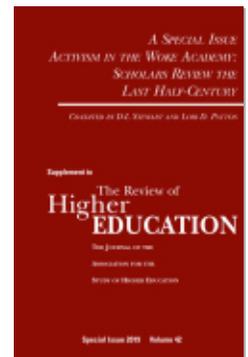# "A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student": Student Activism as Labor

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"A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student": Student Activism as Labor

Chris Linder, Stephen John Quaye, Alex C. Lange, Ricky Ericka Roberts, Marvette C. Lacy, and Wilson Kwamogi Okello

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Abstract: Students with minoritized identities have been engaged in campus activism as a way to hold institutional leaders accountable for addressing oppression. What is particularly unique about these activists is that they often advocate for change as a way to survive in their minoritized bodies. Because these activists are working to address institutional oppression, they are not able to engage in the activities that historically lead to educationally-beneficial college experiences. The purpose of this study was to explore the extra labor in which 25 student activists engaged, including the costs and consequences of their activism.

Postsecondary institutions employ a number of people – including student affairs educators, faculty, and administrators – to create opportunities for learning, growth, and development for students. However, students with minoritized identities do not have the same access to these learning and development opportunities as their dominant group peers because administrators and educators frequently fail to account for the ways minoritized students experience and must respond to oppression on campus. Experiences with oppression, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism, often lead minoritized students to engage in resistance and activism, demanding that institutions create more equitable and just opportunities (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016; Rhoads, 1997).

Undergraduate and graduate student activists perform the emotional, physical, mental, and social labor to address oppression on their campuses (Anonymous, 2018; Green, 2016; Renschler, 2008), a job, arguably, student affairs educators should hold. Indeed, national organizations suggest that student affairs educators should encompass the "knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups and [seek] to address issues of oppression, privilege, and power" (ACPA/NASPA, 2015, p. 30). Although learning and growth do occur for some students as a result of engaging in activism, this unpaid labor may also take time and energy away from student activists engaging in creative

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and intellectual activities that historically lead to educationally-beneficial college experiences (Kuh & Love, 2000), and contribute to negative physical, emotional, and mental health consequences (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

We use the term *labor* to describe the physical, mental, social, and emotional work of student activists as they endeavor to change their campuses. We use the term *minoritized* to refer to students who experience oppression as a result of systems of domination and privilege; in this article, minoritized students include queer and trans students, Students of Color, students with disabilities, and women. Although we use the language *student activists* throughout this article, many participants in this study did not resonate with the term *activist*; yet, they did not have a label they preferred. Consistent with previous scholarship, many Students of Color do not see themselves as activists; rather, they are attempting to survive and thrive in hostile environments that treat their presence as a threat (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). For example, participants in Muñoz's (2015) study believed their identity as undocumented students necessitated engaging in activism. Many Students of Color consider their work toward creating more equitable campus environments an obligation, rather than a choice (Hotchkins, 2017; Jones & Reddick, 2017). Despite shortcomings of *activist*, we use the term throughout the article because it is most consistently used in the literature about students engaged in interrupting hostile campus environments (e.g., Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Muñoz, 2015; Rhoads, 1998). In this article, we use *activism* to describe students' efforts to interrupt power and dominance to create more just campuses. Specifically, activism takes many forms, including students' existence on campus as a form of resistance (Stewart & Williams, in press); engaging in formal leadership structures to change policies and practices on campus; and organizing protests and writing demands for administrators to act (Kezar, 2010).

Although researchers have documented some positive outcomes of student activism, including learning to navigate systems (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Kezar, 2010) and developing a commitment to civic engagement post-college (Cole & Stewart, 1996), most of this research centers students with dominant identities (e.g., white cisgender men and women from upper-class backgrounds) or ignores identity altogether. Further, this research assumes dominant understandings of "civic engagement," including voting, community service, and writing letters to elected officials, which are counter to the experiences and perspectives of many people with minoritized identities (Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, & Lewis, 2015). Some scholars have begun to examine the costs and consequences of student activism, including academic performance and emotional, physical, and mental health (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). The purpose of this article is to problematize traditional notions of student activism and advance the scholarship about the costs and consequences of student activism, specifically for students with minoritized identities.

Guiding Frameworks

Since 2014, a resurgence in public, visible student activism has transpired on college and university campuses. From #BlackLivesMatter (Lowery, 2017), to Undocuqueer (Campbell, 2016), to sexual violence prevention (Linder, Myers, Riggle, & Lacy, 2016), student activists have worked to hold their institutions accountable for racism, transphobia, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and sexism, to name a few. This resurgence in public activism is reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s when students organized around racism in campus environments (Rhoads, 1998). In this article, we utilize scholarship related to Racial Battle Fatigue; exhaustion, burnout, and compassion fatigue; and outcomes of student activism to frame our exploration of experiences of student activists with minoritized identities related to emotional, mental, and physical labor.

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) describes the experience of People of Color navigating and surviving historically and predominantly white environments, including the "amount of energy lost dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism" (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007, p. 555). RBF contributes to people spending time and energy deciding whether an incident was racist and if they should attempt to address it, often choosing to address it. The trauma associated with navigating racist and hostile environments becomes a permanent part of a person's experience, similar to the PTSD a soldier might experience during and after battle. One cannot forget this trauma, which may contribute to passing on this trauma from generation to generation (Smith et al., 2007).

