue to bring great energy and verve to their struggles. In many ways, this special issue pays respect to their efforts and accomplishments and further supports the power of student protest.

### Special Issue on Student Activism: What Follows

The authors of the articles contained within this special issue offer important insights into diversity-related concerns and how students may serve as agents of campus change as well as broader social change. Following this article,

Hope, Keels, and Durkee (2016) in "Participation in Black Lives Matter and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals: Modern Activism Among Black and Latino College Students" present findings from a survey of 533 Black and Latino college students, highlighting both the rates of participation in activism as well as the complex ways in which psychological factors influence involvement in activism. In "California Dreamers: Activism, Identity, and Empowerment Among Undocumented College Students," DeAngelo, Schuster, and Stebleton (2016) share findings from 16 interviews conducted with undocumented students by offering insights into the ways in which activism contributes to an empowering sense of undocumented identity. In "From Margins to Mainstream: Social Media as a Tool for Campus Sexual Violence Activism," Linder, Myers, Riggle, and Lacy (2016) use Internet-related ethnography to call attention to the growing role of social media in student organizing, specifically addressing campus sexual violence.

Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, and Newman (2016) in "College Students with Disabilities Redefine Activism: Self-Advocacy, Storytelling and Collective Action" rely on a constructivist grounded theory approach to offer important insights into the ways in which students with disabilities challenge traditional conceptions of student activism. In "The Poor Kids' Table': Organizing Around an Invisible and Stigmatized Identity in Flux," Warnock and Hurst (2016) utilize qualitative data from 16 semistructured interviews to examine the formation and maintenance of a support group involving low-income, first-generation, and/or working-class students (LIFGWC); a key finding notes that LIFGWC students differed in their comfort level in terms of engaging in social class based campus activism. Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) in "Making Diversity 'Everyone's Business': A Discourse Analysis of Institutional Responses to Student Activism for Equity and Inclusion" adopt a case study approach to examine how administrative response can at times undermine students' diversity efforts. Finally, Lantz et al. (2016) in "Grad Students Talk: Development and Process of a Student-Led Social Justice Collective" share insights from a collaborative autoethnographic project focused on graduate students in psychology and their reactions to acts of racial injustice; their

results address both systemic challenges as well as recommendations for social change.

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