

Networking Amongst Student Activists within School Communities

Jade Wong

Department of Sociology, SUNY New Paltz

Undergraduate Senior Research Project

Dr. Regina Sewell

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Abstract: Student activism has a long precedented history with youth mobilizing to enact social change, especially within college campuses. Networking is a vital part of activist work and demonstrates its prominence within college communities, making it a significant aspect of student activism. The purpose of this study is to explore how networking within school communities affects student activist efforts. Within the study, 6 student activists were interviewed from the SUNY New Paltz campus. Using qualitative thematic analysis, seven different themes emerged focusing on classroom environments/faculty, previous experiences with activism, COVID-19, clubs/school organizations, alumni relations, online communities, and issues with school bureaucracy. Networking was proven to be a valuable aspect of achieving student activist goals and efforts. Further testing is recommended to expand institutional research, and demographics include race, ethnic background, gender, and age. The fine-tuning of questions during interviews is also highly encouraged in order to ensure more precise answers.

Note that all transcriptions are on separate documents not inclusive of this one

Introduction:

Activism work has become increasingly available and widely spread amongst younger generations, fostering civic growth and engagement (Rosati et al. 2019). Student activism has thus shown to be a pivotal force for inciting social change and tackling a range of social issues (Omatsu 2002). Milkman (2016), describes this generation of youth activists' "use of network-based communication (i.e social media) is unprecedented in scale and effectiveness" in order to mobilize and confront persistent social justice issues successfully (2). As a student activist, I've become familiar with and recognize the power students obtain through working amongst their peers and forming tight-knit communities related to the cause of their choice. The research question asks "Does networking within school communities influence student activism efforts?" The purpose of this study is to thus examine networking dynamics in different capacities and see how these connections impact their work as activists on school campus grounds specifically. Throughout my research, I propose and hypothesize that networking is pivotal to student activists' positively impacting their work and efforts.

According to the collective behavior theory, this suggests that protest is an "activity in which organized groups seek goals, mobilize resources and employ strategies," and to be successful, most protest groups need to "mobilize community resources... to provide communication structures to facilitate use and diffusion of tactics"(Biddix and Park 2008:2-3). Further supporting this theory is the learning community theory, which describes how members can learn to listen and work together utilizing their own experiences and expertise in dealing with complex issues (Ntuli and Teferra 2017). Community and networking are often considered integral to the creation of social movements, especially those student-led (Biddix and Park

2008). My research will particularly focus on the phenomenon of networking within school communities and how this influences student activism.

Higher education institutions provide students space for “... opportunities to associate with groups/organizations in either purposive (e.g. one’s one’s personal and academic interests, value commitments...) or passive ways (e.g. while hanging out with a friend)” (Troilan and Barnhardt 2017:4). Research demonstrates there are multiple communities and network opportunities students can take part in, including digital communities/space, peer-to-peer groups/friendship networks, and classroom environments/administrative influence, which foster civic action and activism work.

Activism within digital communities/spaces:

Milkman (2018) describes the success of 4 millennial-led, youth-centered social movements over the last decade which heavily relied on social networking platforms for communication and mobilization. The Movement against Campus Sexual Assault, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) were all social movements that utilized Facebook and Twitter to 1) establish online forums to amplify experiences and grievances leading up to the movement and 2) incite action by organizing with one another through these online communities (Milkman 2018). Similarly, Ntuli and Teferra (2017) describe how “social media technologies have become an important feature of student activism” (3). Social movements often entail the use of computers and mobilization devices providing digital social networks which allow individuals to contribute to online organizations regarding a specific social cause including donations, education, signing petitions, and circulating activities and call-to-actions (i.e. protests, walkouts, and other demonstrations). The usage of hashtags is also particularly special to social media platforms, specifically, which provide easy access to the organization of political power,

hence the phenomenon of “internet age-networked student movements” (Ntuli and Teferra 2017:13). Furthermore, the use of online student websites centered on student-led social movements offered a variety of ways to participate in movements “from online petitions to email addresses and phone numbers for institutional decision-makers” (Biddix and Park 2008: 12). These online resources and communities provided tools for information sharing, organization, and effective mobilization of student activists.

Peer networks/clubs/on-campus organizations:

Ramirez (2023) describes a LatinX- student-led movement on the Michigan State University (MSU) campus, which utilized on-campus organizations, such as the Chicano/Hispanic Student for Progressive Action (CHISPA), that led protests regarding the expansion of Chicano/Latino studies. CHISPA also held “academic enrichment programs, social and cultural activities, and outreach initiatives” which fostered a community space that prompted student populations to advocate for more support services and resources for the LatinX members of the MSU campus (5). Wegemer (2022) also points out that peer networks/friendships often provide introductions to diverse groups and experiences relating to oppression and privilege, which “[bolster] critical perspectives and participation” of civic activities, particularly among LatinX adolescents (2). This study, however, makes clear distinctions between civic engagement and activism efforts, describing how peer/social networks do not influence activism but positively influence civic action. This is because schools 1) prioritize civic youth engagement over activism activities and 2) tend to allow students to participate in civic opportunities that do not address or challenge existing power structures as activism oftentimes does. Researchers did discover that a student's perceptions towards inequalities influenced their willingness to participate in activism efforts, and also highlighted that “social networks of students appeared to

facilitate engagement in service activities” where students tended to either abandon or become more invested in service behaviors based on whether or not their peer circles were doing so (Wegemer 2022:10-11). This is further supported by Troilan and Barnhardt (2017), which demonstrated that participation in at least two college co-curricular involvement experiences (volunteering, voting, etc.) has a positive influence on a student's social and political action. This study also specifically points to involvement within religious groups, (acting as peer educators/mentors), encouraging more positive feelings of being politically active on campus.

Classroom Environments and Administrative Influence:

Activism networks are also present in traditional classroom environments and administrative structures. Silva (2018) describes utilizing decolonial pedagogy (teaching practices that empower students to confront injustice) as a way to positively influence activism efforts among students by introducing specific coursework and collaborative projects. These projects and coursework specifically focus on promoting civic action such as participatory-action-based projects or community-based-learning projects. The result of this classroom environment was a collaborative and collective identity that was used to organize over 400 students in a walkout spreading awareness for their school's diversity center. Students reported feelings of empowerment and radicalization by disrupting dominant narratives that promote white, privileged spaces. (Silva 2018). This is further supported by other academically sanctioned spaces, such as organized sports and college athletics teams. Bunch and Cianfrone (2022) conducted a study measuring the perceptions and effect of athletic departments' contributions to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement via social media postings and discovered student-athletes that who felt supported (i.e through educational resources and postings) positively influence their activism efforts. The student also pointed out that social

media postings, via Instagram and Facebook, which point to specific organizations could improve inclusivity and educate the athletic department on racial messaging, thus demonstrating solidarity amongst staff and students. Student-athletes were acutely aware of the lack of authenticity regarding messaging and expressed great interest in highlighting BIPOC voices, along with other marginalized communities, throughout their college campus.

Student activists' ability to network within school communities provides both support and offers platforms in order to push their social-movement agendas. As demonstrated throughout the literature reviewed, student activism is influenced by networking within school communities. Throughout my project, I hope to highlight networks of student activists within SUNY New Paltz with the intent that these communities will be used by future activists to continue their legacy and work.

Sample and Data Collection:

Six in-depth student activist interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks, beginning on March 31st, 2023, and ending on April 18th, 2023 all ranging from 30-50 minutes and totaling 19 days for data collection. A snowball sampling process was used to obtain interview subjects: after attending an activism panel earlier in the Spring 2023 semester, I was able to retrieve the contacts of three student activists and network with these individuals to find other interviewees, as well as tapping into my personal activism network. Choosing interview subjects was thus intentional and focused to obtain answers from students already familiar with and deeply involved within the SUNY New Paltz activist community. Demographics of all subjects were Female, ages 19-22, with a range of social-justice-oriented majors and minors, including political science, Black studies, sociology, international relations, and environmental geochemical sciences. The racial demographic of interview subjects consisted of four white

individuals, one Black individual, and one of Hispanic descent. This sample of students is somewhat comparable to the racial demographics of SUNY New Paltz, as white students account for 58.1% of the total student body, Black students account for 6% and Hispanic populations account for 23.1%. (College Data Analytics Team, 2023). The interviews were conducted via the online web conferencing application Web-Ex.

I asked a series of questions with three different categories in mind, progressing to go more in-depth with their networking capabilities and activism work completed at SUNY New Paltz. The first set of questions consisted of their backgrounds and inquiries revolving around their personal experiences and identity with activism before and during their time at SUNY New Paltz. Questions in this category included “What kinds of activism work have you been involved with on campus and how did you get involved” as well as “How did your previous experiences/interests/personal activism work influence you're involved with campus activism?”

The next set of questions revolved around networking and the connections individuals made within school grounds. I specifically inquired about clubs/organizations, social actors including faculty/professors, and any other peer social groups which have potentially influenced their activism work. A separate question was then asked specifically about social media platforms, however, I have extended the meaning of ‘social media’ to include non-traditional forms only found on the SUNY New Paltz campus such as group chats, the ENGAGE platform, and YikYak. Having a separate question on social media was essential to the research conducted as previous literature demonstrates the vitality and importance social media platforms have on specifically student activists. Questions included: “Now, thinking about networks and other connections you may have developed, What kind of organizations/school communities do you belong to on campus, sanctioned or non-sanctioned, give details about your own experiences as

examples” and, “When it comes to social media, are there any specific platforms that have helped spread your activism efforts? How?”

