When Students Take Action: How and Why to Engage in College Student Activism

Samantha Schalk
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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Kathy McMahon-Klosterman
Readers: Dr. Jean Lynch and Dr. Ann Fuehrer
**Abstract:**

“When Students Take Action: How and Why to Engage in College Student Activism” gives a detailed example and guide to one type of student activist actions followed by an exploration of the purpose of post-secondary education and a proposal of how activism, as an educational method, can aid in student development and achieving the goals of an empowering, democratic education. This paper seeks to re-define activism and encourage its incorporation into the educational experiences of college students today.
This thesis paper has been approved for submission by the following:

________________________________________________
Dr. Kathy McMahon-Klosterman, Thesis Advisor
Miami University Associate Professor of Education Psychology and Women’s Studies

________________________________________________
Dr. Jean Lynch, Thesis Reader
Miami University Professor of Sociology & Gerontology and Women’s Studies

________________________________________________
Dr. Ann Fuehrer, Thesis Reader
Miami University Associate Professor of Psychology and Women’s Studies
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Introduction: Why Activism? A Personal Statement

As I have worked on this thesis project and talked to professors, peers and family about my topic, I have often encountered the question: why activism? As a Creative Writing and Women’s Studies double major, activism isn’t the immediate topic one would think of as a thesis topic which combines and culminates my university learning experience; however, activism, how and why to do it, has truly been the greatest lesson I’ve learned as an undergraduate. Activism has been the underlying thread which connects everything I’ve learned and makes it applicable to the ‘real’ world in powerful and positive ways; it is what makes my ‘book learning’ meaningful because through activism the theories become praxis, the problems become my own and solutions appear possible.

In choosing activism as my thesis topic I hope to reclaim and redefine the term itself. I believe, particularly for the current generation of college students, activism has been narrowly defined by the stories of the 1960’s civil rights movements and actions: limited to marches, rallies, sit-ins and demonstrations. As a result of the dominance of these stories, activism is often viewed as a thing of the past, no longer effective, or far too difficult to perform. As Eileen Eagan states: “Part of the story…is the neglect by scholars, of the important role that education and students (and faculty and staff) have played in social conflict and change. Despite interest, if not obsession, with student activism in the 1960s, the longer tradition of student activism in relatively neglected” (Eagan 14). Personally, I want to tell new stories about activism: open, creative, diverse stories which reveal to the listener the many forms effective activism can take in different
contexts. Stories can be powerful meaning making tools in the creation of collective understanding or memory. Indeed “much historical memory is carried on outside of textbooks and outside of the classroom. Memories of social movements are transmitted in other ways—through word of mouth and oral tradition and in local or mass popular culture” (Eagan 16).

It is important to note that not all stories of activism have a positive influence on the collective memory. As noted above, many stories of the 1960’s are a hindrance to modern student activists, either because the stories limit the definition of activism or make it seem too hard or easy, but rarely realistic. All of these are problematic because each reason makes activism less understandable and accessible as well as less possible for current activists to effectively engage in. For example, the story of Rosa Parks is often told as if Rosa Parks, tired from a long day of work, just decided one day to not sit in the back of the bus and the Montgomery bus boycott magically followed. Few people realize that Rosa Parks was chosen to be the person to do this act and was already involved with civil rights. The timing was chosen for a reason. The method of transporting people to their jobs during the boycott was planned. Everything was organized and enacted by many people, both white and black, to make the Montgomery bus boycott a success. Understanding Rosa Parks as a singular acting heroine is actually false and detrimental to the collective memory of the story of activism, making activism seem too easy on the one hand and only achievable by special, strong individuals on the other. This example shows the importance of activists, especially experienced activists, being transparent in the process of their work, as well as being honest about its successes and failures, its gifts
and its challenges. In order for student activism to succeed, activists must create a clear and realistic picture of the diverse activist action possibilities. My hope is that this thesis will become one of the new, positive stories of modern student activism, helping others to think about activism differently and define it widely, encouraging professors to incorporate activism into their curriculum and students to incorporate it into their lives.

To be more specific, for the purposes of this paper I propose defining activism as any action which deliberately promotes social justice and equality. I would also connect this to the definition of activist used by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards in their book *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* which states that an activist is “anyone who accesses the resources that he or she has as an individual for the benefit of the common good” (Baumgartner xix). Both of these definitions are broad enough to include many forms of actions as activism, yet still specific enough to exclude actions which benefit only a very specific population or result in detriment to another population of human beings. To further explain activism, one could refer to what I deem an ‘activist maxim’ by feminist philosopher Maria Lugones who states: “I won’t think what I won’t practice”, meaning that being an activist is “[t]he commitment to live differently in the present, to think and act against the grain of oppression” (Lugones 5).

I believe utilizing the above understanding of activism, which shapes this paper, opens up the possibility of students’ collegiate careers and lives becoming filled with activism in real, immediate and effective ways, including for example, how we use language, what and where we shop, and how we interact with one another. It may be argued that some students choose to never engage in activism or simply don’t have the
time, knowledge or ability to so, but I would contend that while societal structures and life circumstances can prevent an individual from engaging in certain kinds of activism, all can engage in some type of activism though it may not be very visible or often, a point which must be remembered particularly in university or college classrooms where activism is being organized because each student will be coming from a very different personal and social life position. Defining activism broadly and accepting different kinds of activism as valid and useful will break down what I believe is a current hierarchy and misunderstanding of activism. Instead this new definition of activism will allow students of different backgrounds, political beliefs, personalities and educational statuses to collaborate with and understand one another as allies and activists for social justice.

I view this thesis as not only a guide on how and why to engage in student activism for faculty and students alike, but also as another form of my activism, another path that my educational and personal experience has taken me in creating positive social change. My hope is that through redefining activism and understanding how and why to participate in activism, more faculty members will include activist actions as part of their classes and more students will incorporate activism into their daily lives.
Section I: How to Engage in College Student Activism, An Example

Note

The following is a guide to creating an activist action on a university campus. This guide details specifically how I, Jill Gottke and Megan Albertz, under the guidance of Dr. Kathy McMahon Klosterman, organized and executed what we call “Upham Action”. This section of the paper was co-written by the four of us and presented at places such as the 2007 Association for Humanist Sociology conference. Thanks again to Jill, Megan and Dr. KMK for allowing me to use this text as part of my overall thesis project.

Introduction

Upham Action originated as a class project for Dr. Kathy McMahon Klosterman and Dr. Jean Lynch’s 2004 Women and (Dis)Ability class. The students from this class along with a few other volunteers ribboned off the non-accessible doors to Upham Hall, a central and historic academic and administrative building on Miami University’s Oxford campus. The ribbons were hung in a way that looked as though the doors were blocked, but were actually cut and re-taped so that the doors easily opened and closed so individuals had the choice of whether or not to use them. Throughout the course of the day the students asked their peers as well as faculty and staff to not use the 13 non-accessible entrances to Upham Hall and instead only go in and out of the single accessible door which did not have a ribbon across it. Many did not know where the accessible entrance was and sometimes had to travel extremely out of their way to locate
it. Responses to the first Upham Action, from both those who participated in the action and from the students, faculty and staff who encountered it, were mixed. Many of the student activists, though most had some training on what to do, were surprised by the sometimes negative reactions they received for what they felt was a positive, educational and consciousness raising action.

The intention of Upham Action was to raise awareness about the inaccessibility of Miami’s campus. Organizers chose to focus on physical accessibility, and therefore visible disabilities, for a variety of reasons. First of all, accessible entrances and push buttons are easily recognized. These are tangible signs of inclusion which are often lacking on Miami’s Oxford campus; therefore asking people to look for these signs leads them to an awareness that Miami is fairly inaccessible. Second, inaccessibility can be a non-existent problem with universal design for new buildings and sometimes minor changes in older buildings. We believe that physical access is the first step toward social access and inclusion. One’s voice cannot be heard if one is not able to participate in the conversation. Additionally, we hoped that raising questions about accessibility would lead people to question other physical and social barriers for people with disabilities and encourage temporarily able bodied individuals to raise their awareness about something they may have been previous ignorant about due to lack of exposure.

In 2006, we, the first three Miami University Disability Studies minors, Sami Schalk, Jill Gottke and Megan Albertz, decided to re-do Upham Action as part of our capstone project for the minor, under the guidance of Dr. Kathy McMahon-Klosterman. We wanted to do this not only because we felt accessibility was still an under-recognized
issue, but also because we felt that organizing such an action was an ideal way of putting what we had learned as Disability Studies minors into practice and bringing it to the attention of others in our campus community. In repeating Upham Action, we utilized what was learned two years prior and decided to recruit more student activist volunteers to participate, create a training program they all had to attend, and also expand the action to two buildings over two days in order to reach more people and raise more awareness.

