

Activism and Rhetoric

Theories and Contexts for Political Engagement

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18 Reclaiming Activism for Students

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Author's note: The following narrative was written by my undergraduate self. The self that was just beginning to understand activism; the self who received a liberal arts education in a private university responsive to student, faculty, and staff needs. Looking back on this piece, my undergraduate self seems a bit naïve, clearly unversed in the critical theory I have since learned in graduate study, and unaware of the realities faced at other institutions or by other, less privileged, activists. Since writing this essay, I have had the experience of watching the restructuring of a public "Research I" institution at the expense of the liberal arts, first-hand supported a failed union strike, and watched tear gas employed on protesters at the 2008 Republican National Convention. I also face the reality of being part of a growing contingent academic labor force, and recognizing the limits to being able to publish, speak, and teach about what I believe to be important and what I know will better position me for the job market (if I have time to write and speak at all). Needless to say, the narrative about being an activist rhetorician I would write today would sound much different.

At the same time, I am proud to let my undergraduate self have a voice here because so often I think that we (as wizened academics/faculty) forget that our undergraduates do not come to us as ready-made activists, yet we hold them to a standard of what it means to be "active" that they do not understand or cannot meet. Worse yet, we might place the burden of activism on to undergraduates without acknowledging that they cannot (and probably should not) model themselves after the images of "student activism" inherited from the 1960s (Kauffman). I hope my narrative serves as a reminder that, as educators, we might need to set aside our own assumptions and ideals, and begin first with the practices already present within our undergraduate population—cultivating from there. Although my activist self has developed with education and experience, it still values the ideals and forms of activism acknowledged here and appreciates that we all begin our activist journeys in different locations.

I have a problem with student activism—or at least how the term is usually defined and applied. Popular use of the term—especially for *student* activism—connotes protest, confrontation, and revolution. However, this definition is too limiting, too daunting, and inaccurate for today's activism. If protest is the

dominant criteria for "activism," then most activists will not gain recognition for their efforts. The stakes are higher for student activists whose actions seemingly "do not count" if it is not protest. Without evidence of a protest, the public concludes that students *are* apathetic and that activism does not exist. For me, activism includes direct action, community service, and education—all activities that work outside traditional institutions to change the status quo. Activism also includes communication for and about those actions: to acknowledge what work has been done and to motivate continued action. This is where I take up a role as an activist myself.

For me, my activism is precisely rooted in discourse and changing the ways that activism is recognized and conceptualized. I advocate for other student activists, and I wield the power of a rhetorical activist in creating and promoting the discursive conditions that make other forms of activism possible. Ideal discursive conditions that empower and promote student activism come from recognizing the forms of activism students are actually engaged in and to combat the discourse that assumes all students are apathetic. There is power in discourse and power in communication; it is in struggling with definitions and being unsatisfied with assumed norms that communication turns into activism itself.

Before I explain this further, I should offer this disclaimer: I have not been part of mass protests, nor attended sit-ins on my campus, nor been part of any "illegal" acts of civil disobedience. If we go by dictionary definitions or descriptions in popular media, this does not make me an activist. However, I *do* consider myself an activist, and I consider the many students on my own campus who engage in acts that change the status quo (without violence and protest) activists as well. Protest is just not done at my campus, but this does not mean that students here are apathetic—although *apathetic* is precisely how students are characterized by students, faculty, and the surrounding community of the University of Denver (DU).

In the six years I was at DU, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, I witnessed the campus change both physically and demographically, although it is still considered to be a campus of conservative, white, middle/upper-class, apathetic students. I can remember numerous classroom experiences where students bemoaned that it is hard to get other students to attend campus events because everyone is apathetic. Or having a professor talk about free speech and, as a side note, say that DU does not have to worry about creating specific policies to regulate campus protest because it would never happen. The *Princeton Review* ranked DU as a politically inactive school, and unlike its neighboring schools of University of Colorado-Boulder or even Colorado State University, DU does not make the local news for students rioting after sports victories or for campus demonstrations. From these publications, from the talk among current students and faculty, and from the fact that there have not been mass campus demonstrations since 1970, it is easy to believe that DU is apathetic and that there is no activism here. However, I argue that DU is as "active" as other campuses; however, the discourse surrounding DU does not reflect students' activism.

