Sustaining and Mobilizing Social Movement Groups on Campus:

A Look into Persuasion on College Campuses

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Activism on college campuses is nothing new, and in fact is often times encouraged. Activism can be defined as “The active participation of individuals in group behavior of creating change-- in attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and or symbols,” (Barnett et al., 2008). College is a great place to breed activism with many unique voices living together on one campus. People come from all over with ideas they have had, with common goals as the groups they find a home with. Even the colleges they attend create the most motivation for change, (Saklad, 2018). Unfortunately, a student is only at institution for so long and their great ideas can get lost once they move on. While new students can bring in new ideas, strong leaders may be gone. This instills the importance of bringing up new members and making them into strong leaders and continuing that process every year. While this may be easier said than done, it brings up the point of how these groups reach new incoming students, getting them to join the movement and continuing change every year. Our study focuses on what tactics social movement groups on campus use to entice individuals to join their mission and in what ways they mobilize. To answer these questions, it was best to get input from students of the University of Nebraska Omaha and compare their answers to previous research findings.

**Review of Literature**

Although the focus of this paper is social movements on college campuses, it’s important to find a widespread of sources that help support that demographic and look at other areas affected. According to an article from the *Humanist*, the #MeToo movement picked up and started after Donald Trump, now the U.S. President, had a tape of him bragging about groping and kissing women without their full consent. There were also allegations against physicist and professor, Lawrence Krauss, who was a feature of a Buzzfeed article last year. As this story surfaced Facebook and viewers got to voice their opinion, Krauss was disciplined, and consequences followed even though he denied the allegations of sexual assault. More examples of this abuse are figures such as Harvey Weinstein and Matt Lauer (Marcotte, 2018). Once these celebrities got exposed, it gave women the courage to speak out on their own unfortunate experiences, on social media platforms like Twitter. The textbook, *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining*, discusses how Twitter and other newer media are “important mediums for influence” and Twitter has “transformed the political landscape” (Gass & Seiter, 2016, pp. 5-6).  Assaulters who commit these acts typically do not have much respect towards women and can be seen as misogynist. As a result, feminist activists and female rights organizations have spurred on college campuses.

In a recent article from TIME magazine, it focused on the trend of campus protests; more specifically, at historic black colleges (Rhodan, 2018). One of the focuses puts President Trump on blast yet again for affecting these movements, being one of the roots of people’s displeasure. The article says that freshman enrollment has jumped 40 percent at historically black colleges and universities, according to Marybeth Gasman, who is the director of the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. A couple colleges mentioned in this article are Spelman College (Atlanta) and Howard University (Washington D.C.) both historically black. Also, President Trump’s exit polls held only 8 percent of the African-American vote in 2016. Mary Schmidt Campbell, president of Spelman College said, “Activism is an extremely important part of what your life here at Spelman should be. I think of protest as a way of shining a light on things that perhaps need to be enlightened that we wouldn’t know about” (Rhodan, 2018, p.61).

From an article of the *Human Life Review,* a Gallup poll from 1996 showed that 47 percent of women said that they were pro-life at the start of college, but 73 percent were pro-choice by the time they graduated (Jalsevac, 2010). Now although this is two decades old, it is still a staggering difference and interesting how their opinions and values changed that much. Students for Life of America is now one of the most successful pro-life organizations in the U.S. (Jalsevac, 2010). The SFLA executive director Kristan Hawkins was interviewed, and she talked about how the momentum is on the pro-life side, and how you can use internet to your advantage when seeking support of social movement groups on campus, but it’s more important to do things in person and connecting with other students face-to-face, instead of just through a screen (p. 106).

Chapter 6 of the same textbook mentioned before, *Persuasion: Social Influence and Compliance Gaining* is all about Conformity and Influence in Groups. Social impact theory is relevant to this research topic. *SIT* says that whoever is added to a group first tends to have the most influence. So social movement on campus, whoever is the president or one of the founding members, they are usually the ones to make big decisions and lead others to agree with them. Informative influence is all about conforming to a group that has the same values and beliefs as us. We are more likely to join a group that we agree with. Another phrase is normative influence, which means that we join a group or beliefs in order to get rewards, such as being liked by others. (Gass & Seiter, pp. 124-125). These two types of influence are alive and well on college campuses; whether it be for a sorority/fraternity, religious, or other social movements, different strategies are available that speakers should take advantage of.