The symptoms of RBF include a variety of physical and physiological health issues. For example, some people report tension headaches and backaches, rapid heartbeat and breathing "in anticipation of racial conflict," upset stomach, extreme fatigue, and elevated blood pressure. Physiological effects include anxiety, "sleep broken by haunting, conflict-specific dreams," hypervigilance, and interrupted ability to think coherently (Smith et al., 2007, p. 556). RBF describes the trauma, time, energy, and health consequences of managing a racist environment – something on which white people do not have to spend time and energy, thereby creating inequitable learning and working opportunities for Students of Color as compared to their white peers.

Exhaustion, Burnout, and Compassion Fatigue

Some researchers have examined the role of exhaustion and burnout in activism, highlighting ways consciousness of oppression required for engaging in activism results in exhaustion, stress, and isolation (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski, 2018; Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Rodgers, 2010); yet, most

of this research does not explicitly examine the role of identity and power in relationship to exhaustion and burnout. Activists with minoritized identities experience even more significant burnout and exhaustion than their dominant group peers as a result of trying to manage their experiences with oppression in the larger society and in the activist groups with which they are affiliated (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski, 2018; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Further, these activists may also feel the need to care for their peers engaged in activist work (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). The extra, unpaid labor that minoritized activists perform can lead to exhaustion and fatigue. White, heterosexual, and cisgender students can often devote their time, energy, resources, and work toward activities that are often valued and rewarded by the institution while Students of Color, queer, and trans students are penalized for spending time and energy attempting to interrupt racism and transphobia on campus.

Compassion fatigue describes a "level of emotional and psychological distress and deterioration that goes beyond burnout" (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011, p. 358). Compassion fatigue is often associated with people who work in helping professions, including counseling and victim advocacy. Student activists in one study about queer Activists of Color on college campuses described high levels of compassion fatigue associated with their work as student activists, sometimes even leading to suicidal ideation. Specifically, the student activists described compassion fatigue "which emerged as a result of internal and external demands, their giving and empathic nature, multiple identity struggles, inconsistent social support, and lack of adequate coping resources" (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011, p. 359).

Outcomes of Student Activism

Scholars have begun to examine the outcomes associated with student activism; yet, most of this research centers students with a large number of dominant identities (e.g., white, middle- or upper-class, cisgender) or does not examine identity at all. For example, a study that examined the "effects of campus culture on students' critical thinking" highlighted the ways being engaged on campus, including through campus activism, may contribute to students' increased critical thinking skills (Tsui, 2000, p. 421). However, in describing the settings in which data collection took place, the author "selected case study sites by juxtaposing institutional selectivity," describing the characteristics of the sites in terms of the students they attracted and enrolled but never disclosing the social identities of these students. Further, the author conducted interviews, observed a number of classrooms and campus interactions, yet never described the social identities of the people in the study. Given the description of the institutions as "highly selective" or not, one might assume the demographics of the institutions, but they are never explicitly named (Tsui, 2000, p. 423).

Similarly, scholars have amassed a substantial body of research that highlights the ways that campus activism contributes to a post-college commitment to civic and political engagement (Barnhardt, 2014; Barnhardt, Sheets, & Pasquesi, 2015; Kezar & Maxey, 2014); however, little of this research examines race or other social identities as a variable in examining this outcome. Most articles do not mention race at all, and the few that do "control for students' background characteristics" (Barnhardt et al., 2015, p. 632), which does not result in a critical analysis of the differences between Students of Color and white students' experiences. Further, many of the measures of political engagement include items like "contacting a public official" or "worked as a canvasser" (Metzger et al., 2015, p. 59), which do not typically represent the ways Students of Color engage in activism or resistance (Hope et al., 2016), and shift the focus to social issues off-campus, rather than addressing issues of oppression on postsecondary campuses.

Given the ways students with minoritized identities often engage and develop a higher level of critical thinking than their non-minoritized peers in order to survive (Hernández, 2016), one is left to wonder how race and class, among other identities, influence the outcomes of student engagement with activism. Renewed attention to student activism has resulted in more contemporary scholarship examining the role of activism in the lives of students with minoritized identities. For example, using sociopolitical development theory (SPD), which contends "that people take action when they believe that their voice and behavior can have the intended sociopolitical impact for them or their community" (Hope et al., 2016, p. 205), one study indicated that Black and Latino college students engage in high rates of activism related to the Movement for Black Lives and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The study also indicated that involvement in this activism was also correlated with higher levels of political activism as measured by the Youth Involvement Inventory, an instrument designed to capture activism more closely aligned with racial justice. Our study contributes to more scholarship on student activism explicitly centering students with minoritized identities, including Students of Color, queer and trans students, and women.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This study was grounded in critical narrative inquiry. We situated the study in a critical paradigm, meaning we paid attention to the role of power in the research process (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Adopting this power-conscious critical paradigm meant naming oppression in our data and seeking ways to pay attention to dominance and oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). We used narrative inquiry to focus on the stories participants shared about their activism, centering their voices and experiences. Narrative inquiry situates participants' lives at the forefront, as a way to learn from their lived

experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Combining a critical framework with narrative inquiry, we specifically examined how power and privilege influenced participants' experiences (Delgado, 1989).

