

THE IMPACT OF STUDENT ACTIVISM ON HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE, STRATEGY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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by

Chelsea K. Smith

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APPROVED:

Matthew B. Fuller, PhD  
Dissertation Director

Peggy C. Holzweiss, PhD  
Committee Member

Ricardo Montelongo, PhD  
Committee Member

Stacey L. Edmonson, EdD  
Dean, College of Education

## **DEDICATION**

This research study is dedicated to my family. My husband, children, mother, aunts, uncles, and loved ones who supported me through this journey. My grandmother only received a fifth grade education therefore, this research study is also dedicated to her life and legacy.

## ABSTRACT

Smith, Chelsea K., *The Impact of Student Activism on Higher Education Administrators: Implications for Institutional Response, Strategy, and Social Media*. Doctor of Education (Higher Education Leadership), August, 2020, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

The purpose of this research study was to use a phenomenological qualitative research approach to gain insight into how university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism, discover what strategies university administrators used when responding to student activism, and how social media affected university administrator's responses to student activism. Participants were six university presidents, vice presidents, and deans of students working at 4-year public institutions in Texas who were selected using criterion-based sampling. Each participant participated in one sixty-minute interview consistent with the phenomenological research approach. Structural coding and analytic memo writing were used to analyze the data. The data analysis revealed nine themes: (a) external and internal pressure, (b) balancing act and competing values, (c) varied degrees of student activism, (d) faculty activism, (e) student development and engagement, (f) empathy, (g) impact of social media, (h) institutional and organizational support, and (i) roles, and responsibilities. These themes indicated that social media presented new challenges for participants regarding institutional policy. However, university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism and had effective strategies for responding to student activism.

**KEY WORDS:** Student activism, First Amendment, Free speech, Social media, University administrator, Institution, Higher education

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                   | Page |
|-----------------------------------|------|
| DEDICATION .....                  | iii  |
| ABSTRACT.....                     | iv   |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....            | v    |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS.....            | vi   |
| CHAPTER                           |      |
| I INTRODUCTION .....              | 1    |
| Background of the Problem .....   | 3    |
| Statement of the Problem.....     | 8    |
| Purpose of the Study .....        | 11   |
| Theoretical Framework .....       | 16   |
| Research Questions.....           | 19   |
| Significance of the Study .....   | 20   |
| Definition of Terms.....          | 22   |
| Assumptions.....                  | 24   |
| Limitations .....                 | 26   |
| Delimitations.....                | 27   |
| Conclusion .....                  | 28   |
| II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..... | 29   |
| Student Activism.....             | 30   |
| Tactics .....                     | 37   |
| Social Media .....                | 41   |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Institutional Strategy .....                        | 47  |
| Institutional Response .....                        | 51  |
| Student Development and Democratic Engagement ..... | 58  |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 70  |
| III METHODOLOGY .....                               | 71  |
| Research Questions .....                            | 72  |
| Research Design.....                                | 72  |
| Procedure .....                                     | 80  |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 88  |
| IV RESULTS .....                                    | 90  |
| External and Internal Pressure .....                | 92  |
| Balancing Act and Competing Values .....            | 95  |
| Varied Degrees of Student Activism .....            | 98  |
| Faculty Activism.....                               | 101 |
| Student Development and Engagement .....            | 103 |
| Empathy .....                                       | 106 |
| Impact of Social Media .....                        | 110 |
| Institutional and Organizational Support .....      | 119 |
| Roles and Responsibilities .....                    | 122 |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 126 |
| V DISCUSSION .....                                  | 133 |
| Conclusion .....                                    | 141 |
| REFERENCES .....                                    | 144 |

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| APPENDIX A ..... | 149 |
| APPENDIX B ..... | 150 |
| APPENDIX C ..... | 151 |
| APPENDIX D ..... | 154 |
| APPENDIX E ..... | 156 |
| VITA .....       | 160 |



## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

In 2010, two white students were arrested for dropping cotton balls in front of the Gaines-Oldham Black Culture Center at the University of Missouri as a racist gesture toward black students. This incident along with others marked the beginning of what was described by Payton Head, Student Government President, in his Facebook post as a stream of "bigotry and the anti-gay sentiment" around the college campus. Payton's post gained nationwide attention and led to a set of protests by the student body.