As an undergraduate student, I believed the talk about apathy, and it took a long while before I realized that talking about apathy did not match the "activism" that was really present. My closest friends and I would talk about the lack of activism on campus even though we organized a week of tolerance and diversity awareness in the year following the Columbine tragedy. Even so, on a campus where service-learning is prominent in classrooms, where there are "living-learning" communities centered on civic leadership and social justice, where the *Vagina Monologues* is an annual event, and where I personally have worked with non-profit organizations committed to educating underprivileged youth in the city, there is an overwhelming attitude that DU students are not activists.

To illustrate this contradiction further, I was able to give four guest lectures as an undergraduate and graduate student about my research on activism. In all but one instance, I walked into the classroom and asked, "What activism exists here?" and get the response, "There is no activism," even though these same students voted in campus elections to support using wind energy in the same building they are sitting in; they are drinking coffee made from fair-trade, organically grown beans; and they have turned in essays printed on recycled paper. Perhaps some of them are not aware that the energy, coffee, and paper were made possible through actions of their fellow students, but it is still disturbing students would describe themselves and fellow students as apathetic—as having no activism—when there have been visible manifestations of "activism" all around. Thus disturbed, I began my journey as both a rhetorician and an activist—I had an "awakening" when I realized that the definition of activism was problematic for students at my campus.

My awakening as an activist was motivated much like other student activists who are compelled to correct a social ill or to move social behavior more in line with their values. For most activists, they become frustrated when they see the material conditions of society (behaviors, practices, policies) not operating under the same principles of equality, freedom, and co-operation that they believe society should be guided by (Fako and Molamu). In my case, my frustration was rooted not in material practices failing to live up to the ideal, but rather the talk surrounding the action hid the activism that was present. My guiding principle was the search for truth; my motivating frustration was that students were called apathetic regardless of the involvement and action that was taking place on my campus. It bothered me that apathy was going to be the legacy of my student experience (even though I didn't feel apathetic), and that if there indeed was no "activism" at DU, then what were we missing? What was the "activism" that as students we were *supposed* to be doing to show that we were not apathetic? If activism did not exist, then I needed to be able to describe the involvement that was happening. If activism did exist, it needed to be publicized and exposed. So, I set out to write my honors thesis on student activism and define what this term actually entailed—interviewing and participating with student groups working to create change in campus and community. I utilized my role as a graduate student promoting the fact that activism does

exist—allowing students to recognize and take up their role as activists. Talk of apathy limited the ability for students to see themselves as activists—changing how we understand activism can change how activism is supported and allowed to be manifested.

Activism Memory Versus Contemporary Practice

Student and *activism* are two terms that have been historically linked, so my perception, like many others', was that the university was inherently a place for activism to occur. From images in the news of students protesting for social issues to hearing about students in the 1960s changing education, communities, and campuses through actions, there is a public expectation that students *should always* be engaging in activism. Even if I did not participate in a sit-in, I assumed there would be other students at my campus that would. However, DU is not the only target of this "talk" of apathy (Loeb); both "active" and "apathetic" universities lament that today's students—historically the most politically active citizens—are apathetic (DeGroot). The images and stories create expectations that *all* students *should* be activists even though historically (even in the 1960s) only ten percent of students would identify as activists (Knott). It is these expectations that overshadow the same activist minority on contemporary campuses or overlook the engagement by students in other campus organizations and who participate "sporadically" in the more direct-action activism. It is hard to swallow being called apathetic when one does not *feel* apathetic.

Thus, we find ourselves in a paradox: there is no "activism" even though there is tangible action by students implementing progressive causes into campus policy or evidenced by events sponsored by student organizations occurring every week. The more I talked with involved students, I realized that the problem was rooted in an inexplicable *silence* surrounding what was happening on campus. Events were not reported in the campus paper; students did not know what other events were happening on campus besides the ones their own organizations sponsored; and the term "activism" was avoided by students in describing their events at all. Regardless of whether it was a group organizing a voter registration drive, tutoring children at a local elementary, or hosting film events, students would preface explaining these events with: "I am not an activist, but ..." or "I don't protest, but ..." This is not to say all extracurricular activities should be labeled "activism," but when activities (such as voter registration with disenfranchised populations) *do* follow in historical legacies of movements or when the action explicitly is to change the status quo, then we need to assert the activism label. There was no activism at DU because there was no talk about these events. The word "activism" was never paired with these activities, thus, there was no reason to believe that activism did or could exist.