A research team comprised of two faculty members, a student affairs educator, and six doctoral students undertook this study. Although we are complex human beings with myriad identities, experiences, and perspectives that cannot be captured in one or two sentences, it is important to share our salient social identities and perspectives as part of the research process. Our collective experiences and perspectives, largely informed by our individual social identities, influenced the research process and helped us to make sense of the data. Chris, a former campus-based women's center staff member and current faculty member in a student affairs graduate program, identifies as a queer, white, cisgender, non-disabled woman from a working-class background. Stephen is a faculty member in a student affairs graduate program. He identifies as a Black/Ghanaian, cisgender, nondisabled, heterosexual man from a middle-class background. Alex is a White/ multiracial, queer, non-binary, able-bodied/neuro-typical doctoral student who most recently worked alongside students in an LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) resource center. Ricky, a doctoral student in a student affairs program, identifies as a differently-abled, Black, cisgender, lesbian, first-generation college student from an economically disadvantaged background. Marvette is a women's center director at a public research 1 institution who identifies as a Black, cisgender, queer, able-bodied woman from a working class background. Wilson, a doctoral candidate in a student affairs in higher education program, identifies as a Black, cisgender, non-disabled man from a lower middle class background. TJ Stewart, who is not an author on this paper but was an integral part of the research process, is a doctoral student in student affairs and a former assistant director of a multicultural center and identifies as a black, queer, cisgender man from a low-income/generationally poor background.

To recruit participants, we reached out to colleagues who worked with student activists, as well as posted messages on listservs associated with identity-based education and support (e.g., Women's Centers, LGBTQ Centers, Multicultural/Diversity Centers, Disability Resource Centers). We also posted a flyer on social media and asked viewers to share with interested participants. We looked for participants engaged in identity-based activism or resistance, 18 years of age or older, and current undergraduate or graduate students (or left their institution in December 2015 or later). "Identity-based activism or resistance" are actions that seek to bring about social change tied to identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation). Students self-selected as engaging in identity-based activism or resistance, and we did not turn away any interested participant.

Data Collection and Analysis

The 25 participants represented a variety of institutional characteristics and identities. At the time of our study, 11 were graduate students, 12 were undergraduate students (four sophomores/three juniors/six seniors), and two were alumni who had graduated within a year. The participant pool included students from 14 institutions, 13 in the United States and one in Canada. Of those institutions, eight were large public institutions, four small or mid-sized regional public campuses, and one mid-sized private institution; 12 institutions were considered predominantly and historically white institutions, one an Historically Black College or University and one Hispanic Serving Institution. Six of the institutions were located in the state of Georgia, and participants did not represent any institutions on the West Coast of the U.S. Four participants identify as Asian American, five as Black or African American, three as multiracial, 11 as white, one as Arab, and one as Latina. Seventeen participants are women, three are men, and five are transgender/genderqueer. Finally, 14 participants identify as straight/heterosexual, four as queer, three as bisexual, two as lesbian, one as pansexual, and one as unknown. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics.

Participants engaged in different types of activism, including organizing protests, writing demands for administrators, meeting with administrators of their campuses, engaging in formal leadership roles in their student organizations, and resisting oppression by showing up and being present in their minoritized bodies. Further, activists engaged around many issues, including racism on campus and in the larger community, campus sexual violence response, transphobia on and off-campus, and issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We conducted 30–75-minute individual interviews (via Skype, Google Hangout, phone, or face-to-face) between October 2016 and April 2017 with 25 students who participated in identity-based activism or resistance. Questions included the kinds of issues they were working to address, how they described their relationships with administrators, how their social identities influenced their activism, what they learned from engaging in activism, and what impeded their activism.

We analyzed data via a three-cycle coding process (Saldaña, 2009). First, research team members each coded two transcripts, specifically paying attention to power in the data. After this first-round coding, research team members discussed the initial codes and developed a master code list. We then conducted line-by-line coding using this master code list. Two research team members coded each transcript. We then met and compared notes and discussed any discrepancies in how we coded. In addition, we discussed and modified some codes to better reflect participants' experiences. From this coding, we then grouped the codes into larger themes and discussed our interpretations of them.

Table 1.
Participant Demographics

Name	Pronouns	School Level	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ability Status	SES	Nationality	Additional Salient Identities
Alyssa	She/her	Grad	Asian American	Woman	Heterosexual	Able-bodied	Middle-class	American Citizen	Cambodian American
Amber	She/her	Grad	Black/African American	Woman	Straight	Able-bodied	Student	Black American	
Athena	She/her	Grad	Filipino	Woman	Straight	Lightly limited in mobility	Middle-class	Filipino	Immigrant
Averi	She/her	Grad	White	Agender	Queer and a Asexual	Non-able-bodied	Student and Jewish	American	Secular
Barbara	She/her	Grad	African American	Woman	Heterosexual	Able-bodied	Middle-class	American	
Beth	She/her	Undergrad	White	Woman	Heteronormative	Disabled	Lower-middle-class	Canadian	
BLB	She/her	Grad	Bi-cultural: White Hispanic	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	Able-bodied	Student	U.S. citizen.	Hidden ethnic minority
Cora	She/her	Grad	White	Woman	Queer	Disabled	Lower-middle	American	
Danielle	She/her	Undergrad	Black	Cisgender woman	Straight	Able	Middle class	American	Christian
Eric	He/him	Undergrad	White	Man	Straight	Able-bodied	Middle-class	American	
Ghassan	He/him	Undergrad	Arab	Man	Heterosexual	Not disabled	Low middle-class	Palestinian-American	Muslim
Jamie	She/her	Undergrad	White	Woman	Bisexual	Able	Upper-middle class	American	Jewish

Table 1, cont.