The third set of questions highlights student activists' progress in their activism work and delves into how these potential connections within these communities affected their activism goals. To end each interview, I asked students to describe any drawbacks to specifically pursuing student activism in order to allow students to share concerns about limitations to their networking abilities and activist goals on campus grounds. Questions included “How have these connections with these organizations/social actors/impacted your own activism network and goals?” and “Concerning networking, are there any drawbacks to specifically pursuing activism within a school setting? If so, how and why?”

Results:

In order to analyze all transcriptions/data, a thematic analysis was used which had seven themes emerge from six interviews of student activists. Each theme represents similarities that all interviewees referenced in their answers. I have referred to each student according to number, and each number correlates to the transcriptions of the students I interviewed which I have provided on 6 separate documents. Below are themes outlined with various quotes from student activists to demonstrate the effects of networking within school communities:

Previous experiences with activism:

One activist described how their identity as a child of immigrant parents and coming from more ethnically diverse areas, specifically sought out communities that connected them culturally to the campus community. This drove Student 4 to join the Black Student Union, a well-known student organization that has a rich history of contributing to ending racial injustice, specifically towards Black students and faculty on campus. Another activist, student 1,

specifically described her identity as being a part of the 1.5 generation, the feeling of first-generation children who don't connect to their American and their ethnic backgrounds, which made her more inclined to join activism groups as they allowed her to be more open-minded and work with different individuals to find her passions.

Five of six activists also described being a part of activist organizations in their high schools, having a specific class or teacher inspire them to want to engage more in activism work coming to the SUNY New Paltz campus. Other Interviewees also expressed how their involvement in local organizations in their hometowns gave them access to understanding different social issues and inspired them to do similar work in college. Student 3 describes already being heavily involved in local politics and how influential that was in finding her passion at SUNY New Paltz:

“I was working on campaigns, like, I was with politics, like Junkie in high school, and I think someone who I worked on a campaign with said that the Westchester LGBTQ advisory board And if I would be interested in serving as the 1st youth person to have ever served on that committee and I was like, duh you know.”

Her first experiences with activism began with clubs and organizations in her high school community, which then led to her expanding her activist efforts toward her local community after connecting and interacting with individuals within these organizations. These passions ultimately guided her to pursue activism work upon arriving at the SUNY New Paltz campus. Similarly, student 2 also expressed how one of her classes in HS inspired her to engage in environmental justice work,

“ I had a teacher in high school that I was really close with and, um, she is like this fantastic advocate and she really inspired me to really use whatever platform I have

whenever privileges I have to just speak out and try to just make any sort of good change...I think that talking to her really um, changed a lot of my perspectives and pushed me toward activism.”

This particular interviewee describes how their activism work is largely surrounding environmental justice, and that her environmental science class and teachers introduced her to the horrors of climate change. Through these teachers and other connections, she was able to join a student activist group called Students for Peace and Survival, an organization that she describes as an “introduction to what I’ve done here”. These same sentiments were expressed by every other activist when they arrived at SUNY New Paltz, giving an ode to at least one particular professor or faculty member which inspired and influenced their decision to do activism work in college.

Classroom Environments and Professor Influence:

All interviewees mentioned courses and majors that inspired them to be a part of activist communities in school. Specific professors were also identified that helped them learn about different opportunities to be involved in activism. It's important to note, however, that the majority of these classes speaking or involving student activism are mainly liberal arts/humanities courses already focused on social justice issues, such as sociology, Black studies, and political science courses. Many of the interviewees agreed that liberal arts majors are more inclined to be a part of activist communities because their majors already identify with social justice work. Two interviewees, Students 5 and 6, expressed how specific classes and professors within their majors helped introduce them to internship opportunities that helped contribute to their individual activist efforts or introduced them to the organizations they belong to today:

“I got involved with NYPIRG through my fieldwork class. Anne Roschelle, she sent, like, a list of contacts and she was like, hey, like, if you haven't found anyone yet, like, reach out to these people and I reached out to Eric, who's the project coordinator, and set up an internship.”

Student 6 specifically describes her beginnings in activism work from taking this one course and her professor, who also happens to be chair of the Sociology department, which helped connect and secure an internship with the established and prominent advocacy group New York Public Institute of Research Group (NYPIRG). From here, she was able to become deeply involved in activism work within this group and work her way up to be on the board of directors, a position only achieved through voting during student elections and referrals.

Other instances included in-depth discussions with professors about issues on campus, providing them opportunities to be able to take part in these issues on campus, and helping inspire them to join clubs/organizations or be a part of campus events like panels, protests, etc. One interviewee, Student 3, describes taking a few sociology classes as an “eye-opening experience” which allowed them to see how she can take action against environmental issues and participate in local politics. Another activist, student 4, describes how Black studies courses introduced her to a network of professors that have a long-standing relationship with the Black Student Union (BSU). These professors have historically helped BSU plan, organize, and spread awareness regarding any events/initiatives being worked on:

“We go hand in hand and If we need help with something, they're always there to help us with any situation. If we need support there always get to back us out.”