The first protest happened on September 24, 2015 at an event called "Racism Lives Here," where protesters asserted nothing had been done to address Payton Head's concerns. On October 1, 2015, a second "Racism Lives Here" event was held with 40–50 participants. On October 24, 2015, a police officer reported a bathroom wall in an on-campus residence hall was vandalized with feces shaped like a swastika. On November 3, 2015, a University of Missouri student Jonathan Butler began a hunger strike, stating he would not eat until the President of the university resigned due to a lack of acknowledgment and unresponsive approach to student concerns about racism.

On November 7, 2015, more than 200 prospective students flooded Missouri's campus for a recruiting day where student protestors held "mock tours" where they recited racist incidents that occurred at the University in 2010 outside the Gaines-Oldham Black Culture Center. Student protestors also recreated events using racial epithets that occurred against two women of color outside of the University Student Recreation Complex. On November 8, 2015, black football players stated they would not practice or play until University President Tim Wolfe resigned. This demonstration would have cost

the University a \$1 million fine if it did not play the scheduled game against Brigham Young University. The Conference Commissioner issued a statement saying he respected the student-athletes for engaging in issues that mattered to them and he was hopeful the issues would be resolved positively. This statement was met with support by the athletics department and within a couple of days, the University of Missouri Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin and President Time Wolfe resigned.

Protests are not limited to students as illustrated by Mount St. Mary's University, a private liberal arts Catholic university with a student enrollment of 2,240 located in Maryland. Mount St. Mary's was experiencing financial problems as a decline in enrollment threatened to harm the university. The university was struggling to retain freshman students, which affected the institution's operational strength. The Board of Trustees decided to hire Simon Newman who was a former financial industry executive to refocus the university agenda to expand marketing, focus on career readiness, and increase enrollment. Newman's retention plan included removing struggling freshman students to improve retention numbers; however, a few faculty members disagreed with his strategies. Newman was quoted as saying "This is hard for you because you think of the students as cuddly bunnies, but you can't. You just have to drown the bunnies. Put a Glock to their heads."

Although, the First Amendment protects freedom of the press, and higher education institutions support academic freedom, if the content relates to the subject, both professors were fired when they expressed their discontent with the President's remark in the university newspaper. This action was seen as retaliatory and in response to the firings faculty at Mount St. Mary's started a petition that questioned the administration's

response to academic freedom and the unjust firing of the professors. The petition collected over 7,500 signatures from across the United States (U.S.), which ultimately contributed to Newman's resignation.

These incidents were a few examples of how university administrators responded to campus activism. In some cases, university administrators focused only on the public relations aspect of student activism rather than the opportunity to promote student development (Schmidt, 2015 & Kezar, 2010). Campus administrators who prepared to respond to student activists by engaging in constructive communication, collaboration, and empowerment were more successful (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). This research study examined how university administrators (a) prepared to respond to student activism, (b) what strategies university administrators used to respond to student activism, and (c) how social media affected university administrators' responses to student activism.

### **Background of the Problem**

Student activism has historically occurred on university campuses, and since the colonial times universities struggled with responding to student activism. As early as the 17th and 18th centuries, students held protests in response to university policy, curriculum, and housing (Broadhurst, 2014). In loco parentis gave university administrators the authority to expel students for things such as lying, stealing, storing liquor, missing prayer and worship, cursing, and playing cards (Broadhurst, 2014). Students protested in response to university administrators' actions and were considered rebels. In most cases, affluent students would protest more than economically

disadvantaged students because these students were more appreciative of their opportunity to receive a college education (Broadhurst, 2014).

During the colonial period, students protested in response to social and national issues. As the formation of colonies began and before the revolutionary war, students demonstrated by boycotting British goods and burning British symbols which led to American campus demonstrations growing in size and scope (Broadhurst, 2014). Because the campus climate was changing and students were becoming more active in response to the Revolution, campuses such as Brown University, Harvard University, and Princeton University, experienced riots when students disagreed with university administration, particularly when students were suspended for things such as scraping their feet during Morning Prayer (Broadhurst, 2014). By the late 18th and 19th centuries, campus protests grew in size and scope (Broadhurst, 2014). Student activists protested against inadequate faculty, disciplinary injustices, and outdated campus policies (Broadhurst, 2014). In response to these protests university administrators created stricter rules, expelled students, and shared expelled students' names with other colleges across the country, effectively labeling them as troublemakers (Broadhurst, 2014).