Name	Pronouns	School Level	Race	Gender	Sexual Orientation	Ability Status	SES	Nationality	Additional Salient Identities
Janet	She/her	Undergrad	White	Woman	Lesbian	Invisible physical disability	Middle-class	American	First woman in family to attend college
Jason	He/him	Grad	Black	Man	Straight	Able	Lower-class	American	
Lauren	She/her	Alumni	Bi-Racial Asian	Woman	Queer or Bi	Temporarily able-bodied	Middle- class	American	
Lee	They/them	Grad	White	Transgender	Pansexual	Disabled	Grad school	US Citizen	
Lucia	They/them	Grad	White	Gender Queer	I'm not sure. I would go with probably straight.	Non-disabled	Middle Class	American	Polyamorous-Veteran
Madeline	Not provided	Undergrad	Black	Woman	Straight	Able-bodied	Lower-middle class	American	Christian
Marie	Not provided	Undergrad	White	Woman	Lesbian	Able-bodied	Student	American	
McKenzie	She/her	Undergrad	African American & Native American	Woman	Straight	None	Prefer not to answer	African American	
Pete	They/them	Grad	South Asian	Gender Queer	Bisexual	Temporarily able-bodied	Upper class	Canadian	
Rachel	She/her	Alumni	White	Woman	Straight	Able-bodied	Low-income	U.S. citizen	
Scarlet	She/her	Undergrad	White	Woman	Bi-Sexual	Diagnosed depression	Middle-class	U.S.	
Teresa	She/her	Undergrad	Latina	Woman	Heterosexual	Able-bodied	Low-income	American	
Zi	They/them	Undergrad	Asian	Gender Queer	Queer	Unknown	Middle- class	Immigrant	

Note. The demographic information in this Table represents how participants self-identified, although we modified some language for clarity and consistency. For example, some students identified as "female" for their gender, and we changed it to "woman." Similarly, participants had a complex understanding of class; in cases where students talked about "being poor because I am a student," we changed the status to "student."

Findings

Participants engaged in activism as a way to survive in their minoritized bodies on college and university campuses designed to advance traditional forms of learning and formal education. Because institutional leaders rarely account for the experience of minoritized people and expect all students to assimilate to dominant, Westernized ways of knowing (Patton, 2016), students with minoritized identities frequently struggle to see themselves represented in the curriculum, traditions, and practices of higher education institutions. This lack of congruence leads some students to engage in activism and resistance to challenge institutions to change their practices to be more equitable, recognizing multiple ways of knowing, being, and learning.

Many minoritized students engage in resistance and activism out of a sense of responsibility or survival, rather than choice, as described by Teresa, a participant in our study. "A student should have the privilege of just being a student, and it's just really weird how that is a privilege, just being a student, but it obviously is because there are people who cannot only be students." She described the ways in which minoritized students frequently had little choice but to engage in activism on their campuses. The responsibility some students felt to engage in resistance and activism resulted in them forgoing the luxury of merely being a student and being able to invest most of their energy in academic, creative, and co-curricular activities that earn them cultural capital in college and beyond. Even though students experienced learning and growth as a result of their activism, their engagement in activism did not always translate to potential employers' or graduate school admissions committees' measures of growth and learning.

In this section, we illustrate student activists' labor and the emotional, personal, and mental costs associated with their activism. We begin by highlighting the ways activists navigated institutional oppression and their interactions with administrators and educators. Then, we discuss tangible consequences student activists experienced as a result of pushing their institutions to do better. Although we do not know the exact titles of the positions to which participants were referring when describing their relationships with administrators, in our interview protocol, we defined administrators as "Deans or higher."

Institutional Oppression and Relationships with Administrators

Most higher education institutions in the U.S. espouse a commitment to equity, diversity, or inclusion and/or a commitment to developing engaged citizens (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Unfortunately, many student activists in this study experienced their institutions differently than the values institutional leaders espouse related to equity and diversity. Given that institutions of higher education were designed to serve wealthy, white, cisgender,

heterosexual, Christian men (Patton, 2016), it is not surprising that students with minoritized identities experience their campuses as not equitable and inclusive. Most diversity activities on college and university campuses focus on teaching dominant group members – namely white men – about how to work with diverse "others," rather than disrupting systems of domination and oppression that limit full participation of minoritized people (Patton, 2016). Students described experiences with administrators protecting dominance, backlash from administrators and educators, and ways that institutions benefit from the free labor of student activists.

Administrators protecting dominance. Participants shared examples of administrators protecting dominant ways of knowing and being, rather than considering shifts in structures that would alleviate pressure on minoritized students to assimilate to dominant culture. Participants described tense relationships with institutional leaders as a result of administrators' desire to protect the institution over student activists. Although many administrators would likely counter that protecting the institution served students in the long run, most students did not experience administrators' behaviors in this way. Several activists described feeling like administrators cared more about protecting the institution than they did supporting activists. Activists saw administrators protecting dominance in three primary ways: (1) financially, (2) through freedom of speech claims, and (3) by aligning themselves with the institution over students. Athena shared an example of protecting dominance financially,

> There's this fear amongst the administration that we may be the next University of Tennessee where we will lose our funding for our diversity center. It's a lot of "tread lightly" kind of talk that we get. "Be careful, don't be too political, don't be too radical . . . don't be too demanding." You can see in the statements that they issue how money talks.