“Professor Anthony Dandridge in the black studies department. Um, is very much like my guide for the vast majority of the advocacy work that I do here because. He is brilliant

in a lot of ways, but particularly in understanding power structures and who talks to who, and if you have a conversation with this person, it'll go to this person.”

Both of these students indicated that professors within Black Studies helped them achieve their activist efforts by providing resources and support that would not have been available to them had they not established their connections with this department. It's important to note that both of these students are Black studies majors and have taken a plethora of courses with these specific professors, Professor Dandrige and Professor/Chair McWilliams, already initiating a rapport and relationship with them. These professors specifically helped connect them to other faculty to put on events in addition to providing space to discuss important issues surrounding racial and gendered injustice at the SUNY New Paltz campus.

Professors also provide students opportunities to talk about their activism efforts and issues that matter to them in class, encouraging students to take local action by participating in student organizations and clubs. One activist, student 4, describes how a professor encouraged her to be a part of an activism panel earlier this semester,

“my, um, advisor, my old Advisor Anna Gjika. She was the 1 who told me about this in the activism panel. And without her, I probably wouldn't have known about it. I probably wouldn't have done it. They've played a part and who I am as a student who I am as the president. Maybe in an activist in general.”

Many of the interviewees expressed shared feelings of having support from faculty and networking within classroom spaces that have allowed them to expand their activism efforts and knowledge. Student 4 quoted above specifically describes instances where professors have provided support in understanding that “we're students also, so people don't understand that” and cites how “really, very helpful” professors are in planning and executing bigger

projects/events. This student also describes how the visibility of her activism work was made possible by the aid of faculty and networking within these spaces, providing her platforms to be able to express her activism efforts with BSU.

Clubs and organizations:

All students were a part of student clubs/organizations that are widely known on campus. Each discussed the positives/benefits of being in these organizations and how they've impacted their own activism efforts. All student activists describe how their activism efforts would not be accomplished without the breadth of networking they completed while in these organizations. Students reported that being a part of their respective organizations brought up issues and motivation to work on bigger projects and attend events related to their individual interests and activism goals. Student 4 talks about being able to "have a seat at the table" when no seats were previously given to her. While she describes being a more introverted person, being the president of a highly established school organization, BSU, has allowed her to speak up on issues that matter to her the most, an inspiring feeling all other students reported feeling as well. Student 3 also brings up sentiments describing how she doesn't feel like she would be able to achieve her goals as an activist had it not been for the connections she made:

"Menstrual product initiative 'cause it's like, fresh in my mind. Uh, I think if we didn't make the connections that we made this year, the project would have been pushed off another year."

This student activist describes how the menstrual product initiative was something previous members of the Student Senate were trying to pursue, however, boxes of tampons were left sitting in the office indicating the initiative never went live. The project was thus completed through a domino effect: through student 3's position in student government, she was able to get

in contact with other individuals that also were interested in spearheading this project. After speaking with people in Student Union building management, she was able to bring this project to residence halls and the Center for student engagement, bringing together a total of five student groups with the ability to distribute hundreds of free menstrual products to the SUNY New Paltz population.

Many of the students interviewed are also a part of more than one student club/organization, allowing easy access and flow of information from other student activist organizations. One interviewee, student 2, describes being a part of all three major environmental organizations at SUNY New Paltz, each well-known and having a deep and rich history in environmental activism. She describes,

“ I believe I'm the only person that's involved in all 3 major environmental organizations on campus, at least in the capacity that I am. And. It's been very useful to be able to like it. Work together and we can Co, sponsor things because I'm aware of like what each individual organization is up to so if we're doing something with sustainability ambassadors and eco allies is doing something similar. Well, maybe that's an opportunity for us to, like, do 1 big thing together. Um, and vice versa, like, if something is already deeply underway with 1 organization.”

This student's ability to network with these three major organizations has allowed her to expand and contribute to activism through co-sponsorships (meaning helping raise awareness for events by combining members to help put together the event) and increasing student bodies attending these events. This same student describes how activism works in numbers, and the more exposure/people that are at these events, the more inspired they feel to become involved.

Furthermore, many student activists describe using their networks from other classes/organizations to help fulfill leadership positions and contribute to their respective causes. One interviewee, student 3, specifically described leveraging their network by being involved in the Resident Hall Student Association as an RA, filling up school senate seats after reaching out to them about opportunities to be a part of:

“ I make an announcement at every single meeting [at RHSA] about what positions are empty and what we're doing and easily half or more than half of my senators. I'd like, stole from hall government.”

Another interviewee, student 2, expressed similar sentiments, describing,

“Um, and then also there are 2 E board members the semester that we got because of Andrea Vargas's class. It was really fantastic and she was kind enough to allow me to promote Environmental Alliance whenever I wanted.”