An article stated that “student activism exemplifies acts of persuasion to achieve compliance gaining, (Barnett et al., 2008). Gass and Seiter layout the definition of compliance gaining in chapter 11: “research examining compliance gaining generally focuses on persuasion aimed at getting others to do something or to act in a particular way, (2014, p. 238). Compliance gaining happens in a more interpersonal context, rather than a one-to-many. When students participate in activism, they are trying to influence administrators to comply with requests. To achieve compliance gaining, activists would likely use promoting liking, getting them to like you before making your requests for a better chance of compliance. Or they could use generating moral obligation by trying to make them feel immoral by not complying, (Gass and Seiter, 2014, p. 240). Back to the article, they emphasize using upward influence, which is trying to influence someone higher in the hierarchy of authority, (Barnett et al., 2008). Another emphasis is planning, defined as “predetermination of a course of action aimed at achieving some goal, (Barnett et al., 2008). The ultimate goal was to answer our research question.

**Method**

**Participants.** People participated in the survey at random. Participants had to have internet access and be presently or previously involved in astudent organization, such as Mavericks Students for Life, Student Government, Network for Disability Awareness, Women’s Resource Center, and Allies for Sign Language, and more. Participants also had to be 18-years or older. The other participant was Dr. Barbara Pickering, who has taught a class herself on social movements, graciously volunteered her time to be interviewed by us for a professionals input on our research.

**Procedures.** To conduct the survey a form was created on Google Forms.Our group looked up student organizations under activism in the student organization database, Engage, and chose groups to send our survey to. We used qualitative questions to capture information on the activism and experience of each participant. There were four open-ended questions and one multiple choice question. These surveys were sent out online, through email and links on our team’s social media pages. Once participants began to fill them out, we were able to see the results. The participates were also able to choose how much information they preferred to give us. These survey responses were then able to be accessed by our group through Google Forms, and we could then group them by organization. The survey started out by asking each respondent what social activist group they belonged to and followed up with why they chose to join.  We then asked some more in-depth questions, such as positive and negatives about social movement groups, and how they use persuasion to grow and continue. The respondents were also asked to leave their email and were sent a copy of their own response. After these surveys were completed we gathered the results onto our Google Doc and analyzed the data from them to determine the results.

**Measurement.** The measurement used in this study was comparing and contrasting. Through this method of measurement, we compared and contrasted the answers that were received by the participants. Like answers were grouped together to find patterns. Whereas, answers that did not fit into any established category were analyzed individually.

**Data Analysis.** From our interview with Dr. Pickering, the data we found concludes that joining social movement groups is good for students, for reasons like the benefit of being involved on campus. These issues might relate to campus, but they also go beyond campus, and having people take interest in the issue is important for the social movement group to survive. People choose to join for many reasons according to Dr. Pickering, such as friends, the issue is of relevance to them, or they just want to belong. Unfortunately, with being a part of a social movement, campus members also have the chance to see backlash, depending on the actions of the groups, they also risk triggering oppositions from those who disagree. However, these groups have done a great job of bringing issues to light to the students they share this campus with. With help from faculty members, and members form the Community Engagement Center. Dr. Pickering stated that there are many students willing to participate, they just need to find these groups and people to talk to. As long as groups stay in the context of free speech, all these groups belong on campus and should be utilized. For groups to entice members to join, she sees them putting up posters around campus, and making displays in the student center, being a part of the student organization fair, as well as personal conversation with students. If someone is a part of one of these groups and wants more members, look at items such as shirts and laptop stickers to see if they would be interested and start engaging with them. Her advice is to not just worry about prevalent issues throughout the year, but also worry about recruiting new members and building up new, strong leaders.

**Results**

From the data we found, we know that there is more activism now than in the past on college campuses. School activism on campus started in the 1920’s and climaxed during the Great Depression, but now is on the rise more than ever before. In fact, according to a UCLA study, nearly 1 in 10 people will be a part of a protest at some point in college, (Smith, 2017). We found that students were not joining religious social groups either, as students joining religious groups continues to fall nationally. The national average of students identifying to a certain religious group has dropped drastically over the last 30 years. Students are more apt to find social issues that they truly believe need to be improved such as: racism, sexual assault, gender inequality, ageism and classism, just to name a few.  With the recent surge in social movements students have made no room for injustice or inequality. They are no longer sticking to posting to their social media, they are gathering and mobilizing. Poster Making, sending postcards, volunteering on local campaigns, calling their local representatives, joining political parties on and off-campus. College students are taking a stand and making their voices heard. When interviewing our expert, she found it hard to pinpoint impacts that students have made, so it is necessary to question how students entice people to join and understand them. In the long run, they will have more voices and a better chance of administrators listening to them. When students take action, they can enact change, (Smith, 2018). According to Dr. Pickering and other sources, the problem is not that these issues are not getting tackled, but that there will be strong activism for two to three years, and then strong leaders leave, and the issue goes cold for a few years, (Sakland, 2018).