On postsecondary campuses where the threat of losing funding is pervasive given the influence of neoliberal logics within higher education (Giroux, 2002; Lawless & Chen, 2017), administrators have sometimes decided to value financial security over student lives. A fear of losing funding prompted administrators to tell students to be cautious in their activism, which only exacerbated activists' frustration with administrators. "They have their role at the university, and their role is not to follow any interest of their student activists," Lee said, "Their role is to work in the interest of the department, the university, the program, whatever it is." Working in the interest of the institution meant that student activists felt unsupported by administrators, which impacted their emotional and mental energy.

Protecting freedom of speech was another tactic administrators used to explain why they could not support activists publicly or in the ways activists

desired. For example, Pete commented, "Because we're a public institution, they talk about freedom of speech, and we have to uphold that." Administrators often used freedom of speech as a way to not address the pain and hate directed toward activists; this behavior reinforced a feeling that administrators did not care about students. Pete added, "Nobody cares about accountability until a lot of people make it a primary concern. I've learned that no matter what institution you're in, no matter what kind of values they hold, they don't actually care about students."

Pete continued, describing their transformation from working within institutions to pushing back against them as a result of the realization that administrators often worked to protect the institution, which often felt counter to student activists' demands,

> I used to think that working with an institution would always be beneficial and that people would respect me depending on how I frame arguments and things like that. Then . . . understanding that people assume that I'm not worthy of respect, regardless of how I say something. I realize it was more for me to choose not to silence myself because I understood that I would be institutionally silenced no matter how I say something but I need to understand not to disbelieve myself with the aims of being more respectable and I think that created a large shift in the way that I view things.

Pete noted their process of coming to understand the ways in which leaders at their institution pushed student activists to engage in "respectability politics" by hosting a "a really large symposium . . . talking a lot about how there is a way to protest and a way to do things." A number of student activists discussed ways administrators seemed to prioritize institutional needs for respectability and not "rocking the boat" over the needs of minoritized students on campus. In addition to challenging relationships with administrators, students also described their experiences with backlash from institutional agents, including educators and administrators.

Backlash from educators and administrators. Student activists described experiencing various forms of backlash as a result of their labor. Backlash included negative reactions by administrators (e.g., withdrawing interpersonal/institutional capital/support) and a sense of disconnection from faculty, staff, family, and peers (e.g., isolation, lack of understanding). Ghassan, a member of a group advocating for justice in Palestine, learned that he and another student had been placed on a blacklist by Zionists, and someone who helped cultivate that list contacted the campus administration to warn the administrators that the organization was a violent, terrorist-supporting organization, and they should be heavily surveilled. Ghassan's involvement in this group and being placed on this blacklist led to his organization's events being cancelled in university spaces. Although the organization found ways to host their events, the backlash impeded the institutional support the or-

ganization normally received and on which it relied. Additionally, Ghassan, like other participants in the study, shared how his work with activism led him to not listing particular activism-oriented organizations on his resume out of fear of being labeled a "troublemaker" to potential employers.

Aside from administrators, activists also discussed losing support from advisors and faculty. For example, BLB shared how her relationship with her advisor ended after BLB disagreed with her advisor and other faculty about the centrality of race and racism in education. Her advisor refused to let her complete her thesis on ethnic-conscious mentoring, one of the areas of BLB's activism.

> My old advisor and I do not talk. There's other bridges I probably burned that I'm not even completely aware of with other faculty and students. They don't necessarily want to work with me or they're not going out of their way to help me. I wouldn't ask them for letters of recommendations even though I worked with one of them for three years.

Although BLB eventually found a supportive advisor and began to move forward "in the direction" she wanted to go with her scholarship, her original activism was halted by her original advisor. Eventually, this led BLB to end her relationship with that advisor, with whom she had worked extensively for three years, which also meant a loss of support from someone who could speak to her skills and abilities for a majority of her graduate school experience.

Backlash also occurred through administrators gaslighting participants. When a person uses power to make someone question or doubt that their experience is real, the person questioning their experience is experiencing gaslighting. Used as a tactic to deflect attention away from oppression, the person being gaslit questions their own memory or sanity in the process (Abramson, 2014). For example, people trying to maintain their "good" image or the comfort of a dominant space may attempt to manipulate a person who experiences oppression to minimize their experiences with oppression (Evans & Moore, 2015), which is a form of gaslighting. Jamie described this experience:

> I feel like we get gaslit a fair amount. I was part of a meeting with the Vice President of Student Affairs a couple of weeks ago. We literally said, "We don't feel supported by the administration." You keep saying all these buzzwords like "diversity and reason and yada yada." Then, you go and do policies that are super harmful. Exactly the opposite. He was like, "What policies? I don't know what you're talking about." We literally had to lay out specific things in the past year that he knew about. He was completely aware of them. He still made us have to lay it out for him, which clearly shows that they weren't even on his radar.

Although it is possible that the administrator did not recall the policies to which Jamie referred, what makes gaslighting particularly difficult is how people being gaslit question themselves when engaged with those with power over them. Administrators' minimizing of the depth of oppression activists were navigating exacerbated the backlash activists faced in addressing oppression. Further, students clearly named ways that institutions benefitted from their free labor related to improving equity on campuses as a form of institutional oppression.