At the beginning of the 20th century, students began to care less about campus issues and focused more on local, state, and national issues. Social reform began to be the primary objective of student protests and socialism began to grow politically and amongst student groups (Broadhurst, 2014). During this time, students were concerned about the struggle of the working class individual. Intercollegiate Socialist Society (ISS) was a student group that advocated for educational programs, and focused on social reform, with an emphasis on improving conditions for the working class (Broadhurst,

2014). Different chapters of ISS promoted activities that organized unions for student workers and initiatives to keep military programs off-campus. Other initiatives included removing censorship policies from campus, allowing women to smoke on campus, removing mandatory Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) from campus, and increasing student influence in university governance (Broadhurst, 2014).

After the Great Depression, students began to embrace socialism and communism, which led to a peace movement across college campuses (Broadhurst, 2014). In a protest known as the "Oxford Pledge" students at Oxford University declared they would not fight for their country. American students who held anti-war conferences and pledged not to fight any American war (Broadhurst, 2014) adopted this pledge. The 1930s continued to see a growth in socialist and communist student groups, which planned and participated in many anti-war demonstrations. In the 1940s and 1950s, student activism started to decline due to the end of World War II. The decline was a result of America winning the war and a sense of pride in American priorities (Broadhurst, 2014).

During the 1950s, students on college campuses were recovering from The Great Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust, and began to lean more toward conservatism and engaged in less activism (Broadhurst, 2014). Although this trend was significant in the student activism movement, there were groups such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) who organized and held local community programs for students (Broadhurst, 2014). One major movement that began to gain traction was the movement for desegregation. During this time, African-American students began to question the "separate but equal"

law by arguing they had a heavier financial burden because there were no equal regional colleges for them to attend, and as a result, students had to move away from their home to attend college (Broadhurst, 2014).

Student activism began to rise again during the 1960s, as students were increasingly dissatisfied with American society after World War II. At this time, the Soviet Union emerged as the rival for America in the race for world power. This feud precipitated the Cold War and during this time, the federal government began to fund university research on unprecedented levels (Broadhurst, 2014). Due to the increase in federal funding and an influx of baby boomers to college campuses, universities experienced a tremendous increase in enrollment (Broadhurst, 2014). This increase caused students to complain that universities were becoming impersonal because auditoriums were filling, registrations were becoming computerized, and graduate assistants were replacing faculty (Broadhurst, 2014). Along with these issues, students began to reject the idea of *in loco parentis*, which treated students like children rather than adults (Broadhurst, 2014).

The Free Speech Movement (FSM) began at the University of California, Berkley in 1964. Because the media coverage was extensive during this new era of television the FSM had powerful effects across college campuses and helped magnify the idea that students should have a greater impact on campus governance (Broadhurst, 2014). Students held similar FSMs challenging *in loco parentis* across college campuses and by the end of the decade, the policy began to dissipate. National organizations began to emerge focusing on both student rights and other social issues. The New Left was a group of students who were described as Democrats and moderate Republicans who

formed to advanced democracy and dispel communism. The New Left included smaller groups such as the Student Peace Union (SPU), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Youth International Party (YIPPEE) (Broadhurst, 2014).

The New Left was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement and led demonstrations such as sit-ins and freedom rides that were predominately held in the segregated South (Broadhurst, 2014). Another group formed under the New Left was the Black Student Union (BSU). This group of students raised concerns with university administration on issues such as; increased enrollment for black students; open-admission for minorities; hiring of additional black faculty and staff; black studies programs; and increased financial support (Broadhurst, 2014).

Moving into the 20th and 21st century, students began to champion causes such as ending the Vietnam War, divesting from South Africa during apartheid, Women's right to equality, and acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Protests and demonstrations declined on college campuses after the 1970s but students continued to stay active (Broadhurst, 2014). Students began to engage in volunteerism on issues such as helping the homeless, eliminating world hunger, and human rights. Throughout history, students have engaged in activism in response to administrative policies. Today's students are using traditional strategies to protest and demonstrate on issues such as equity, inclusion, and diversity, but can do so with new platforms such as social media (Taha, Hastings, & Minei, 2015).

In the new age of student activism, university administrators should be prepared to engage students effectively. By doing so universities should be able to manage difficult dialogues and meet student expectations of accountability in areas that emerge as

systemic social justice issues across the campus culture. To provide proactive strategies for university administrators this research study reviewed social issues that concerned student activists

### **Statement of the Problem**

Freedom of speech and expression have become more complex with the use of social media and the 24-hour news cycle. Social media has become a news source for students. Social media mobilized information in one space, which allowed students the ability to express their political opinions and become a part of a movement. (Taha et al., 2015). The 24-hour news cycle is described as information that is reported the moment an event occurs with no time to think about the event (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). News outlets reported on stories that were inflated, enhanced non-news events, and injected anchors' personal opinions to fill airtime in order to continue the constant cycle of news (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). Students often have the ability to access social media and news outlets on their mobile devices, which might have caused them to react negatively to disinformation and ultimately leave universities exposed to a social crisis before it has had the opportunity to assess and respond (Schmidt, 2015). Universities were unable to respond in a quick and concise manner when social issues were the basis for student activism (Martin, 2014).