Clearly, discourse shapes how we experience our world and orients our actions based on our defined subject positions. The academic study of student

activism further cements the link between activism and protest coupled with presenting "activism" as an act to be avoided. Initial psychological studies of student activists in the 1960s and 1970s use protest as a defining variable (Knott) and are rooted, much like sociological collective behavior studies, in the assumption that demonstration by student activists is an irrational behavior (Buechler). Mass media tends to frame activism under familiar images of protest, symbols, and violence (Gitlin), and other academic definitions of activism similarly are grounded in tactics rather than issues: "Student political activism is generally defined as the engagement by students in non-institutionalized political activities, such as illegal demonstrations against the Vietnam War, illegal civil rights protests, strikes, sit-ins, and other similar activities" (Wood 2). When "activism" is defined as irrational and illegal, then no student would want to legitimize their cause through that label.

The fact remains that activism is not just protest, yet the "talk" about activism outside this definition is just catching up. For example, community service has always been part of student activism with examples of students aiding immigrants and the urban poor in the early 1900s (Cartwright), prominent again in the early 1960s (Bocciocco); community service currently seems to be the preferred tactic for students. We might say that students are becoming more strategic, using demonstration as a last resort or alongside service, education, and legal action (Featherstone; Hamilton). Although email campaigns, campus policy change, and volunteerism are less likely to make the news, it is how students understand activism. The students I interviewed mentioned that activism had to do with taking action on issues that they are passionate about—to make changes that improve the life of others no matter what tactic was employed. Moreover, many mentioned that students had the responsibility to take what was learned in the classroom and apply it to real-life situations, or take action from what was done in the classroom. Action included everything from making your voice or opinion known, doing service for others, and educating others about a specific issue. The issues addressed do not always have to be political or specifically deal with the government, and students recognize that you can make personal issues matter in the public sphere. Lastly, students recognize that this engagement should extend past "student" years: that what is done at the university level is the first step to prolonged activism. For those who have been awakened to activism, it is important to support and recognize their efforts to promote continued involvement.

Through the research of my honors thesis, I found my own activist mission. If it was discourse that created my own (and the public's) expectation that students should engage in activism, then discourse promoting current activism could similarly motivate students to continue to engage. Since discourse can disallow activism to be recognized because it is narrowly defined as protest, then a broader definition of activism should be circulated to recognize students' lack of apathy. I realized that I could be an advocate for the activists I was interviewing and writing about. My activist role could be in circulating discourse that made activism the norm and preferred act of students.

Limitations and Possibilities for Student Activism through Discourse

After tracing the definition of activism, I was not content to let this information be confined only in the written portion of my thesis—it needed to get out in the public if it were to promote the activism I saw at DU. The first time I took my project to the “public” was at a conference on my campus sponsored by the Provost, centered on the topic of the university’s role in the “public good.” As the only undergraduate participant on a panel of student involvement (following a speaker from Greek Life who prefaced his remarks by acknowledging that DU students are not as active as our counterparts in Boulder), I was there to suggest that university faculty administration and faculty were not looking hard enough for or supporting the activism that *was* present at DU. To prove my case, I listed off numerous events that student groups had sponsored over the past year that I saw as “activism,” many of which were unknown to those attending the panel. It was apparent that “talk” had to be initiated if we were to achieve a vision of the campus as an active place—there has to be belief that collective action is possible and that others are acting for the “public good” promoted at the university. Changing the discourse about activism on campuses can have tangible effects.