Institutional benefit from student activists' labor. Student activists in this study were acutely aware of how institutions benefited from their labor related to improving campus climate. Further, many student activists also noted the additional labor expected of minoritized faculty and staff frequently charged with supporting minoritized student activists. Teresa noted the consequences of students engaging in work that paid administrators should be doing:

> If they're [administrators] asking for meetings, they're taking time away from students' academics. There should be some sort of compensation for that, even if it is buying them lunch or buying them dinner. You're alleviating some of the other things that the student has to worry about. It should just always be taking from the student, and I don't think they acknowledge that that's what they're doing a lot of the time. I think that they just think, "Oh, this is a good student." There should be compensation for all of these conversations and meetings and working groups in some form.

Assuming that students are "good" was a way administrators minimized the significance of activists' work and benefitted from activists' free labor to improve campus climates. Similarly, Averi described the feeling of doing free labor for the institution. "[Institutional leaders] value what I bring, but they don't value it enough to pay me for it." Averi illustrated the tension associated with being valued for her work but not being rewarded appropriately. She continued,

> The choice is I do it for free or I don't do it. It's hard for me to choose don't do it. That doesn't feel good. It won't feel good emotionally. It doesn't feel good for me caring about students and where they should be and for clients and where they should be. I just get put in a lot of really icky situations.

The "really icky situations" to which Averi referred was having to choose between serving a community she valued and that needed her support and standing up for herself and her needs related to compensation.

Even when administrators seemed supportive, activists did not always trust them and were concerned with their work becoming institutionalized, and thus, lessening its impact. Beth shared an example of this point.

> We don't want [our activism] to become like we're a mouthpiece for [admin-istrators] to look like we're doing really good work. We want it to be anti-oppressive, feminist work, so we need to make sure that we can find a way that we can do that without being controlled by someone.

Activists worried that if the institution sanctioned their activism, it would lose its ability to effect the institutional change they wanted and that the institutions would benefit from the positive public relations that resulted from the emotional, physical, and mental labor of the activists without ac-tually making any significant changes to institutional policies or practices.

In addition to describing the ways institutional policies and practices and administrators' desire to protect institutions inhibited their ability to engage in activism, student activists also described significant consequences as a result of engaging in activism.

Consequences of Engaging in Activism

As a result of engaging in activism and resistance related to institutional oppression, student activists suffered significant consequences in the form of isolation from peers and family, decreased academic performance, and physical and emotional exhaustion.

Isolation from peers and family. Student activists described isolation from their friends and family as a result of engaging in activism and resistance. In the peer context, this included isolation in both activist and non-activist circles. Janet described her experience transitioning out of work with an LGBTQ activist student organization,

> When I ceased to be in that specific organization, even though I had given years to it and been a consistent part of it . . . I had people who were viciously attacking me, saying "Ding dong, the witch is dead. I'm so glad she's out of this. Now we can do whatever we want," as if I was really the impediment. That was something that was really difficult . . . [I did] a lot of second guessing. Am I really doing the right thing? Am I offending somebody? Am I doing the wrong activism? A lot of that came from within the community itself.

After she left the organization, Janet had no LGBTQ community at the uni-versity, which felt isolating. She eventually stopped doing activism in LGBTQ communities and dedicated time and energy to working with a local domestic violence shelter. She experienced verbal backlash from her fellow activists and a sense that she did not belong with the campus LGBTQ community. The constant second-guessing herself and her abilities was a form of emotional and mental labor in which other students did not engage.

Relatedly, Ghassan described isolation from his peers because they did not recognize his efforts with activism as legitimate. "There are some stu-dents that look down on [activism] because they think it's a waste of time.

It's not studying-oriented, it's not education, it's not based on their classes." Participants described that their peers did not see the value of activism if it was not directly linked to in-class activities.

Some participants who became involved in activism after they got to college had trouble with family members who did not understand what they were doing or why they were doing it. Alyssa shared how she felt a major consequence of her activism was being authentic with her community and her family. Specifically, she noted,

> I think when you become an activist and understand social justice, it's like learning a whole new language and new knowledge. I think especially for Students of Color, there's a huge disconnect between what we're learning at universities and then what happens when they go back home. I know that sometimes when I get comments of, "Oh Alyssa, you think you're better than us because you know this new language. I don't know what oppression means but you do." Then at the same time, I'm doing that work because of my community. Figuring that out has been a challenge and a cost because I want to continue learning more about activism and social justice, but I don't necessarily yet have the language to explain that to my family back home.

For Alyssa, this disconnect was a difficult line to straddle. On one hand, she felt that her family did not understand what she was doing and her language in discussing these issues was not resonating with them; at the same time, Alyssa felt the need to continue doing her activist work because she was trying to support her community, which included her family.

Decreased academic performance and learning. Another significant consequence of participants' activism and resistance was that their schoolwork suffered, and they were distracted from learning. Needing to spend time on activism so that they could make their campuses less harmful took time away from studying and learning. As Teresa noted, some educators and administrators assumed that because activists were "good students," taking time away from their studies to meet with them would not negatively impact students' academics. However, activism did, in fact, affect students' classroom experiences, as they were often so exhausted and battling mental health issues from experiencing oppression that they could not concentrate on their studies.

Participants provided insight into how their commitment came with sacrifice, as they described their struggle to prioritize academics while engaging in activism. For example, Jamie, who was involved in multiple student organizations, described the difficulty of learning to negotiate her duties, as they pertained to her activism work:

> Just knowing when a meeting isn't necessarily essential is something I've been working on. Every meeting feels so essential. I have to go to all these meetings.