What follows is a detailed description of how we carried out this activist action on campus. We have written this guide to Upham Action primarily to help others who would like to re-create it on their own campus. However, the general steps we took in order to produce an effective activist action on our university campus can be used to facilitate different actions around other social justice issues and causes as well.

**Planning**

In order to plan an effective action, it is important to take into consideration the time and location of your event. When in the preparation stages of creating Upham Action, our team chose the building locations of Upham and Irvin Halls based on several factors. First of all, both of these academic buildings are subject to a lot of traffic, as they are centrally located on campus. We also choose these buildings because the majority of the doors on these halls were inaccessible and without directional markers. Furthermore, Upham Hall, the building which we mainly focused on, is a well-known Miami University symbol complete with local myths connected to it. It is a hall which houses the office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Science, and provides classrooms for
multiple disciplines. Needless to say, it is a building that is highly recognizable and central to any Miami University student. The fact that Upham Hall has only one accessible door out of fourteen largely limits the potential for students with disabilities to be integrated into all that this building represents to Miami University.

In addition to the careful planning that went into choosing a location, the dates and times of Upham Action were chosen with very specific reasons. First of all, the dates November 7th and 8th were chosen so as not to coincide with any other major campus events. During the first month of planning, our team actually had two different dates in mind for Upham Action. However, we became aware that our event would then occur on the same day as another demonstration on campus led by the Association of Women Students: the annual Take Back the Night march which speaks out about violence against women. In order to not detract support from either activist action, we moved the dates of our event to maximize the educational potential of both programs.

Furthermore, our team picked the dates of Tuesday, November 7th to hold our action at Irvin Hall during the major class times of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. because Irvin Hall is a foreign language building that holds most of its classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Since the majority of Miami students are required to take a foreign language, we were sure to come in contact a wide variety of students. The majority of classes housed in Upham Hall during the same major class times, on the other hand, are on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Hence, we decided to hold our action at Upham Hall on Wednesday, November 8th.
A second important part about planning an action is the creation of materials which will be distributed to the activists as well as the general public. When creating all printed materials to pass out to Miami students, faculty, and staff, it was important for our team to use person first language. Person first language is a way for the disability community and its allies to literally put the person first in speaking or writing. An example of this would be to say “a girl with autism” rather than an “autistic girl”, or “a wheelchair user” rather than “wheelchair bound”. This form of language emphasizes that a disability is only one part of a person and while some in the disability community have chosen to claim disability as a primary identity, temporarily able-bodied individuals and disability community allies should never assume such a primary disability identity exists and use person first language indeed. Essentially, person first language moves away from words and phrases which have negative connotations for people with disabilities and instead uses positive and empowering descriptors. While, like in other minority or marginalized communities, the most appropriate language is always changing, person first language as we understand it at this point in time was used in all our materials. After all, we organized Upham Action as an educational and awareness raising activist action, and we therefore wanted to use the best terms possible so as not to marginalize the community whom we were trying to support.

In addition to using person first language, our team made considerable efforts to use language on our handouts that was educational and thought-provoking. We wanted to avoid confrontational language at all costs. We did this because we felt that inciting the anger of students, faculty, and staff would be a sure way to decrease the lines of
communication between the Miami community and the participants of Upham Action. We wanted to educate our campus about some of the problems with accessibility that people with disabilities face. In order to effect change, we felt it was necessary to first let people know about Miami’s lack of accessibility and then engage them in dialogue rather than shutting down the conversation immediately by directly or purposefully provoking, accusing or angering anyone.

Keeping the aforementioned things in mind, our team created a student activist volunteer script and awareness handbills to be passed out on the day of the action. The script was composed of two short sentences inviting people to participate in the action and informing the public that the action was being held in order to create disability rights awareness (more details about the script and its rationale will follow in the cooperation ad collaboration section). The handbill for students, faculty and staff who encountered the action contained the same script explanation of Upham Action, our contact information, and some information about disability in general and the lack of accessibility on Miami’s campus specifically. The contact information for our team was not the e-mail or telephone number of any of us individually; rather we created a free yahoo e-mail address, uphamaction@yahoo.com, which would become our central electronic contact and informational hub for us to contact the student activists and vice versa. We decided to frame the information on our handouts in a way that would give Miami students, faculty, and staff facts to understand the widespread nature of disability, and to situate inaccessibility in respect to Miami culture. For example, on a campus which has over 30 percent of its student population participate in the Greek system, we believed it was
important to include the fact that none of the Miami University sorority residence halls are accessible. We believed combining general information about disability in America with specific facts about our university would be most effective in getting people to think about the problem of inaccessibility on campus and beyond.

Another printed material we created was a “Talking Points” document. We had not originally planned on including this sort of resource in our action, but after talking to our university president (see the cooperation and collaboration section) we came to the conclusion that it would be beneficial to the Miami population’s engagement with Upham Action if we could place a discussion sheet in each classroom of Irvin and Upham Halls. We placed the Talking Points in rooms the night before in hopes that throughout the day of the action interested teachers would lead a short discussion on the events that they and their students had just encountered. Since many students were late to class in trying to find the accessible door, we hoped that teachers would be compelled to at least look at the Talking Points sheet to better understand what was going on and possibly develop in-class dialogue. The document not only included the same information as the handouts being given at the doors, but also some additional statistics, a thought-provoking cartoon, and open ended discussion questions. We found the Talking Points sheet was a good way to give students and professors immediate insight into the purpose of Upham Action as well as a chance to talk about it amongst themselves.

Our preparation for Upham Action also included creating a post-action performance event which would allow more opportunity for those interested in further raising their level of awareness. The primary purpose was to allow for questions and
discussion about the action. For our event, we chose to have local singer/songwriter, Renee Alper, perform some of her songs, especially those related to disability in her life. We were also prepared to lead a discussion and answer questions about our activist action. The event was held in an accessible room in the evening after the event. We advertised for this event by putting the time and location information on the handouts volunteers passed out during Upham Action and by word of mouth. A post-action awareness event could take on a variety of forms besides what we chose. What is important is to create a space where the action can be talked about and where those interested can gain more information. We thought hosting a performance event would attract the most people; however, it’s possible another sort of forum would work as well or better for other campuses or actions.

The final important part of our action preparation was contacting campus media venues as a way to create further awareness about Upham Action to those who did not come to Irvin and Upham Halls on our chosen dates. We informed local and school newspapers as well as local television stations about our event, inviting these media venues to write about, report on and attend Upham Action. A reporter and photographer from our main campus newspaper, The Miami Student, came to do a story about the action. When interviewed, our team members stressed to the reporter the importance of appropriate, person first language, and we made sure that she had a copy of an appropriate language guide. Unfortunately, our invitations for press coverage and our emphasis on appropriate language were not as effective as we would have liked. Only the Miami Student covered our event, but they gave us an eye-catching full page color
spread. Although we greatly stressed the use of person first language, we were disappointed to see many terms in the article which we had told the reporter were not widely accepted, though again we were pleased with the space the paper had dedicated to the action. In order to prevent the same problem, we suggest asking to be able to review the article before it is published or sending a letter to the editor afterward if problems still arise. Depending on the flexibility of local media venues, particularly student newspapers, it may also be possible to write one’s own article or editorial about your activist action and get it published in the paper. Though we were not successful in getting a large amount of media attention, we do feel that what press we got was positive and helpful and believe contacting the media is a vital part of activist actions.

**Cooperation and Collaboration**

An important part of an effective action, especially on a college or university campus, is cooperating and collaborating with the appropriate people. In the case of Upham Action we felt it was necessary to contact all administrative figures that we wanted support from in performing the action due to their connection to the issue. Prior to the action we contacted and/or met with representatives from the campus police, physical facilities, disability services and students with disabilities. These individuals we contacted had already experienced Upham Action in the past and were willing to again support our efforts. Campus police knew what was occurring and notified their staff in case the police were called (which had happened in 2004) and agreed to stop by occasionally throughout the day to be sure things were running smoothly. Physical
facilities agreed to leave our ribbons up all day, after establishing that the ribbons were hung and cut in a way so that the doors could be easily opened and closed and no individual was actually physically barred from entering or exiting a building. Disability services notified individuals who were registered as students with disabilities that the action would be occurring and invited them to participate as student activists if they wished.

In addition to the above contacts, our team also met with the new president of the university to notify him about what we were planning to do and also hopefully open the dialogue about improving Miami’s campus and climate for people with disabilities as part of his plans for diversifying the university. At the meeting we showed the materials we had prepared at that point and explained to him the history of Upham Action, the purpose, and what exactly we planned to do. While our meeting was not as positive as we had hoped, we met the president’s questions, suggestions and resistance with honesty, knowledge, open minds and persistence. We took his suggestion to notify faculty by creating the Talking Points sheet since we were unsure as to how to find out which professors had class in each building on those days in order to e-mail them ahead of time. Additionally, we felt too much notification took away the element of surprise which makes Upham Action effective: it is supposed to be an inconvenience in order to make people think about the difficulty that an inaccessible campus presents to people with physical disabilities. We did not meet with the president for validation or approval of our action necessarily, but simply sought to make clear that we wanted to work with him to make change and not against him. Our team felt that including the university president in
the planning process helped our cause as when people questioned our being “allowed” to do it, we could state that we had not only the support of campus police, physical facilities and disability services, but the president also already knew about our activist action.