In other cases, academic freedom was an issue where institutions struggled to define the meaning and support its premise. For example, in *Edwards v. California University of Pennsylvania* (156 F. 3d 488, 3rd Cir. 1998) Dilwar Edwards was a professor who taught Introduction to Educational Media where the focus of the course was on how teachers used various tools such as projection equipment, chalkboards,



photographs, and films effectively. Edwards began to put subjects such as issues of bias, censorship, religion, and humanism on his course syllabi. A student filed a complaint to university administration claiming Edwards was trying to advance religious agendas.

After several other similar incidents and complaints, university administration suspended Edwards with pay. Subsequently, Edwards sued the institution for violation of his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights. The court concluded Edwards did not have a First Amendment right to choose classroom materials and subjects in contravention of what the university dictated. However, if a student was offended by the opinion of a professor, and the professor was speaking in terms of class content, the professor was within his or her First Amendment right. University administrators should strive to educate students on academic freedom in a way that builds rapport and respect for the academic process while teaching students about First Amendment protections. In turn, faculty should strive to remain within the context of the courses they are teaching and not inject personal opinions outside of those constraints.

In other cases, some universities have not taken a proactive approach to address racism, sexism, homophobia, or other social issues important to the student population. Students who engaged in activism on topics such as racism and sexism were often labeled as radicals instead of being valued as an important part of the educational environment (Martin, 2014). Student activism produced an atmosphere for diversity that was often counterintuitive to institutional values (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). At times, minority populations and their social concerns were ignored in preference of the majority and the normative campus environment (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). If universities continued to ignore social issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, it could make universities

underprepared to address student activism and exposed to criticism (Hoffman & Mitchel, 2016).

Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, and Barnett (2005) examined how student activists characterized university administrators. Twenty-six student activists were interviewed and four characterizations influenced both the actual and desired relationships with administrators (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). The first characterization was administrators were viewed as gatekeepers in the system (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). Students perceived administrators as responsible for maintaining normalcy and consistency in the university setting. Students perceived administrators as having the power to protect the system as well as having power over student activism.

The second characterization was administrators were viewed as antagonists and enemies (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). Students perceived administrators were in opposition to their views and had a "desire to disempower students through ignoring them or keeping crucial information from them" (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005, p.303). Students also perceived administrators as unwilling to listen and unwilling to give them consideration on things that mattered to them.

The third characterization was that students perceived administrators as supporters (Ropers-Huilman, et al, 2005). Although this perception was noted less than the other characterizations, students stated at times they felt supported by administrators. Students felt supported through access and availability administrators provided as well as the accessibility of institutional resources (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). Students perceived high-level administrators were available to meet with them on a regular basis.

The final characterization was absentee leaders. Students perceived administrators as persons who had important work but did not understand what that work might be (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2005). Students felt their relationship with administrators was marginalized because they did not know the roles and functions of an administrator. In conclusion, students were ineffectively engaged in the decision-making process at the university. When this occurred, university administrators missed an opportunity for civic and democratic engagement, which appeared as a lack of care and concern by campus administrators about social issues (Kezar, 2010).

Student perceptions of engagement, transparency, and inclusiveness were important factors for administrators to consider when responding to student activism. When priorities for administration were to disengage, protect normalcy, and disempower student activism, universities were at risk of being unprepared to respond to student activism (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Student activism had become a renewed movement across the U.S. for many different reasons. Social justice, equity, tuition, gun violence, and gender discrimination were just a few reasons why university administrators should be prepared to address student activism in a proactive, transparent, and meaningful way.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Student activism has historically occurred on university campuses and some common approaches included protests, sit-ins, and boycotts, which were typical strategies for student activists. With the invention of new platforms such as social media, online petitions, and online campaigns, some universities were unable to address proactively student concerns prior to an event. Some university administrators had attempted to

make adjustments to embrace activism; however, others only did so in name and not action (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

In 2015, Emory University students protested in solidarity with South Africa, Yale University, and the University of Missouri against racism and the lack of diversity on college campuses. Students organized marches and protests across campus as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to bring attention to the lack of funding and resources provided to black students at Emory. Student activists presented a list of demands to the Dean of Campus Life Office, which included things such as improved mental health counseling and specific academic counseling for minority students. In response to the protest Ajay Nair, the Senior Vice President and Dean of Campus Life met with student activists to discuss their demands. Nair's initial thought was one of defense as he began to reason that the university already had mechanisms in place to provide these resources to students (Brown, 2016). However, after reading the demands, meeting with students, and listening to them explain their story, Nair began to retract his initial defense (Brown, 2016).