> In reality, I have a paper due. A meeting is probably not essential unless there is some kind of emergency situation happening. Then, I don't have to be the person who is always taking care of the emergency.

The difficulty of not allowing activism to supersede academics was shared by Ghassan: "For students involved in activism, it's hard to balance out their studies and activism and their daily lives and their social circles with the kind of work that they do, which can get a little overwhelming." Zi echoed this sentiment, as they reflected on their lack of balance: "One of the biggest downsides of the way that I've engaged with student life and activism is that it's a lot of time that I'm not spending studying." These students shared their trials with meeting their full potential as students due to not having enough time for their academics.

Marie and Janet described how the struggle for balance can be even more detrimental to academic pursuits. Marie said: "I just got so stressed to the point where I started failing classes." Janet mentioned a difficult time she experienced with balancing activism and academics that was compounded by health concerns: "My chronic illness was really, really bad, going through a bad phase. I ended up having to drop down to being a part time student." Yet, even in that struggle, she felt compelled to keep "activism first." Her activist work was so important to her that she chose it over her classes: "I still ended up doing all of my activist work. That was the thing that I wouldn't let drop; whereas, I had to drop classes."

Most students do not have to choose between activism and academics. However, since each of these participants was deeply passionate about improving their campuses, they made academic sacrifices. The findings illustrate that student activists' commitment results in a considerable amount of time away from studying and other academic activities. Further, the activists provided detailed examples of compromised well-being as a consequence of activism.

Emotional and physical well-being. Participants described how their activism affected their emotional and physical well-being. For example, Athena reflected on the difficulty of activism and how it impacted her emotional and physical health:

> I learned that [activism] is hard, such hard work. It is tiring, and you burn out and you need a support system . . . .It can be very lonely being an activist, especially when you have marginalized identities because it's hard to find that support system or other people who will understand what you're going through. I also learned that it takes a lot of bravery to be an activist and speak out because you can become a target and people push on you and become the devil's advocate and so it takes a lot.

Marie shared, "In any activist circle, you find you get a lot of burnout. You get really tired, you're tired of being the voice, you're tired of putting all this energy when there's not a lot of thanks given back to it." The lack of thanks Marie expressed intensified the feelings of burnout. Amber noticed emotional exhaustion in her classes: "I remember always feeling exhausted, not really mentally because my classes were not hard at all but emotionally exhausted from being that person all the time because there were no other Black people in my classroom." Amber's comment about "being that person" meant being the Black person who always brought up racism and feeling the toll, since there were no other people to support her.

Lee raised a similar point in describing their experience always correcting people who misgendered them. A faculty member nominated Lee for a diversity award, yet consistently misgendered them, regardless of the fact that Lee kept correcting the faculty member. Lee noted,

> These little things where I have to take time out of my own schedule, my own effort and energy that I have a limited amount of, to try and push my institution to do better to improve the way that they handle these things.

Lee described having a limited amount of energy; having to deal with being misgendered meant that Lee could not direct their energy into more life-giving and affirming activities.

Students experienced significant consequences related to exhaustion and burnout as Averi shared,

> When I did activist things, I was told to stop. When I did personal things that would require . . . help, I didn't get it. I was just completely destroyed as a human in almost every way [in my] two years that I spent at [institution]. I am still surprised that it didn't kill me . . . if I wasn't who I was, I would've easily just committed suicide for them. Everyone just repeatedly told me I wasn't worth it and what I did was stupid. When I reached for help further, I didn't get it.

Averi's words were strong, and the invocation of suicidal ideation demonstrated the significance of the consequences activists faced as a result of their engagement. Averi's experience as a student activist left her feeling overwhelmed and harmed, and she indicated that all she needed from administration was some "help."

Some activists noted that since postsecondary institutions benefited from the emotional and mental exhaustion of students, at the very least they could address the scarcity of effective resources. Marie shared,

> There's not a lot of mental health resources. I think that would be definitely something negative attached to being an activist. Administration can step back and recognize the work that these students are doing for free, essentially, and building up good mental health resources for these students.

Jason also shared concerns about mental health resources, but his focus was on making sure institutions have staff who are properly trained to address the concerns of student activists,

> When counselors receive people going through those struggles, and they don't understand the type of fatigue, the type of frustration, the type of pain that's experienced within the communities that they don't relate to, then it adds to the trauma that those communities are experiencing.

Both Marie and Jason emphasized the importance of providing resources to support activists in healing from burnout as well as emotional and mental pain. Because activists provided free labor to their institutions, they wanted their institutions to offer resources that supported their wellbeing.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Student activists with minoritized identities engaged in activism and resistance to hold institutional leaders accountable to espoused commitments of diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campuses. Although most activists in this study attended predominantly white institutions, some participants attended HBCUs or HSIs, illustrating the significance of activism at a variety of institutional types. Our findings illuminate the consequences of student activists engaging in unpaid labor related to diversity and equity on college campuses – labor in which white, cisgender, nondisabled, wealthy, and male students do not have to engage. When students do not have the luxury of "just being students" as described by Teresa, they take on more than their fair share of commitment to improving the community, resulting in them having less time to engage in creative, intellectual, and other endeavors that would benefit their growth and development during and beyond college. They experience backlash and resistance from administrators and significant levels of exhaustion and burnout as a result of their activism.