Another key way we sought cooperation with parts of the university was through funding requests. Funds were necessary to cover the costs of copying handbills, talking points sheets, and training information as well as the CDs and buttons we gave to the student activist volunteers. We were able to secure funding for the project through our university’s Honors and Scholars Program under a creative research grant. If we had not been able to receive this grant, we could also have sought support from the Educational Psychology department which offers the disability studies introductory class or from the Office of Advancement of Research and Scholarship. If we had collaborated with a student group on campus that received money from student government, we could have also had them supply some of the funds. Money does exist for this type of action on college and university campuses, especially if the action is used as part of a thesis project or research. If funds can’t be secured, costs can be minimized by not using the buttons or CDs for volunteers and only paying for copying costs. Investigating multiple avenues as well as being creative and flexible is key in getting enough funding.

The most important cooperation and collaboration we had was with the many student activist volunteers. We refer to these students as both activists and volunteers because while some conceived of themselves as activists either prior to or after the action, others simply participated as part of a class and did not necessarily claim the term ‘activist’. In the opinion of our team though, everyone who participated in the action is an
activist because they raised awareness and created change in the minds of many members of our campus community. In order to recruit and organize over one hundred volunteers, it was important to spread the word about Upham Action to classes, professors, campus organizations, and listservs. Our team made announcements to many special education, disability studies, and service learning classes, and informed them of what we were doing as well as the times and locations of our eight scheduled training sessions. We sent out announcements to professors in the aforementioned departments, as well as to various student groups that have an emphasis in social activism or volunteering. In addition, we contacted all of the students still at Miami who had participated in the previous Upham Action. We kept a list of all the individuals who contacted us wishing to volunteer and we added them to the address book of our Upham Action email address. It was very important to establish a clear line of communication between the coordinators of the event and the potential student activist volunteers. The e-mail address was most helpful in letting interested parties know all of the upcoming training session dates, times, and locations so that they could become a trained Upham Action volunteer.

In order to fully prepare all individuals for the specific gifts and challenges of Upham Action our team decided to create an activist training. The first year Upham Action was executed on campus, no such detailed and mandated training was in place. As a result, some student activist volunteers found themselves in situations that they did not know how to handle. As previously stated, a few volunteers were surprised to receive negative reactions from students and faculty, and one or two even had to stop volunteering because they were so upset. We created this training session to provide
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The first item in our packet was an “Information Sheet”. This paper included the essential facts concerning Upham Action, and served as a quick reference for volunteers. It stated the dates, times, and locations of the action. The sheet also contained a short outline of what the action would entail and its purpose. This was necessary to make sure all of the volunteers were on the same page as to when, where, how, and why Upham Action was to be performed. This page also contained the script that all student activist volunteers were to use throughout the day to each person who approached the door so that all students, faculty and staff were receiving the same message. The script read: “We invite you to locate and use the accessible entrance to this building. This is a student organized action to raise awareness about disability rights and the lack of accessibility on Miami’s campus”. While this may seem like a mouthful, we felt the chosen language was the most effective way to say exactly what we wanted to get across and by giving students a script they did not have to decide for themselves how to ask people to find the accessible doors or explain why we were doing Upham Action: the initial speaking at least, was already written for them.

The backside of the Information Sheet was a document that was entitled “What to Expect.” This paper first outlined some of the positive reactions that volunteers might
see from students, faculty and staff, and how they should respond in these sorts of encounters. Specifically, we encouraged student activists to engage in conversation with and give handbills to interested parties. The remainder of the sheet went through all the possible negative reactions that our team could conceive happening. We taught our volunteers how to respond to some common questions and concerns that the Miami population might have in response to Upham Action. Our possible negative reactions ranged from small to large, and we even spent time on what student activist volunteers should do if they felt emotionally or physically threatened. We stressed that extreme cases were not likely to happen, but we wanted our volunteers to have all the resources they could have available to them that they would potentially need when participating in any type of activist action. At this point in the training, we made our private cell phone numbers available to the student activists so that they could call from their respective doors if anything major occurred since at least one of the three of us, though most often two of us, would be at the building all day.

The last page of our packet contained the lyrics to some motivational, action-oriented songs, both older and current, that our team had compiled on a CD for the students. We created and passed this CD out as a way to get volunteers inspired, feeling that they were about create change, and to hopefully also create some unity amongst the large group of approximately 125 individuals. The idea was to have student activist volunteers listen to the CD once or twice, become familiar with the songs, and then have this music played at the action itself. Unfortunately, we were unable to find a way to play
our CD at Upham Action, so although we like the idea of using music to empower and create unity, it wasn’t something we were able to do during the action.

The final piece of our packet was a button for our volunteers. This was an important symbol of Upham Action, as we had every single student activist wear their button whenever they were standing at one of the doors. This was a great way to visibly demonstrate the size of our student activist force, and exemplify unity amongst all the participants. It was also an effective way to denote to the public who was involved in the action. By having buttons as identifying markers of participating student activists, Miami students, faculty, and staff had the opportunity to ask questions and information about Upham Action to those who were involved in its execution. A very important factor that our team considered during the creation of this packet was the necessity of keeping the packet small and accessible. Since our volunteers were busy, involved students, we tried to keep the significant information brief and easily understood. We really wanted students to read the information we provided them, so we gave them only the most vital information needed, and stated it in a clear manner.

In order to present our informational packet and training to potential student activists, our team decided to hold eight 20 minute training sessions. The session times, dates, and locations were announced in classes and through our e-mail address. We made sure that the eight training gatherings were held on different days and times of the week in order to accommodate as many individuals involved as possible. Our session was very structured to maximize efficiency, and it included a variety of learning techniques. Understanding the importance of brevity, we tried very hard to keep the sessions under
thirty minutes so that all student activist volunteers were able to get the necessary training without putting too much of a strain on their already hectic schedules.

When volunteers entered the room, they were able to hear the motivational CD playing on the room’s technology system as a greeting to the training. Once everyone was settled, we turned off the music, introduced ourselves, and thanked everyone for taking the time to come to the training program and participate in the action. We then proceeded to read and further explain both the Information Sheet and the What to Expect sheet. We also informed everyone about the importance of the volunteer buttons, and asked everyone to wear them while they were volunteering. While we were doing this, we passed around a sign-in sheet and a shift sign-up sheet. On the sign-in sheet, we had people put down their names and e-mail addresses. This way, we could simultaneously make sure we had everyone’s contact information and keep count of who had attended the required training session. On the sign-up sheet, volunteers claimed time slots for the particular doors at which they would work. This sheet was a good visual for the coordinators to see what areas of the buildings were covered and for how long. After we explained both of our information sheets, we opened up for questions. Our team wanted to ensure that everyone’s needs and concerns were addressed. When all questions were answered, we passed out a pre-action survey asking volunteers to rate the effectiveness of the training. Once each person turned in their survey, they were given a volunteer button and CD, and were free to leave.

In general, those individuals who came to our eight scheduled training sessions felt informed and comfortable with the tasks they needed to perform while participating
in Upham Action. However, we experienced a very low turnout at every single one of our training sessions. Our team needed to come up with some resourceful solutions for the problematic lack of trained student activists and we therefore decided to add even more training sessions to our schedule. We learned from the initial eight trainings that just offering the sessions was not going to provide our team with enough people to work all of the doors at Irvin and Upham Halls. Therefore, we decided to take the training sessions directly to potential volunteers. Our team scheduled training sessions during or after interested classes, and we also held training sessions for various campus organizations who place an emphasis on service, such as the Miami University Synchronized Skating Team and a couple of campus fraternities. In addition, team members trained several individuals on a one-on-one basis for those people who could not make it to any other offered session. By completing these activities, totaling fifteen group trainings in all, we were able to gather more than enough student activist volunteers. In addition, it was a great way to get the word out to people in these classes and organizations who might not have already heard about Upham Action.

Execution

When it finally came time to execute our action, we were excited and nervous, but felt very prepared based on our extensive work to plan, coordinate and collaborate prior to the date of the action. One crucial aspect of executing Upham Action was setting up the night before. We wanted to be prepared with student activists at the doors ready to say the script and pass out the handbills as soon as the first students were arriving for
their 8 a.m. classes about ten minutes before their classes actually start. For our set up, we asked individuals unable or uncomfortable with participating in the action to help. This was especially needed with Upham which has a lot of entrances and a lot of classrooms to cover. The preparation for the doors included hanging ribbon and signs. The ribbon that we used was about two inches wide, and was a dark purple color. We taped the ribbon diagonally along the door from top to bottom, making sure that if the door was a double door, we cut and re-taped the ribbon where the doors opened to give the appearance that the door was blocked though in actuality it was not. While some students were taping the doors with the ribbon, others were placing the Talking Points sheet under the doors of every classroom and/or office in the building. Additionally our night before preparation included sending out a reminder e-mail to all our student activist volunteers to remind them to meet at the check-in-spot the next day. We attached a spread sheet of the times and doors everyone had signed up to work during the training sessions as well.