These connections not only expanded their personal networks but also the organization's activist network. Both interviewees indicated that having more people work alongside them in their respective organizations allows them to pursue bigger projects and activist efforts through the support of their growing connections. These two individuals also expressed how they act as networks themselves, connecting their fellow activists to other organizations and clubs they are familiar with, as well as connecting their members with other student leaders of the organizations they belong to. Student 3 details how her position on the student senate has allowed her to connect and interact with representatives of different organizations because they serve on the senate board with her:

“If I have a student, who comes into the office and say that there's a need for this club or that club, and, like, the club already exists and my senators are a part of it I'll connect them to 1 of the senators”

Students will often come to her to vent and express certain needs on campus, and she is able to act as a liaison between her senators on top of connecting students to appropriate faculty members. These connections allow other students to understand the breadth of networks to tap into in order to pursue their own interests and activism works. Student 3 also describes how being a part of this student senate allowed her to see how connected faculty is with Student issues, and the push to raise these issues to faculty in order to seek solutions to long-term problems expressed:

“And so that disconnect that we feel is obviously very upsetting for us. But I think a lot of students would be surprised to know that it is equally, if not more frustrating for administrators who do care and are interested in what we have to say... I didn't believe this until I joined student government, but, but the interest of students and faculty and staff and administration are often more aligned than disconnected.”

Many other student activists also expressed this sentiment: students run our institution and ultimately our needs should be heard and seen. Connecting students to appropriate faculty within our institution that specialize in these specific areas will lead to the visibility of said issues and therefore viable solutions tailored to students' needs that haven't been addressed before. This student particularly wants to highlight these ongoing issues, and she reports many leave her office feeling satisfied and heard after being connected to individuals that can provide.

The ability to network with off-campus organizations was also made possible through connections with student organizations and clubs. Student 5 specifically describes working with

local politicians and community organizations dedicated to helping the housing crisis in the Hudson Valley by allowing them to come table at different campus-sponsored events or participate in panels as speakers and organizers:

“ We had all the local politicians so we had Michelle Hinchey, Jen Metzger, and Pat Ryan, who’s in Congress, Michelle... students being able to get their merchandise just being able to hear and listen to them that was outside of the sub. And that was again a great way to try to garner students' votes to just make them aware of that, like, on the ballot it's more than that, It's more than just like these abstract people like, they are coming to our campus and really trying to talk about it.”

Connecting students to local government allows them to participate in civic action such as voting, and support important social issues that reflect liberal, activist goals. This same student also describes how one of their fellow members is interning in Albany and working with local state-level politicians. Being a part of New Paltz College Democrats, an organization centered on democratic issues and campaigns, they are able to take any events and issues they are working on and bring them directly to politicians to respond, encouraging them to take local action. Student 1 additionally describes how networking with other organizations allows them to intertwine other activist goals with her organization to other organizations:

“And NYPIRG works, like, I don't want to see a strict structure, but we have an agenda because we are, we are like. A larger organization that works, like, throughout the entire state, and it's been cool working with Take Back the Night to figure out how we can apply, like, you know. Um, like, domestic abuse awareness to those, um, like things, so that's been cool.”

As described by two other activists who belong to NYPIRG as well, all three described how NYPIRG works by curating activist agendas that outline predetermined goals to pursue decided at the beginning of the school year. The ability to network and interact with other organizations on campus allowed this student to see how intersectional activism work truly is, combining efforts to work towards bigger activist goals that span across multiple organizations on campus. Another student interviewee describes how the use of networking within clubs and organizations in such a small, campus community allows for easy access to information and the ability to spread awareness for their activist goals. Many students felt inspired to vote and learn more about issues being discussed by attending such events according to the students themselves.

Two of the interviewees, Students 2 and 3, also indicated that even within their own organizations, many individuals reach out to them to learn more and engage in other activist initiatives on campus. Both activists found that their members are constantly looking for ways to network and learn more about the communities they're engaging with within their respective organizations.

Online communities:

All activists described using traditional social media platforms, such as Instagram, coupled with school-based online communities such as Engage, and YikYak. Engage is a communication tool that is used by students to discover clubs and student organizations listing events, contact information, and club information (i.e. meeting days/times, synopsis of the club, etc.). Instagram is a picture/video-based platform where students have the ability to share club photos, videos, and event fliers. Yik Yak is an online discussion-based platform only available to SUNY New Paltz students where you can create discussion threads based on posts made anonymously.

Many described Engage as a tool used to help spread not only their club's events and membership details, but also how they discovered activism work themselves. Student 5 described how she was perusing through Engage to find activist clubs that aligned with her goals and passions of democratic values and happened to stumble upon New Paltz Democrats in the Spring of 2021. After finding them through Engage, She was enticed to join after discovering their Instagram account soon after, describing how they were “really active” that particular semester, but that none of her classes had mentioned the organization itself before. Student activist 2 also describes how they became involved their freshman year with New Paltz’s ‘Environmental Alliance’, a school-sanctioned club dedicated to climate justice and action, after viewing a social media post via Instagram describing meeting dates and times. Through this one connection, she was also able to meet individuals that introduced her to the sustainability ambassador program on campus where she then applied and accepted. Student 2 was in this program for the next three years of her college career where she engages students and the wider campus community in sustainable projects/initiatives, centering her studies around environmental advocacy work.