**Discussion**

**Interpretation of results.** After analyzing the data from our survey, interviewing credible professors and gathering multiple sources related to student activism, we determined that student activism is a major topic for discussion on college campuses. Also, now more than ever, students are getting involved with a variety of different social movements that are allowing them to have a voice on their campus and in their community. Which is important because students need to exercise their right to free speech.  Overall, we were satisfied of hitting the minimum of 25 participants of the research and had good outside sources to back-up information.

**Strengths and weaknesses.** One strength from the study was that we had a focus of college students on a college campus. Another would be that our topic was of relevance, being all about social movements and how students get involved with their campus. This was a way for leaders to explain their stance and how they grow their following. One weakness was that we did not get as much feedback as we were hoping for, with under 30 total survey takers. In addition, we did not include age, race, gender, etc. in the details of the survey; that weakness alone was the one that stood out most to us. A further weakness was that there could be some bias in the responses to our questions to make the representatives look good. They could have not been totally truthful in their tactics to get new members to join the groups.

**Implications and applications.** The implication that can be drawn from this study is that social movements, along with student activism are vital to college life. These groups give students a sense of belonging and purpose, not only on their college campuses, but to their community at large. These results can not only be applied to helping convince students across all campuses to join social movement groups, but any student organization on their campus. It can also be applied as a warning for those that are seeking to join these types of organizations in the future, because students will be wary of the negatives that can come from these groups such as, brainwashing, hazing, practice groupthink, and seek ulterior motives.

**Future research directions.** Although there is a significant amount of research that pertains to social movement groups directly, we feel that there needs to be more research on this topic that deals directly with college campuses. Social movements will always be present, and they are especially important around the college ages 18-24 because it shapes our views and instinctive ways at an early stage of our lives. Two research questions that could still be asked are, “How will ensuing politics and public affairs affect the ways in which leaders go about recruiting members?” and “What role do social movement groups play in the educational environment?” These questions are essential to this topic because politics interfere with how we behave and make decisions when others are present. The other question is relevant because we focused on social movements in a school setting; it’s important to think about how these groups act in the classroom and around teachers, opposed to it just being on the street downtown.

Our study focused on what tactics social movement groups on campus use to entice individuals to join their mission and in what ways they mobilize. From the data we found, we know that there is more activism now than in the past on college campuses. Students find issues that they truly believe need to be improved such as: racism, sexual assault, gender inequality, ageism and classism, and many more. Students are no longer sticking to posting to their social media, they are gathering and mobilizing. Poster Making, sending postcards, volunteering on local campaigns, calling their local representatives, joining political parties on and off-campus. College students are taking a stand and making their voices heard.

**Appendices**

**Survey questions sent out in the Google Form survey to campus social movement groups:**

1. What social movement group do you belong to on campus?
2. What motivated you to join this group?
   1. Friends
   2. Wanted a voice
   3. To make an impact
   4. Your ideals matched this group
3. What are the negatives and positives that come with joining a social movement group on a college campus?
4. How does your group entice others to join or tactics that they use to recruit new members?
5. How does your social movement group maintain itself in terms of leadership and its mission as time goes on?

**Questions asked during the interview with Dr. Barbara Pickering:**

1. Why do individuals join social movement groups?
2. Do you think it is important for students to get involved in these groups on campus?
3. Are there any risks that come with joining social movement groups?
4. As a member of this University, how have you seen these organizations impact the community?
5. In your opinion, what resources could these groups find useful to continue to grow?
6. If any what social movement group do you believe should be added to UNO, and why or why not?
7. Are there any groups that you think are not healthy to have on campus, and why or why not?
8. How do you see groups entice others to join them?
9. What advice would you give to these groups in terms of mobilizing and sustaining themselves as their leaders graduate and move on?

**Tables**

Figure 1. Participants answered a multiple-choice question as to why they were motivated to join a social movement group on campus.

Table 1. Lists the names of the social movement groups that participants belong or belonged to.

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