On the day of the action, we felt it was important to have an accessible check-in spot, with one of our team members as a central coordinator. This person checked in student activists, telling them where their doors were located, and gave them a stack of the handbills. If for some reason there was a problem with the volunteers or with the students, faculty and staff entering the building, everyone was told at check-in that the central coordinator was the person to seek out and contact. For students that somehow missed the training sessions, the central coordinator during that shift was also prepared to give an on-the-spot training. During checking, the central coordinator re-emphasized that
student activists should know and use the script to maintain the unified voice of the action. If they did not or could not memorize it, we had extra copies available. The check-in spot was not only where the volunteers checked-in, but it was also the main hold for the action that day. The check-in spot was where extra materials were stored and one member of our team was consistently present to deal with any arising issues.

Throughout the day of the action, when more than one member of our team was present, we found it essential to walk around the building and check in on the student activists, because even with the training session, you can never fully prepare people for some of the negative reactions that they might experience. We found that our presence made people feel comfortable, and knowing that if they did have a negative experience, they could leave or come and talk to one of us. Additionally, it was important that we knew everyone was following the guidelines of standing to the side of the door, thus not preventing people from entering and using the script. Our checking in on the proper execution of the action allowed us to respond to complaints and accusations that arose, including one police visit in response to a student saying she missed a test because a student activist would not allow her entrance. We believe this student simply saw the ribbons and assumed she could not get in without actually listening to what the student activists were saying. As we checked in with everyone it was helpful to carry extra handbills around to give people if they were running low. With class changes especially it was good to make check if any volunteers had to leave early for class or for another reason so no door was left unattended and no student activist volunteer was left alone who didn’t feel comfortable without a partner. Knowing which students had to leave
early allowed us to have a replacement ready to take the place of that person when the time came.

While videotaping is not necessary for a successful action, we did find videotaping the action to be a great way to remember the day, as well as a method of reviewing and analyzing the action to determine what went well and what could be improved. Having someone who is familiar with the videotaping equipment or working with it closely ahead of time is important for videotaping as we had trouble with some of our tapes when we did it ourselves. On the day of the action, we videotaped volunteers’ reactions, a tour around the building, and heavy student traffic flow between class changes. The student activists’ reactions were good to have, especially since during low traffic times we could ask them to tell stories about specific positive and negative reactions. We asked questions such as “What has your reaction been?”, “What have the students, staff, and faculty reactions been?”, and “Is there any moment that sticks out?”. Videotaping a tour of the building was also beneficial. We provided commentary about the inaccessibility of the building while viewing it at the same time. While walking around the building, we could also review any stairs, broken sidewalk, or landscape around the building that might prevent access to an otherwise accessible entrance. Finally, a particularly interesting portion was taping the volunteers in action during heavy student flow in and out of the buildings in order to see general reactions.

With any action on a college campus which disrupts the typical flow of activities, there is the possibility for students, staff, and faculty not participating in the action to call police or other authority figures. Our student activist volunteers were told that if the
police were called, the central coordinator should be hailed over or the police officer should be directed toward the check in spot where one of our team members would be available to answer any questions. It was our responsibility to make sure that all of the volunteers were following the script and not preventing anyone from entering the doors in order to be able to speak professionally and honestly with the police. Additionally, we made sure that we were the ones speaking to any authority figures which were aggressively questioning our student activist volunteers or trying to stop the action.

**Evaluation**

In performing any activist action, especially one which is being funded by a research grant or which may be repeated in the future, it’s important to evaluate the results of the action, its effectiveness and what specifically did and did not work. In performing Upham Action we used a variety of ways to evaluate what occurred including videotapes, pre and post action surveys, class discussions, a post action awareness piece, team meetings and the Upham Action e-mail address. Some of these methods were more helpful than others, but we felt that using multiple evaluative approaches would help us view both the microscopic and macroscopic effects of our action on the Miami University community.

Videotapes can provide some insight into the way the action was received by the general community. As already stated we used the videotapes to interview volunteers during class times when few people were entering the building and to simply observe the way people reacted to encountering the action. Being unfamiliar with the equipment,
however, our videos did not, for some reason, have sound and therefore were not ideal. Despite this, we believe the tapes are still useful to see how people reacted, even if we can’t hear what is being said. In addition, tapes of the action can later be used for a documentary on the action or in a training session if the action is done in the future.

The pre and post surveys are likely the most important and extensive feedback one can get from the student activists. We gave out the pre-surveys after training and e-mailed the post-surveys to our student activist volunteers after the action. As a result of these methods of distribution, we had a lot more pre than post surveys filled out, but the information is still very useful. Perhaps having surveys available to fill out at the action once people are done will help raise the number of post-surveys filled out. The pre-survey asked volunteers if they had participated in the action previously, how they heard about the action, their primary reason for participating and the emotion they were feeling about participating. Volunteers were then asked what they expected reactions of students and faculty specifically would be and if they felt prepared to deal with those reactions. Finally, volunteers were asked what part of training was most helpful and what could be improved. The post-survey asked how the actual event compared to their expectations, what emotion they mainly experienced, and what the typical reactions were. Volunteers were also asked to look back at training to see if it really prepared them and if there was anything they, in retrospect, thought should be changed about the training. Finally, the post-surveys asked if the volunteer thought the action was effective, why, and if they would participate in Upham Action or something similar again.
The answers to these surveys and the changes which occur between the pre and post are incredibly helpful in understanding how effective the training was for the volunteers and searching for ways to improve. In our action, most said they felt prepared both before and after and the big suggestion for improvement of training was to do role-play, which we had actually considered and then decided not to do. Almost all of the student activists said they would do the action or something like it again, though perhaps related to a cause about which they felt more strongly. For future actions, it may be good to work with someone familiar with creating surveys and using data collecting systems so that beyond the stories written by volunteers on the surveys, one can also have hard statistics to report about the action which could help in receiving funding or convincing some people of the importance of such activism on college campuses. No matter what though, the use of surveys for volunteers was key to understanding the effectiveness of training and how to improve it in the future.

Another possible avenue for evaluation would be classroom discussion. These may or may not be possible to directly use as evaluation tools. For discussions that occur in classes which were affected by the action, we could not obviously be in the rooms, nor do we know how many classes actually took the time to discuss what was happening outside. At best, we had word of mouth from peers, volunteers and professors who could tell us how people reacted and what they were saying. In contrast, however, we were able to have discussions with the classes who participated in the action. This was an opportunity to hear first hand accounts of their time at the doors as well as what they overheard or discussed with people in and outside of classrooms about the action. While
word of mouth may not necessarily be a scientifically sound method of evaluation, we do believe all accounts were beneficial and each story about someone whose consciousness was raised or who genuinely appreciated the action was a success story for us. This use of stories for evaluation relates to the concept of the collective memory of activism because the stories and discussions about Upham Action can alter the collective memory of activism on campus. Eagan’s statement that “[a]t many schools there is less history of activism or perhaps less memory. Students come to college with no knowledge of past activism and no idea of their own potential role as activists…students may see [campus] as a site of sports or parties not debates and barricades”, can easily be applied to the Miami University campus culture (Eagan 17). We believe talking to people about Upham is not only a good way to learn more about the action’s results and possibly gain outside suggestions for improvement, but also to build the collective memory of Upham Action as an instance of contemporary activism on Miami’s campus and positively affect the culture’s view of activism.

The post action awareness piece was another evaluative tool we planned to use to gauge some the reactions of individuals. The turn-out for our event, unfortunately, was incredibly low. Less than ten people came and all were student activists who had participated in the action. There are several possible reasons for this low turn-out. It could be that since this was the second year of the event, people may have thought they knew all about it and didn’t need to talk about the issues or ask questions. It could also be that students are so used to receiving handbills on campus that most discard these without reading them and therefore did not see that the event was occurring. It’s possible that
better advertising in the form of posters inside the building or an announcement on the school’s website may have helped our turn-out.