All activists described using the social media platform, Instagram, to some capacity. Student 5 described using Instagram’s Direct Message (DM) feature (where individuals can immediately contact others through messaging their accounts) to recruit potential students to join their organization successfully:

“Old President Dan, would literally DM people who follow the account and say, hey, we're having a meeting Wednesday, you should really come. And it worked, but it also didn't work with some people.”

This individual commented particularly on how it was the organization’s drive, coupled with utilizing Instagram’s DM feature that made recruitment successful, on top of in-person

recruitment tactics i.e. going up to potential club members during other club meetings, using their friends to join their organization, etc. This student also points out that through using this DM feature, she was able to recruit individuals for events their organization was hosting such as tabling and any other volunteer work they were engaged with. Although this organization specifically used Instagram for a more grassroots method of mobilization and organizing, three other activists expressed that they mainly use Instagram to help spread awareness for their organizations and to share their activism efforts. Student 1 commented,

“We've been using it to highlight more of the. Like, NYPIRG students, like people, like the students who are in NYPIRG more, then. Um, just posting, like, making a post and having, like, we're having a workshop this day and this day, like, using the faces of NYPIRG students to, um. Actually, spread awareness on our issues.”

Other students agreed that engagement on posts increased when they showed the faces of the actual students doing activist/civic work. Student 5 cites doing Instagram Takeovers, where members would have the account for a day and post content related to their club/organization. Engagement increases significantly when showcasing the work and pictures/videos of actual members participating in activism work. Student 2 commented how they feel this is because it allows students to resonate and see how people within their age group can be a part of the activism work they're doing. Two activists, Students 2 and 4, specifically described how there can be somewhat of a disconnect between doing activism work online as it seems 'performative', however having infographics, linking petitions, among other 'call to actions' allows people to have access to resources that enable social change.

Two students, students 3 and 2, also described how social media was used directly to support their efforts and perform activism online by spreading the word about their respective

initiatives. Student activist 3 describes how they posted via YikYak and helped hundreds of students become aware of the availability of free menstrual products in the Student Union.

Another activist described how in her organization NYPIRG, they would carry out,

“social media campaigns where we're all, like, tweet at an official or whatever and, like, just spam them with hashtags of important, like, causes that we care about. And that has proven to be really effective. We also... call their offices a lot and we will share on Instagram and such to like, for everybody to go make those calls. Numbers matter when it comes to, like, that sort of thing, especially when it's on, like, a state or local level.”

This same individual describes how everyone in our generation uses social media to some capacity, and that it's progress to see people being informed about issues they may not have had access to before. As demonstrated, using these online tools has allowed these activists to expand their efforts beyond in-person events

COVID-19 effects:

All activists described how COVID-19 hindered their organization's ability to recruit and keep momentum for their respective causes. It's important to note that two of the six interviewees were introduced to their organizations after COVID had occurred, around 2021-2022, yet they still felt and commented on the effects COVID had on participation in their organizations.

Student 5 describes how,

“And everyone kind of like, especially we're all from the year that came in Fall 2020 so... I think this class particularly like thought you had to figure everything out on your own and didn't know about these networks and connections like you could have with professors. So we've kind of just been like, trying to figure it out and this semester. I think we're all finally, like, we have these amazing resources. We can use that.”

This student also describes how their organization, New Paltz College Democrats, was trying to understand how they fit into the wider campus community and how to assert their presence after COVID struck in 2020. One way they attempted to do this was to be involved in collaborative club events with other established organizations on campus, such as attending and participating in an Earth Day event, a commemorative holiday for our planet many SUNY New Paltz students look forward to celebrating. She also describes how they're building 'confidence' to connect with other campus organizations that share similar platforms and work on the same causes as they are.

All activists describe similar sentiments, how coming into a post-COVID school environment hindered their ability to connect and seek out opportunities related to their passions. COVID-19 dismembered many clubs which were then inactive, and students were left having to rebuild the community and work on outreach to their fellow peers. Student 3 described how,

“we're climbing out of the COVID pole... I agree and I feel in general, this is something that I like struggle with. I mean, no institution is without its flaws. And I feel like the student association has really, for whatever reason, lost the trust of the students and we have a hard time getting like, the required number of votes for elections. We have a hard time, just getting people interested.”

Prior to COVID-19, the Student Senate was an extremely active and well-known presence on campus with senate seats filled up to capacity, 32 senators representing 7000+ students on campus. After COVID hit campus, she was only able to fill up 15 of the 32 available seats. This student also reports how many ask her in general what the Student Association is, and how frustrating it can be to understand how disconnected the student population is from the work they are doing. She specifically describes how the student senate is “there to serve”, something other

student organizations are relaying to their communities and fellow peers. All of these students described their dedication to helping their community in understanding activism can be achieved through different avenues, it's just more so about accessing these networks that allow students to comprehend in what ways they can contribute to activism on campus. While many organizations are gaining membership, all activists agreed their organizations are nowhere near as prominent as they once were prior to the pandemic of 2020.