Although my own honors thesis was not the cause of promoting more activism on my campus, for the activists that I interviewed and shared the project with, it was an important step in starting discussion and for them to learn about their own campus. Changing the “talk” can change conditions. First, “activism” becomes a unifying label that allows the possibility for collective action. Second, it establishes belief that students are not apathetic, thus collaborating with others becomes a possible and worthwhile endeavor. Third, collaborative efforts produce events that garner more publicity, thus more discourse about campus activism, and future activism is ensured because a belief in activism is solidified. Let me explain these in turn.

The discourse of apathy did not match the activism that existed on my campus; thus, my first step in writing about activism was essentially reclaiming “activism” for students. Students should make the term their own and use it to describe their efforts. Describing their actions as activism creates a belief that activism exists. Given the assumption that other students on campus were apathetic, most efforts done by students were through organizations. These organizations assumed that any efforts to gain participation of other students who were not members were futile because it was presumed that DU’s apathetic students do not participate in campus events. Thus, in 2003, three different organizations showed the same documentary about United Nations sanctions in Iraq—all unaware that other groups had shown the film previously. Obviously, the attendance for the same film at three separate events is smaller than the attendance possible if all groups had worked together. With “organizations” as the only means and terms to create collective action, broader coalitions cannot be built even with groups sharing similar interests, and efforts are not made to seek out other like-minded organizations.

A further problem with "organization" as the collective term is that we tend to not pay attention to information from other organizations because we assume we are not included in the message as a non-member. Moreover, organizations come and go, and the history of an organization is not as lasting or woven into the culture of the university the same way that *activism* is remembered. The more we talk about "activism," the more students can see beyond organization borders and recognize the efforts of other students. Activism takes a collective effort, and, if we believe other activists are out there, we will work to find them. Unlike the UN film showing of 2003, in 2005 a coalition of undergraduate and graduate student groups (along with academic departments) worked together to get Black Panther founder Bobby Seale to speak on campus. Had only one group organized the event, the 500+ attendance at Seale's talk may not have been possible. This event could happen because there was not a belief that students were apathetic and activism at DU is possible.

In order for activists to organize a collective effort, they have to believe there are others to collaborate with and that it is their purpose to do so. With the silence about activism and the discourse of apathy on campus, belief did not exist that it was the role of a DU student to act. If one did act (engaging in community service, organizing events, etc.) it was assumed that the event was an isolated action. We can foster belief that collective action is possible by circulating discourse that makes this a reality. Lack of publicity serves as a self-perpetuating cycle: the student newspaper cannot report on events (activism) presumed not to exist; campus activists did not submit press releases presuming the paper would not print them anyway. By changing perceptions of what is newsworthy and what events to seek out, then discourse can change. For example, in 2004 a group of students created their own alternative newspaper that specifically featured a spotlight on a campus activist. All stories include pictures of all the writers and events they are writing on. In this way, there is now written and visual discourse to prove the existence of activism at DU along with groups with which others could collaborate.

Finally, by changing the discourse of activism we build upon and extend a legacy of activism. The history and legacy of student activism in the 1960s helped to create the protest-only paradigm ingrained in our collective memory regardless of the discourse that includes service and other actions to change the status quo. Protest was the marker for students to live up to, but it is this legacy that limits the possibilities for current activists. Thus, a new legacy must be built so that the actions of current students are recognized and that "activism" does become part of a positive role students take on. In my own way, I am adding to this legacy by using my research to write about student activism, to present this to my fellow students, and to encourage others to do the same. Circulating discourse about what activism *really* is creates the discursive conditions that support activists' efforts because it also changes how we publicly describe and understand student activism. When we talk about the possibilities of activism, it makes activism possible. This becomes our mission and reality.

My activism is done through my work as a rhetorician. I advocate for students in an effort to help them realize that activism is possible and is their mission. The same, I think, can be said for all activist rhetoricians. Our written work is oriented to helping realize the possibilities of citizenship, democracy, and public engagement. We both publicize the current conditions—enabling and oppressive as they may be—as well as imagine future possibilities for agency and action. What I hope I have shown here is that discourse can be the force that both constrains and enables action. The definition of activism was problematic for me, and thus I have made it my mission to change our public conceptions of it so that student activists can imagine new possibilities for themselves. It is through discourse that campuses can transform from being perceived as apathetic to realizing their true activism; it is through discourse that we chart our own activist paths.

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