Though we met and communicated almost daily in the weeks leading up the Upham Action, after the event, we needed a break and did not get together right away to discuss what had occurred. After a week or so of rest and appreciating our efforts, we met regularly and talked a lot about the action and what we would have done differently in order to be more effective. While this worked for us, coordinators of another action may find it helpful to get together to discuss what occurred as soon as possible after the action so that nothing is forgotten. It would be especially beneficial if someone at these meetings took detailed notes about what individuals thought went well, what didn’t work well and what could be changed in the future. By discussing these issues and recording the coordinators’ thoughts soon after the action, it is more likely things will be fresh in everyone’s minds. In addition, however, other meetings could and likely should occur as coordinators have had more time to process the event, talk to others involved in or affected by the action and to review some of the videotapes and post-action surveys. These meetings and the notes taken during them will be key to creating a better action in the future. Learning from the past is the best way to improve and leaving detailed instructions and suggestions for improvement for future student activists will be incredibly helpful.

Our Upham Action e-mail address was also a way we hoped to evaluate the action. In addition to sending out the post survey through this account, the e-mail address was listed on the handbills we passed out during the action so that people who came to
the doors and had a strong reaction could write to us about the action, positively or negatively or ask questions. We hoped this would provide first hand accounts of reactions to the action, but unfortunately, no one e-mailed us. This may be because the address was under the name of the action and not a particular person so people didn’t exactly know to whom they would be writing or because once the event was over no one felt the need to contact us. The central e-mail address was so helpful, however, in contact with the volunteers that it may as well be open for potential contact with university community members reacting to the event. Even if no one writes, it seems helpful to leave that option available since even one written response would be useful in evaluating the action.

It is important to add that no matter how extensive and diverse the methods of evaluation, activist actions are events whose full results and effects can never be completely known. There are students whose awareness was heightened or interest fueled in disability rights because of Upham Action whom we will never know. For example, two years after Upham Action occurred, a member of our team was having a conversation with a new acquaintance about her thesis project and mentioned Upham Action. He was shocked and excited that she was one of the people behind the action. He explained that even though he walked past the volunteers and went to class through an inaccessible entrance, he took the handout and read it and ever since has noticed when accessible entrances are easily located or not on campus. This a story we may have never heard and there are likely hundreds of other similar stories: stories which will be shared with Miami students, faculty and staff, present and future, which will never reach us, but
will nonetheless add to the collective memory of activism at Miami and begin to alter the culture to include activist actions.

**Hopes for the Future**

The intentions behind Upham Action were two-fold, but now in retrospect, there are three main things we most desire to occur as a result of Upham Action. First, we hope Upham Action raised awareness about the need for better accessibility on Miami’s campus. This does not just mean that for a day we made people realize Upham or Irvin Halls only have one accessible entrance which can make navigating hard; we hope that the awareness we raise extends beyond that. Ideally, students who participated, encountered, or read about Upham Action at Miami will be forced to notice accessibility issues at Miami and beyond, always looking for the accessible entrance or the elevator, or being amazed at how many doors at Miami are inaccessible due to one single step. We hope that this heightened attention to accessibility issues lasts well beyond the two days of Upham Action, causing more and more members of the Miami University to first consider the physical barriers to inclusivity and eventually begin to connect such visible issues with the more subtle, invisible socio-cultural issues affecting the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Secondly, we hope our student activist volunteers begin to see themselves as agents of change, as real, live, effective activists now, in whatever life situation they may be. We hope that both the training preparation and the actual experience of participating in Upham Action gave the students a positive feeling about themselves and their ability to
create positive change. Many of the students noted in their post-survey or verbally to us that they would indeed participate in another activist action, although it would likely not be around disability rights issues, but something more important or closer to them such as women’s rights, the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer community, or environmental issues. While the point of Upham Action was to get Miami University members to think specifically about disability rights, we feel successful even if our student activists volunteers choose to become active in something other than disability rights because our goal for this group was to give them the tools, ability and confidence they, as students, need in order to create positive change.

Similarly, we hope that this guide to Upham Action can be utilized to not only reproduce this particular activist action on another college or university campus, but also to engage in activist actions related to other marginalized groups or social justice issues. Anywhere and everywhere there is a desire to make a statement, raise awareness and create change through organized student action on a college or university campus, we hope that this guide can be of service to that cause. We hope that our descriptions of the steps we took as well as the advice we give based on reflection of how what we did could be improved, will be a useful tool for students and/or faculty members aiding students in activist actions. If this guide gives hope that organized student action can be done with positive results, if it spurs anyone else onto action or even just makes someone realize that they can indeed be an activist right now in their everyday life, then we feel that this guide has fulfilled its purpose. We realize that the information is specific to college or
university students, but we hope that it is also open and flexible enough to be useful to anyone else interested in activism as well.

Upham Action has now been, essentially, a three year project from planning and execution to writing, revising and now finally releasing this guide into the world. It has been a full, exhausting, wonderful and incredible learning experience for all of us involved and particularly for the three of us who are students. We feel our educational careers have been positively and profoundly altered by our involvement in Upham Action and we only hope that our efforts will help more students have similar and equally worthwhile experiences. Don’t wait to take action, as Sweet Honey in the Rock sings: *We are the ones we’ve been waiting for!*
Section II: Why to Engage in College Student Activism, Benefits and Possibilities

Understanding Upham Action as one example of student activism, yet recognizing that activism can take a variety of other forms, the question becomes why should students be engaging in such actions? After all, I am essentially proposing that the encouragement of student activism become a method of education, so one might ask: What are the educational benefits and possibilities of encouraging activist actions on college and university campuses? Prior to discussing the benefits of activism, it seems important to talk first about the purpose and goals of education itself since as Steven Cahn writes “methods are adopted to achieve goals, and if our goals are ill-chosen, we must rethink our methods. For that reason, questions of procedure are inseparable from questions of purpose” (Cahn xii). While there are many ideas about the purposes and aims of higher education in modern society, the debate over liberal versus vocational education seems to be most repeated in traditional educational literature, while more contemporary texts bring up the concepts of democratic education and empowering education. Interestingly, the goals and purposes of education within these four frameworks seem to be supported, fostered and furthered through student activism and the activist qualities which are developed and honed over time with continued experience in the cycle of activist engagement. This section explores some of the proposed purposes of higher education today, brings them together into a single educational statement of purpose and then explains how activism can help bring students closer to these aims and ideals for college and university education.
What is the Purpose of Education?

So what then, is the purpose of education or even more basically, what is education? Timothy McMannon defines it as “a process of socialization, preparing each individual to take an active place in the specific society in which he or she lives” (McMannon 5). Ira Shor places even more importance on education defining it as “a contested terrain where people are socialized and future of society is at stake” (Shor 13). These definitions help to broadly understand that education’s purpose is to shape the minds and develop the skills of individuals so that they can productively participate in, as well as perpetuate and affect, their society. McMannon further explains that in regard to education’s specific purposes “both the questions and answers evolve in response to changes in the larger society” (McMannon 1). This sentiment is exemplified in regards to current educational purposes by Robert Reason and Tracy Davis who state that “[t]he increasingly diverse student population in higher education has given rise to an increased focus on social justice by the popular media and higher education administrators” (Reason and Davis 6). A change in university student population, in and of itself, does not explain the reason for engaging in student activism, but this change and the attention it is receiving from educators begins to hint at why activism occurs and why it ought to be encouraged for students living and learning in ever more diverse settings. As the world of academia and society at large continues to diversify, people of different racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, of various abilities, ages, genders and sexual orientations are coming together and interacting in more long-term ways. Individuals must know not only
how to live together, but live together well, for the betterment of all. Reason and Davis argue that “[a]s our society continues to diversify, we must not only equip students with the skills for positive cross-cultural interactions, but also enlist their help in eliminating barriers to true social justice” (Reason and Davis 13). Often, when exploring the purposes of education, the concept of pedagogies, or teaching practices, are used along with different concepts of types of education. Before exploring how activism benefits the educational process for today’s students, it may help to explore the goals and purposes of two types of education: vocational and liberal, as well as two educational pedagogies: democratic and empowering.

Traditionally, education is often divided into the concepts of vocational and liberal, each considered to have different aims and outcomes for the student. Simplistically defined, vocational education is that which prepares the student for a specific career field through classes and experiences which directly contribute and relate to the student’s future job. Liberal education is a educational approach which aims to educate the student in a variety of areas, including math, science, philosophy, the humanities and art, without necessarily developing that student for a particular career path. Vocational education is sometimes deemed education for utility purposes while liberal education is considered education for education’s sake. These two educational types are often posed as being opposites from one another, advocates of each trying to expose the faults and dangers in the other (McMannon 10). Most higher educational institutions today consider themselves liberal arts schools, though some critics may argue
that utility still wins out over education for the sake of education in some of these colleges and universities, despite the liberal arts label.