Alumni relations:

Alumni networks were also mentioned in three of the six activist interviews. Many described how Alumni either provided insight into problems and roadblocks they are facing when it comes to pursuing activism on campus, while others offered them advice and connections to different organizations. Student 4 describes,

“Recently, I was spoken to someone who graduated from 2013, and he was just telling me how to maneuver my ways on campus... he said if, if there's some, if they're doing something that we don't necessarily agree with spread the word get everybody. Let everybody hear what they're doing and just make a protest. So just conversation's like that, it's really inspiring because you just feel like, you just feel defeated sometimes.”

This student specifically sought advice and ways to mitigate issues with pushback from the administration, reminding her that students have the power and right to demand their needs. Many of the other activists interviewed also agreed that it becomes difficult to be involved on campus when you feel as if no space is provided to work on these issues. However, many expressed that ‘you yourself have to create spaces for problems to be addressed’. Inspiration and being able to discuss these issues openly is a key aspect for activists to be able to feel as if they have the power to change these social issues. Student activist 5 describes how one of the alumni

they're connected to helped establish a relationship with the off-campus organization, For the Many. This particular alumnus works within the organization For the Many, which focuses on the same issues as the New Paltz College Democrats, the club they were previously involved with on campus:

“With my connection, so, as I mentioned, Dan, he was our old president so he works for the many, and he also was working on Sarahanas campaign. So, through ties that we've made individually, we've been able to get politicians to come out. We've been able to interact with these other clubs and organizations.”

This student emphasizes that these off-campus connections would not be made possible without the close connections of their former president, Dan. Dan is thus able to connect two existing, local organizations focusing on similar issues and values, being able to build this club's community and expand its network overall.

Shortcomings of School Activism/School Bureaucracy:

Four of six interviewees reported that while they felt that school activism does positively impact their work as activists, many also pinpointed issues and limitations to doing activism work at school. One interviewee, student 2, discussed how they felt Campus activism isn't effective for the wider community beyond school grounds, and that many individuals felt unable or unwilling to attend activist protests/events because of the perception that these issues only affect college students. This individual particularly makes a note that campus activism happens after class/school time, usually a time when people are home and not able to participate due to other engagements such as family time or being away from campus altogether. Student 2 also points out, however, that having such a 'close-knit community' like our small campus of SUNY

New Paltz, does aid in spreading awareness and information around, even to fellow professors/faculty.

Student 5 also described how they felt issues with bureaucracy, describing how difficult it was to receive adequate funding for their organization and being forced to work around the school's schedule in order to not 'disrupt campus events'. She says,

“So being at the will of the school, what the school is putting on and what the school is functioning, and just like when other events are happening, having to be so cognizant of that has really made it difficult, because we just can't take this to the streets and do something.”

This individual also points out that in order to have events for the school/campus community, organizations are forced to book school-sanctioned spaces such as rooms in the Student Union or Classrooms, and requests can potentially be denied due to other events happening at the same time. The school will also prioritize bigger events than the endeavors of student activists, forcing students to find ways to work around these obstacles by moving efforts off-campus. Furthermore, other students interviewed described how funding was difficult to comprehend considering that certain clubs/organizations' funds were cut as the school forced merges with specific organizations. This in turn makes it difficult to maintain and plan due to limited financial aid and the inability to get certain equipment needed to host events. Students are thus forced to take on an “extra burden” when student activists just simply want to “show up and talk to students” openly about these issues.

Lastly, two of six student activists brought up issues with the administration being frustrating to work with and feelings of apathy when it comes to hearing student concerns. Student activist 4 quotes,

“There are certain things, for example, the slave owner plaques near... peregrine dining hall, It's like as a student, and as activist as, like. Why do you do this? ... You know, the reaction that you're going to get, we've dealt with this in 2019, why would you still want to deal with it in 2023 when its the same thing? And that, you know, that is wrong. But also as like, the administration point of view when we were speaking to them about it, they're like, this project has been in the works and we can't just take it out.”

This student expressed how ultimately difficult it is to have the administration act on issues that have repeatedly caused students to feel distrust and indifference towards the school community. One of the Black Student Union's (BSU) primary initiatives they have been working on throughout the years is to raise awareness that slave owners are still celebrated in school buildings and benches on campus. While BSU has successfully removed slave owner names on a majority of dorm buildings and received national recognition for such efforts, there are still remnants of slave owner plaques on school benches and other pockets of the school grounds. Student 4 maintains there seems to be a consistent disconnect between performative action and sustainable action meant to withstand generations of racial trauma and discrimination experienced by students of color. Many student activists interviewed also touched upon these dividing sentiments between students and administration, explaining how they felt as if the school has its own personal agenda separate from the needs of students.