Disrupting the Status Quo

Activists described their experiences with administrators protecting the institution and the status quo over activists' demands for more equitable campus environments. Activists worked with administrators who largely supported the institution and reproduced the oppressive structures of the institution through their silence and lack of publicly supporting student activists or engaging in work to improve their campuses. When activists challenged administrators to enact their espoused commitments to diversity, administrators pointed out policies or statements that illustrated their commitment to diversity, rather than significantly changing institutional structures to address inequities. These non-performatives (Ahmed, 2012) contributed to activists feeling further alienated and emotionally and mentally exhausted because

they did not want incremental diversity changes, but instead, desired drastic changes that uprooted systems of oppression (Patton, 2016).

Perpetuating the status quo connects with interest convergence, a principle of critical race theory, that describes how white people work to address racism when they see and understand the ways in which addressing racism benefits them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For example, some scholars highlight *Brown v. Board of Education* as a form of interest convergence; when White people understood that the U.S. "looked bad" on the international level for its failure to address racism, they invested in desegregating schools, at least in policy (Bell, 1980). Similarly, some students in this study shared examples of times when administrators attempted to institutionalize activism, as in the example shared by Pete related to the colloquia on their campuses teaching students the "right" ways to engage in activism. Activists balked at this idea, noting that the effects of their activism would become muted if aligned with the institution, and the institution would get public recognition for the work of student activists, despite the fact that most institutional leaders actually resisted the activism. Interest convergence highlights the ways change rests on the benevolence of oppressors; whereas, activism is inherently invested in challenging the status quo and remaining outside traditional institutional channels.

Administrators must consider the toll activism and resistance to better their institutions takes on minoritized students. Rather than protecting the institution and the status quo, administrators must listen to student activists and reduce the responsibility of minoritized students for improving their campuses. Although students are members of the community and should be engaged in activities that improve the climate overall, a disproportionate amount of this responsibility cannot fall to minoritized students. Administrators have a responsibility to develop an equitable environment that enables all students to thrive, rather than primarily relying on minoritized student activists to address oppressive climates or co-opting their work after change occurs. Administrators must resist the urge to become defensive when confronted by student activists and see their activism stemming from a desire to make their campuses better.

Exhaustion, Burnout, and Fatigue

Consistent with the literature on racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2007), compassion fatigue (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), and burnout (Gorski, 2018), student activists with minoritized identities experienced serious emotional, physical, and mental costs associated with activism. Students consistently reported relationships and academics suffering as a result of their activism and described exhaustion and burnout. Racial battle fatigue illuminates the long-term health consequences People of Color experience as a result of managing everyday impacts of racism. Students in our study named similar concerns about their physical, emotional, and mental health.

Additionally, people experiencing RBF and other forms of fatigue may miss out on opportunities to engage in more creative, life-giving activities, many of which are prioritized and rewarded by institutions and result in cultural capital post-graduation. Because activists are spending time battling their institutions and working to improve them, they do not get to spend that time engaging in activities that will enable them to be "successful" in traditional ways. We are not arguing that institutional leaders value, reward, or coopt student activists to frame their activities as "success;" instead, we argue that administrators must consider the disproportionate impact that hostile and oppressive campus climates have on minoritized students, even those who are engaged in dismantling these systems of oppression.

Many administrators and scholars herald student activism as a form of civic engagement and an opportunity for students to engage in learning and growth (Barnhardt, 2014; Barnhardt et al., 2015; Kezar & Maxey, 2014), yet our research indicates that minoritized students experience significant consequences as a result of their activism and resistance. Most previous scholarship on student activism does not examine activism from an identity-based perspective. Although minoritized students may also experience growth and learning as a result of their activism, the consequences that come with this learning and growth may not be worth it. Students should have the opportunity to engage in learning and growth without experiencing fear of backlash from campus administrators and significant exhaustion or burnout as a result of the combination of oppressive campus environments and their commitments to improving those environments.

Administrators must understand the significance of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion among student activists and work to alleviate the additional labor required of minoritized students to survive and thrive on historically and persistently oppressive campuses. In addition to alleviating the need for minoritized students to engage in activism related to oppression to begin with, administrators must also develop support systems for students currently engaged in activism. Those working with activists should support them in working to heal from oppression and the additional labor it requires, including directing more resources to campus counseling centers. Over the past few years, activists have demanded an increase in counseling staff, particularly counselors who understand the unique challenges of being a minoritized person on campus, to support them in healing from pain and violence (New, 2016).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we illustrated the significance of student activism as labor and the consequences activists faced as a result of their labor. We do not advocate that administrators merely compensate activists for their work,

but instead, reflect on why activists are ultimately responsible for improving their campuses. We urge administrators to consider the unique interplay between activists' minoritized identities and their activism, resulting in unpaid emotional, mental, and physical labor on the part of student activists. Although administrators must provide support for student activists managing significant emotional, mental, and physical consequences as a result of their activism, the most significant response to student activism is to change the oppressive structures that require students to engage in activism in the first place. Institutional leaders must respond to activists' demands and stop relying on activists' free labor to improve campus environments.

Teresa's point about just wanting to be a student is striking. She illustrates the privilege that comes with dominant identities and the ways in which campus administrators further institutionalize privilege by relying on minoritized students for their free labor related to improving oppressive structures and practices. Removing the onus for improving campus climates from activists with minoritized identities will enable them to devote more time toward "just being a student," something they craved.

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