When looking at these educational approaches in the traditional way, it would appear that activism is only applicable to liberal education as students can learn about minority and oppressed groups in literature, history and the social sciences and then act to make a difference. This assumption, however, is false, for a closer look reveals how important it is for those of all career paths to engage in activism. For example, union workers in steel mills and factories would benefit from having previous experience in activism prior to contract talks and strikes. Also, women working in any setting where men have official position of power over them need an understanding of sexism and their rights for a sexual harassment free workplace and equal treatment on the job. Activism is not an act of charity which only benefits the oppressed other, but is also for people who are members of marginalized groups to be seen and heard in a powerful, effective and public way, working toward their own socio-political needs. This defense of activism framed within the view that these types of education are actually opposites, reveals then that, as McMannon notes: “the separation of liberal arts education from technical or vocational training is a false one. There is, in fact, much of the other in each if it is done properly” (McMannon 12). This statement is echoed and further explained by Steven Cahn who writes:

It would be a serious error, however, to separate liberal and vocational education. If the members of a democracy are to be not only knowledgeable participants in the political arena, but also effective contributors in the social sphere, each should be provided with the necessary skills, social orientation and intellectual perspective to succeed in some wide field of occupational endeavor. But such vocational education must not be confused
with narrow job-training. Animals are broken in and trained; human beings ought to be enlightened and educated. (11)

In addition to liberal and vocational as two traditional educational formats, different teaching pedagogies have developed which help shape the goals and methods of education in particular institutions and individual classrooms. These different pedagogical approaches begin to make the connection, as Cahn does above, between education and the future of not only the individual, but also of society as a whole. Two of these educational frameworks are particularly connected to, and would indeed benefit from, engagement in student activism: democratic education and empowering education, also referred to as education for democracy and education for empowerment throughout the rest of this piece. Again, these conceptualizations of education are different from liberal and vocational in that they move away from the individualized goals of education, (a well trained or a highly educated person) and instead seek to consider and explore how the development of the individual affects society at large and vice versa.

The purpose of education for democracy is to develop in students the skills needed to be effective, active participants in a political democracy such as “the ability to deliberate, to think critically, [and] to develop and express one’s voice articulately” (Darling-Hammond 49). Further, “education for democracy requires not only experiences that develop serious thinking but also access to social understanding, developed by personal participation in a democratic community and direct experience of multiple perspectives” (Darling-Hammond 47). This type of education is directly connected to public politics, intended to educate individuals so that they can understand and intelligently participate in governmental processes. Within democratic education,
student activism can help to develop the above stated skills as well as encourage students to participate in politics. A narrow understanding of democratic education may propose getting students to understand how the current governmental system works and encouraging them to participate in this system in traditional forms such as voting or running for election at local, state or national levels. One could also, however, see education for democracy as potentially encouraging students to get involved in non-traditional ways since the expanded definition of student activism incorporates creative acts of democratic participation such as art commenting on political figures, letters to elected officials, voter registration drives, or volunteering for a candidate’s campaign. These actions, representing a spectrum of public, private, large and small actions, are all possibilities of activism which specifically fulfill the goals of this pedagogical approach when democratic education is understood as containing both traditional and non-traditional democratic participation. This broad approach to education for democracy answers the question: “[H]ow can the members of a democracy be provided with the necessary understanding and capability to reap the greatest possible benefits from the democratic process while at the same time protecting that process from those who would seek its destruction?” (Cahn 6).

While democratic education is more directly connected to politics, empowering education extends explicitly into the social arena as well. Ira Shor defines education for empowerment as “a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change…The goals of this pedagogy are to relate personal growth to public life, by developing strong skills, academic knowledge, habits of inquiry, and critical curiosity about society, power,
Empowering education does not exclude the public and political issues of democratic education, nor does it lose the focus of individual development within vocational and liberal education, rather it combines multiple pedagogical approaches into an unabashedly socio-political educational process. To say empowering education is political, however, seems to imply that the other types of education explored are not, but the fact is that “[n]o curriculum can be neutral. All forms of education are political” (Shor 12). The political nature of education and its connection to activist actions is also asserted by Robert A. Rhoads who writes:

The university is a place where knowledge is created and because knowledge is clearly political...then the university is necessarily a site where identity politics will undoubtedly unfold. From such a perspective, student activism is not to be taken as a sign that the university is in agony, but instead may be seen as an example of a plurality of voices struggling to be heard (27).

Shor describes empowering education as participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multi-cultural, dialogic, de-socializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, and activist (Shor 17). Obviously, the inclusion of “activist” as a quality of education for empowerment makes the need for engagement in student activism readily apparent. Shor writes that “empowering education invites students to become skilled workers and thinking citizens who are also change agents and social critics” and I believe that without practice in activism, without guided development and experience as a change agent throughout one’s education, such student educational outcomes cannot be effectively achieved (16).

Considering all four of these educational frameworks just discussed: vocational, liberal, democratic and empowering, I would like to propose bringing them together into
a working definition of the purpose of higher education in the United States today, recalling again Reason and Davis’ statement about the effects of an ever diversifying world. The purpose of education should be to develop engaged and active citizens who want and work for, in a variety of ways, a socially just democracy, which has the “goal of full and equal participation for all groups, where resources are equitably distributed and everyone is physically and psychologically safe” (Reason and Davis 7). This statement of purpose for education is, I admit, a mouthful and a lot to ask of our current educational system. I would argue, however, that without something positive and long term to aim for, education as a system will get no where at all, continuing instead to run in circles of achievement tests, budget cuts, and quick-fix problem solving, rather than truly becoming the strong, positive foundation of individual growth and societal development that it should and can be. I believe that engaging in student activism as part of one’s education, does indeed lead towards fulfillment of the above stated purpose of an empowering education for democracy that educates not only for the sake of education, but also for the utility of social and personal development. As Linda Darling-Hammond writes:

To ensure a populace capable of democratic decision making, schools must cultivate in all students the skills, knowledge and understanding that both arm them with a keen intelligence capable of free thought and lead them to embrace the values undergirding our pluralistic democracy—that, in other words, enable them to live productively together (41-42)

I fully believe that an education which includes engagement in student activism can achieve Darling-Hammond’s proposition: provide not only knowledge and understanding, but also the qualities and skills needed by students to become actively participating citizens of a social justice oriented society.
How Does Activism Help?

Having explored the purpose of education or perhaps what it should be, I can now discuss how engaging in student activism as a method of education can aid in achieving the goals of higher education. Based on both personal experience and the research I have encountered, I believe that engaging in student activism in residence halls, student organizations and classes, through both the initiative of students themselves and the encouragement of faculty and staff on campus can have a positive effect. Engagement in activism improves students’ critical thinking and speaking skills, instill creativity, perseverance and compassion as well as empower them and aid in their development of self and identity in the critical collegiate years. I propose that the understanding and use of an activist cycle of engagement develops and hones these activist qualities overtime. These qualities, whether gained or improved through engagement in student activism, can contribute to the goals of higher education established above to foster the growth of students as individuals, citizens, and change agents in a diverse, democratic society.

Critical thinking skills are important for fulfilling the purposes of education, for students who can problem solve and mindfully address multifaceted issues and concepts are better prepared to be active, democratic citizens. In settings which include a diversity of people, such as modern colleges and universities, a multicultural environment can flourish, allowing for the development of social justice attitudes and beliefs which can be turned into social justice actions (Reason and Davis 8). Research has shown that these
activist social justice attitudes require movement forward in typical cognitive development theory frameworks because:

[a]s students move out of a dualistic or received knowledge view of the world, they become more comfortable with multiple perspectives and the subjectivity of authority and knowing. With this important transition comes a new ability to examine different worldviews, understand one’s own subjective biases, and more fully understand complex concepts like privilege, oppression and intersubjectivity. (Reason and Davis 10-11).

The more a student engages in activism, learning about and confronting the intersecting oppressions of today’s society, the more a student will use and further develop critical thinking skills and problem-solving methods of intellectual engagement.

Speaking skills can also be developed through engagement in student activism. Activist actions, both in the planning and execution, often require student activists to speak and speak well. Speaking as part of activism can occur in a variety of both public and private ways such as speaking to others about the importance of an issue, speaking to fellow activists to train them on what to do during an action, or speaking loudly in public if leading a chant or making a speech. Practice speaking through engagement in student activism results in the ability to articulate clearly and confidently on one’s beliefs and actions as an activist. Speaking through activism gives students the feeling of “having the authority to speak to these issues” and also, over time develops better confidence in speech and overall speaking skills (Broido and Reason 22). In terms of the purposes of education, speaking skills are important for citizens who are engaged in the democratic process, particularly those who choose to become more directly involved in public politics elected officials or lobbyists for example.
Another activist quality is creativity, for in order to work against the various expressions of oppression and break out of the traditional activist modes, one must be creative. Creativity, as I use it here, is not to be understood in a strictly artistic sense, although art can very much be a type of activism. Creativity, as an activist quality, is the ability to think outside of the box, so to speak, in order to develop new and more effective means of activism in different situations and contexts. Creativity comes into play both in planning an activist action, when one needs to do something attention getting or which can be effective with only a few participants for example, as well as during an action, where activists may be called to improvise at times, responding to unexpected reactions or circumstances. Upham Action is an example of a creatively planned activist action which was intended to catch the attention of college students, faculty and staff by disrupting the typical flow of their day. Education which does not promote creativity in the form of creative thought, action, and personal expression, invites stagnancy and monotony in society. Student activism provides opportunities for already creative individuals to further express themselves, and for the less creative to challenge themselves to more effectively think and act differently.