Discussion:

As demonstrated, findings supported that networking positively influences student activists' abilities to pursue their activism efforts and is overall aligned with the literature reviewed. There were several networking opportunities students identified throughout their time in the New Paltz campus which contributed to their activism journey and how they became

involved today. Students identified specific professors or faculty members that have greatly contributed to their efforts by connecting them to specific organizations or other social actors to help pursue their activism goals. Alumni were also documented as motivating factors and networking opportunities for current students to become more involved on campus. Interviewees also indicated classroom environments gave both inspiration and opportunity for students to connect with peers regarding social justice issues prompting them to join activist communities on campus. Silva (2018) also describes employing decolonial pedagogy which seeks to utilize education “as a tool for empowerment and confronting injustice” (2). Many professors apply a similar teaching method in humanities-based courses within SUNY New Paltz’s community, creating space to “raise awareness on social issues, differential power, and how to work collectively to facilitate change” (2).

All students interviewed identified being in activist groups well-known on campus primarily focusing on environmental justice, political organizing, and racial justice. Cocircular involvement while in college, whether volunteering or engaging in clubs specifically, positively impacts a student's ability to cultivate civic outcomes (Troilan & Barnhardt 2017). Students identified how their clubs/student organizations were key to facilitating activism work and providing communities that supported their respective causes. Similar to how the LatinX community of MSU created the ‘grapes protest’ in support of Cesar Chavez’s unionizing efforts (Santa-Ramierz 2021: 7), all students attested that their activist networks allowed them to work on bigger projects and attend events (protests, walkouts, etc.) which pertained to their individual interests and activist goals. One prominent issue discussed by interviewees was the inability to avoid bureaucratic-related problems such as receiving adequate funding, administrative pushback on specific student demands, and the inability of school activism to reach communities beyond

school grounds. COVID-19 also proved to be another issue that all organizations and student activists described as hindering their ability to network and engage the campus community in activism overall. While no solution was proposed for these persistent difficulties, many described being able to make due with their platforms and resources at hand while indicating that their activist efforts were still effective in reaching their intended audiences. Clubs and organizations thus prove to provide spaces in which social issues can be discussed and resolutions can be found amongst each other.

Online platforms and communities were also expressed as an important tool that student activists used to be a part of their activist communities and/or helped recruit for their organizations. Social media, in general, was also used by activists to successfully mobilize and organize students for political protest/other activist efforts (Milkman 2016). As demonstrated, social media is a multidisciplinary tool that is “used to communicate social issues” (Bunch and Cianfrone 2022: 22). Some interviewees also expressed concern for slacktivism which critics refer to as activism restricted to online efforts only resulting in little to no drastic change (Bunch and Cianfrone 2022: 24). However, student interviewees described how online platforms and communities were overall used to help spread awareness of their work within their organizations via posts on Instagram specifically. Other SUNY New Paltz-specific platforms, such as Yik Yak and Engage, were used by three student activists to help expand their networks and participate in their organizations via joining executive board positions or increasing membership. Overall, increasing students in their organizations helped to overall expand activism efforts and awareness of important social issues such as climate change or the housing crisis in the Hudson Valley.

All interviewees indicated that networking inspires and encourages participation in campus organizing in ways that would not be possible without the help of the networks and organizations they are a part of. Each interviewee described that community, a key part of networking, is what motivates them to continue their efforts knowing they are making a difference in some way and love contributing/connecting to students who share the same struggles.

Conclusion and Next Steps:

Networking within school communities positively influences student activism and is proven vital to student activists' work. As shown through these six interviews, all interviewees described their positive experiences utilizing their networks in order to engage in activism work at SUNY New Paltz. It's important to note that three of the six students interviewed were a part of the same organization, potentially skewing findings as they talked relatively about the same networks they tapped into and similar experiences. Further research needs to be conducted regarding other activist organizations on campus. All interviewees were also women, which is not reflective of the student body of New Paltz students and many already have established relationships with me as the interviewer, potentially skewing their answers. Researchers should look to expand their interview network to be inclusive of all genders and to accurately reflect the demographic populations of SUNY New Paltz, as approximately one-third of the population is male compared to two-thirds being female (SUNY New Paltz Demographics & Diversity Report, 2023). Future studies should also, in general, expand the demographic makeup of students to include more LGBTQ+ representation and People of color as these individuals have historically been heavily involved in activist efforts. This study is also limited in the sense that is restricted to just the New Paltz campus community, an already heavily influenced population that leans more

towards liberal ideologies and thinking from both faculty and students. In order to find concrete, conclusive results of how networking impacts school activist communities, future studies should include universities and schools nationwide in order to understand the bigger scope of these issues especially those whose campuses aren't as liberal learning. Furthermore, expanding and narrowing down interview questions will help to delve deeper into networking opportunities and communities students utilize for their activism endeavors.

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