In addition to being creative, student activists also learn to be perseverant through activist engagement. This perseverance lies in a combination of commitment and hope, through the recognition that “a social movement as a long-term journey” and “the sincere belief that what is learned (racism, sexism, homophobia) can be unlearned” (Broido and Reason 20). Students engaging in activism must understand that not everything will change overnight, but things can and will change. Students must recognize both the big
effects of their work such as changes in policies or the election of an official and the little (read: less or in-visible) effects such as the raised awareness or feeling of acceptance created for an individual who may or may not express gratitude. Bruce Holland Rogers has said that one’s reward for wanting to be a writer if that you get to be a writer and I believe the same goes for an activist (Rogers). Your reward for wanting to create change is, sometimes, you create change. Student activists quickly learn that they will not always be rewarded with praise or visible results of their work and more experienced students, as well as faculty and staff must not only try to prepare newer student activists, but also help them see their work as effective and positive and give them the hope needed to be perseverant. Perseverance, and the commitment and hope which it entails, is helpful to future citizens, especially those who most want to make change at the institutional, governmental or national levels. Such systematic work takes persistence to an incredible degree, and student activists who have become more perseverant through their work will be better prepared to face such challenges.

As a result of the fact that sometimes actions will fail or one’s perseverance will waiver, student activists must also develop a sense of compassion which “must include people we are working to support, people we are hoping will join us…and ourselves. Social justice advocacy can be difficult and draining work, although also often fulfilling and sustaining” (Reason and Broido 87). While many may agree that student activists must have compassion for those marginalized groups they are working for, activists often forget to have compassion for themselves and for those of majority groups who have yet to have their eyes opened about the importance of activism for social justice causes.
Without this multi-faceted compassion, activists could feel like giving up when actions go wrong or could isolate potential allies and fellow activists by writing off members of privileged groups. Compassionate student activists are likely to also be compassionate citizens, who are able to empathize with fellow citizens and work for improving the living, working and social conditions of other people.

Additionally, activist students are likely to become empowered students. When students see their actions creating change on large, small, visible and less visible levels, they begin to feel empowered as activists, seeing themselves as effective change agents. Empowerment occurs not only from the success of actions, but also from the actions themselves in that students become empowered when they are able to act and speak on behalf of themselves and causes they believe in, rather than having an authority figure speak for or over them. Shor believes that “[e]mpowered students make meaning and act from reflection, instead of memorizing facts and values handed to them” (Shor 12). Since the proposed purpose of education is to empower democratic citizens to participate effectively in a socially just society, then empowerment through activism is a good way to begin aiding students to see themselves as social and political change agents.

Finally, engagement in student activism aids in the development of identity and a strong sense of self. Reason and Broido believe “that effective and sustainable [activist] behavior requires a solid foundation of self-understanding—that is, based on continuous critical reflection into the roles of power and privilege in one’s life and relationships” (Reason and Broido 81). When working for social justice causes, student activists not only see how racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ableism and religious discrimination
affect marginalize groups, but also how these oppressions both privilege and harm those in the majority groups as well. As students engage in more activist actions, especially for different causes, they will not only begin to make connections between different oppressions, but see the privileges and harmful effects in their own lives, based on their many intersecting social locations. This type of self awareness is key to developing a firm sense of self that results in feeling neither victimized by nor guilty about one’s social location. This sense of self also connects one’s own oppressions to the oppressions of others without necessarily equating them (Reason and David 10). Robert Rhoads writes that:

The sense of connection between the self and the other may be understood in terms of the formation of a collective consciousness. Social movements thus must involve a degree of change in how individuals define themselves and eventually align themselves with others. As identity evolves, one seeks out others with whom this new sense of self can be shared. (231)

I believe that an activist identity can be developed amongst students from various social locations and backgrounds as they together engage in activist actions and develop not only activist qualities, but also strong senses of self. This collective consciousness of activist identity along with a sense of self in relation to others, is incredibly important for empowered, democratic citizens of the future because they will be able to live as individuals and respect others as individuals, while still recognizing the importance of living with and learning from one another in an inclusive democratic society.

It is clear that the qualities developed through engagement in student activism are ideal for an active and engage citizenry of a successful democratic society. It is important to note, however, that one does not need to have all the qualities before engaging in
activism, rather students can develop and further refine these skills over time through the activist cycle of engagement, which I call the EAR cycle: Education, Action and Reflection. The cycle begins with Education, meaning that the student is learning (or learning more) about an issue, action or cause in a way that will benefit them in being more effective as an activist during the action. Education here can occur directly in a classroom setting through lectures and readings or in any other number of ways in which information can be gained such as at an event with speakers or performers, through a leadership or activist training program, in personal research, or on television and radio.

Education is the first part of the cycle and can vary in depth and breadth of information, particularly depending on how much information one has already gained. Sometimes, just a little bit of new information is needed before acting, but nonetheless Education must be the first step.

The second part of the EAR cycle for activist engagement is Action. Action is when students take what has been learned in the Education stage and do something with that knowledge. Action not only includes the actual activist action, but also the planning and preparation work which may potentially occur prior to an action. Sometimes, activism which occurs on a personal level may not require much planning, but, as was shown in the example of Upham Action, some activist actions take an incredible amount of planning and cooperation in order to occur. In short, the Action stage of the EAR cycle, is indeed the most active part of the cycle, however, it does include the planning and organization of an action as well. It is important to also recall that through the expanded definition of activism, the Action part of the activist cycle, may include an
activist action which is quick, low-key, personal or hardly visible, yet still affects positive change.

The final stage of the EAR cycle is Reflection. This is a key, yet often overlooked part of activism. After engaging in an activist action of any type it is important to reflect on what occurred. Reflection should, while recognizing that all results can never be known, attempt to name the various possible positive and negative effects of the action on the supported group, the student activists themselves, and the targets of the activism. Reflection should also consider what could be improved if the action were to occur again. Eileen Eagan writes that “[w]hile student activism usually arises from immediate and local issues, as it develops commitment it can take on an international trajectory”, however, I also see the opposite occurring on college campuses (Eagan 12). I agree that it is important to make connections from local issues to larger issues of oppressive social systems. There is a dangerous trend I see on college and university campuses, however, in which students go straight to the international level with making connections to the local, and thus making issues such as modern slavery, the sex trade, sweatshops and female circumcision, foreign and otherized concerns seemingly unconnected to the modern Western world. This is not to say that activism which raises awareness about these international issues is bad or ineffective, but there must be awareness on the part of activists of when their actions result, or could result, in a perpetuation of the problem and further victimize the group(s) they seek to help. This is a reason why Reflection is a critical part of student activism because without reflecting on the positive, negative and potentially unknown effects of an action, it becomes difficult to see if one’s actions are
doing more harm than good. It’s important to remember that activism is different from charity and service learning, and I believe the EAR cycle for activist engagement, particularly the Reflection stage, aids in distinguishing student activism as a specific empowering, democratic educational method.

Note that the EAR framework for student activism is defined as an activist cycle, meaning that Education, Action and Reflection are not linear points or ascending steps with a specific, clear and designated end goal, but building stages in a continuous cycle which develops, intensifies and progresses with each repetition. Indeed, activism is, in and of itself, a learning and growing process. There is never a state of completion or perfection. While this may seem troubling for some who want to achieve an endpoint or final goal, there is, or should be, no activist hierarchy of success. Personally, I see more hope in the conception of activism as a life-long growth process because it means there is always work to do individually and collectively, that there is always room for more activists who are passionate about social justice. As for the educational system, the idea of activism as a never-ending cycle is also positive because unlike other educational methods where one must understand the basics, addition and subtraction for example, before one can move onto the bigger concepts such as multiplication, division and algebra. While one would never see first graders and college math majors in the same class together, individuals with similar differences in levels of experience with activism can work together and learn from each other by participating in activist actions in classes or with student groups. Perhaps the more experienced student activists would lead the planning or take a more leadership role, but no matter how many EAR cycles of activist
engagement one has experienced, one can always begin again with others at different levels of experience and create effective activist actions together.

Linda Darling-Hammond writes that “[i]n the United States as elsewhere, efforts to rethink schooling have been stimulated by the need to prepare a much more diverse and inclusive group of future citizens” (Darling-Hammond 43). I believe student activism can aid in that preparation. By continuing to work together through the cycle of Education, Action and Reflection, students will develop the activist qualities of critical thinking, speaking, creativity, perseverance, compassion, empowerment and strong sense of self. These skills, as explained above, directly relate to the purposes of education. I believe students who develop these activist qualities through continued engagement in student activism during their college careers will be more prepared to be actively participating citizens in a true democratic and socially just society. Steven Cahn states that “a wise person is one with intellectual perspective, who is familiar with both the foundations of knowledge and its heights, who can scrutinize the fundamental principles of thought and action while maintaining a view of the world that encompasses both what is and what ought to be” (Cahn 10). I believe that students provided with the educational opportunities for engagement in student activism will not only be able to understand how society currently works, but will also have hopes and ideas for how society should work and be ready and prepared to lead the way, after all “[e]ducation is more than facts and skills. It’s is a socializing experience that helps make the people who make society” (Shor 15).
Conclusion: A Framework for Reflection

In my various classroom experiences of activism under the guidance of my mentor, Dr. Kathy McMahon-Klosterman (KMK), she always asks students to write a paper reflecting on and explaining their actions by answering the questions: “What?”, “So What?”, and “Now What?”. To further explain, the final papers are supposed to cover what the student did, why such actions are important and what additional actions will, could or should follow in order to continue creating positive change. I am particularly fond of the simplicity and straight-forwardness of these three questions which often yield extensive and thoughtful answers in my experiences as both a student and an undergraduate teaching assistant in Dr. KMK’s classes. I believe that using this framework for my conclusion, focusing more heavily on the “Now What?”, is an excellent way of revisiting the assertions and purposes of this thesis as well as explaining how I believe it can be beneficial for future use by students, faculty, and staff in college and university settings.

What?

This paper has given a detailed example of and guidelines for engaging in one form of student activism while also explaining how encouraging activist actions furthers the purpose education. Ideally, this thesis paper has sparked interest in activism and created hope for its potential to better educate students to be active and engaged citizens in today’s democratic society. The introduction to this paper explained why I chose
activism and how I believe activism has been and should be defined in the collective memory for the current generation of student activists. The first section of the paper is a co-written piece about Upham Action, an extensively planned, large-scale, activist action which I helped organize with my mentor and peers. This experientially based section gave the details of our planning, execution and evaluation of the action as an example of how to organize activism on college or university campuses. The second, research based section, explored some different frameworks for higher education and proposing a single statement of purpose for today’s education in a diverse world. This section then explained how engaging in activism helps fulfill the purposes of an empowering and democratic education through the development of certain activist qualities. Overall, this thesis project has incorporated personal experience with research and proposals for the future of student activism in post-secondary education.

**So What?**

This work is an important step in convincing people of the importance of student activism and its potential contributions to higher education and society as whole. Until activism can be freed from its current narrow definition and seen instead as a spectrum of actions connected to social justice, individuals will continue to be intimidated by activism or discount its potential if it continues to use only the traditional methods for change. One of the ways ideas about activism can change is through educating people. By this I mean not just telling different stories of activism to change conceptions, but also using educational settings like colleges and universities to encourage student activism, teaching
and guiding students to develop the skills needed to become effective activists and engaged citizens who both believe in and work for social justice in a diverse democratic society. This paper provides not only reasons for engaging in student activism, but also an example and guidelines thus being persuasive and suggestive, which I believe is more helpful and effective than just one or the other. I hope that this paper details exactly what its title states: how and why to engage in student activism, in a way that urges individuals to action with a base understanding of the importance and potential of their work as activists. This thesis paper intended to provide readers both rationale and guidance for student activist action without being narrowly prescriptive. This paper lays foundation work for engaging in student activism which can be built on by individuals in the context of their own personal and educational situations.

**Now What?**

I chose student activism as my thesis topic because it is something I hope all college students will learn about and engage in during their post-secondary education, no matter what their major or future career. I know that student activism is not a magical fix for all the problems in society or even in just the educational system, but I do believe that when done effectively, persistently and in line with the goals of social justice, it can make a huge difference in students’ personal and intellectual development as future citizens. This paper is only one step of many, however, on the way to fully incorporating student activist engagement into education as a philosophy and system as well as into the culture and values of educational institutions. From here, I hope that students and faculty and
staff at colleges and universities will take the concepts within this paper and put it into action within the specific context of their own personal, public and academic lives.

I hope that students are encouraged by this paper to see themselves as potential change agents and are motivated to educate themselves on social justice issues and act as activists in little and big ways in their daily lives. This means not only learning about the lives, experiences, and opinions of minority groups, but being willing to stand up for these groups by changing one’s thoughts, language, and behavior. Student activism can occur through, but is not limited to, attending lectures and events around diversity and social justice issues, educating peers, using and encouraging the use of appropriate language, organizing rallies and petitions around issues on or off campus, and being involved in campus politics. I hope that student readers of this paper follow Robert Reason and Ellen Broido’s advice to “[k]now your own strengths and limits…[because] few of us are equally effective in all areas; knowing our talents will maximize our ability to create social change” (Reason and Broido 83). Activism is both personal and political. It should be shaped by one’s own personal, social, and educational situations in a way that does not put one’s self in danger. That said, however, activism should also be a growth experience and I hope that students take this foundation work and do activist actions which put them outside their comfort zone in a way that fosters positive growth and development of the activist skills discussed in Section II.

The general advice I would give to student activists is two-fold, echoing the writing of Reason and Broido. First, “Do not expect praise” (Reason and Broido 86). As said before, often one’s only reward for wanting to create change is that sometimes, you
create change. Activism is not always easy, nor should it be if it is to make us think and grow. This fact, however, should not discourage student activists; rather, I believe it shows how important activism really is since it takes difficult work to accomplish.

Secondly, I would encourage student activists to be willing to make mistakes and forgive themselves for those mistakes as well. This connects to the activist quality of compassion: compassion for one’s self, because getting mired in one’s mistakes is not conducive to growth and development. As Reason and Broido write:

"It is inevitable that engaged [activists] will make mistakes, miss opportunities to intervene, and on occasion act in ways incongruent with their values. Mistakes and shortcomings need to be addressed, but we must also recognize that they are inevitable parts of the learning process and that we are transformed as much by our work as is the world we seek to transform. (87-88)"

Another group I have hopes for in terms of the future of this thesis is college and university faculty and staff members. I hope that these individuals will utilize this paper to encourage student activism in classrooms and student organizations. As a result of the fact that “[m]any students are reluctant to take action without encouragement and invitation”, faculty and staff members, often respected figures for students, play a key role in initiating student activism and beginning the activist development of individual students (Reason and Broido 84). I would encourage faculty and staff members, particularly those in diversity and/or student affairs, to create environments where activist and social justice behaviors and attitudes are expected (Reason and Broido 84). When behaviors are explicitly part of guidelines for students in classrooms, organizations, residence halls or the institution as a whole and students are held accountable to these guidelines, changes in thought and behavior will occur because it becomes clear that it is
the expected and desired way of behaving. Research has shown that students may not seek out activism, but participation in well organized and guided circumstances can lead to an activist identity and initiate a desire to participate in and/or organize other actions (Broido and Reason 23). We saw this directly in responses from student activists in Upham action, many of whom participated as part of the Introduction to Disability Studies class. As a result of this fact, I cannot stress enough the importance of courses and workshops for students which include safe environments, constructive conflict, dialogue amongst a diverse group and the opportunity to engage in activism (Broido and Reason 24).

In addition to providing students these opportunities for activist learning and experience, I also hope that faculty and staff continue to educate and act as activists themselves, providing models of activist engagement for their students in both daily interactions of appropriate language and behavior as well as in organizing and participating in larger organized actions. Finally, faculty and staff can help to encourage student activism by being listeners and supporters of student activists, not only as they plan or participate in actions, but also when they struggle, make mistakes or get discouraged. Educators ought to create a network of support by not only being there for students as respected, knowledgeable, older adults, but also by connecting students with one another to help them build their own support systems. These efforts will increase the likelihood of students continuing in their activism and not getting burnt out or disillusioned with the purpose of their activist actions.
To conclude, what should happen now with the information in paper is both the start of EAR cycles of activist engagement for students, faculty and staff at colleges and universities. Change cannot occur without the effort and support of all groups nor without everyone being willing to continually educate themselves, act, reflect and encourage others to do the same. I hope that this paper provides a challenge to higher education, a challenge which will be taken on by students, faculty and staff at colleges and universities, both big and small, urban and rural, vocational and liberal arts, public and private, all in pursuit of achieving the purposes of empowering, democratic education for a socially just society. Despite the time and effort I have put into this paper, something I consider part of my own activism, I recognize that widespread change cannot occur without the actions of others. Systematic change will not happen without the readers of this paper taking up the ideas and guidelines set out here and enacting these concepts in their lives, encouraging and engaging in student activism with the intention of creating a more equitable, safe and inclusive society for all. I have only laid the foundation: the details and process of building something more upon this base is up to you. In solidarity, I will continue engaging in my personal activism and wish each reader growth and success in her or his own actions as well.
Works Cited