Emory's administration listened and developed a plan with the assistance of the student activists to create working groups that would take each of the demands and address them one at a time (Brown, 2016). Each issue was evaluated on its own merit and each group discovered the core issues and developed action steps, timelines, and accountability measures for each demand (Brown, 2016). For example, faculty evaluations were a concern for students. The student activists wanted an opportunity to report bias incidents in the classroom. Through many conversations, it was determined that the core problem was not bias incidents but a campus climate that was not conducive

to minority student development (Brown, 2016). The objective then became for Emory to help faculty become more purposeful and thoughtful about their pedagogical strategies in the classroom so an environment was created where each student can succeed (Brown, 2016). Emory University exemplified the type of reactive and proactive approaches university administrators had when responding to student activism.

Recently, the University of Virginia was scrutinized for its lack of preparation in providing security at a protest where white supremacists marched on campus and were met with counter-protestors where violence ensued. A professor at the university asked the Dean about the lack of police presence and it was later determined the university police did not prepare adequately for the known rally, and the lack of police presence and preparation emboldened the protestors which eventually turned violent (Bauman, 2017).

Auditors were commissioned to do a full review of the violence that carried from the campus protest on Friday to a Unite the Right rally on Saturday at an off-campus location. At that location, a woman was killed by a white supremacist who drove his car into the crowd (Bauman, 2017). The commission's report noted several failures by the university police department. The university police department did not intervene properly during the torchlight rally held by marchers, which in turn increased the intent to engage in similar acts the next day (Bauman, 2017). The department did not coordinate properly with other local law enforcement. It did not plan for an event that could turn violent, did not separate demonstrators from counter-protestors, and did not notify the university community about the torchlight rally (Bauman, 2017). Law enforcement also did not stage police officers near the rally location during or after the event became threatening and did not request additional police assistance after the event became violent

(Bauman, 2017). Each of these failures led to physical violence where over 30 people were injured. Inaction on behalf of the university police department led to egregious failures where student and civilian lives were at risk (Bauman, 2017). Student safety should be a priority for university administrators and lack of preparation should not deter student activism from occurring.

Understanding and improving relationships with student activists took a cultural and structural shift that began with university administrators (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Bridging the gap between activism and education was important for both the student and the institution. According to the literature, some key areas for university administrators to bridge the gap included providing avenues for diversity and inclusion, empowering student activists, and displaying transparent communication (Martin, 2014).

Martin (2014) studied the tension between student activism as a behavior for institutions to manage against the goal of earning a degree. In this study, civic engagement was explored as the desired outcome of attending college by reviewing a compilation of chapters on campus climates for student activists and analyzing themes to determine three common threads (Martin, 2014).

The relevancy of social and political activism in American higher education was identified as the first common thread. The perception that student activism was no longer relevant on college campuses was shaded because student activists no longer protested strictly in free speech zones on campus but organized their efforts on social media outlets (Martin, 2014). Administrators can extract from this conclusion that student activists were changing their methods to express dissent.

Another common thread administrators should consider was the potential for educating students on social and political activism when designing learning outcomes. "Acts such as protests, vigils, teach-ins, and other demonstrations appeared to aid students in developing what many considered an important outcome of college" (Martin, 2014, p.89). Student activism can develop key skills such as strategizing, political savvy, critical thinking, and mediation, which contributed to student development (Martin, 2014).

The final common thread was the power of the individual in campus activism. University administrators should remember each individual student had a story to contribute. Although a larger movement may be taking place it is the personal experience or story that ties the student to the issue they support (Martin, 2014). When campus administrators dismiss individual stories, students may disengage thereby creating tension between student activists and campus administration. Students were unlikely to feel a sense of community when there was an absence of safety, inclusion, and student involvement on college campuses (Martin, 2014). The tension that existed between student activism and cultural norms may hinder academic success, retention, and civic responsibility if it remains unaddressed (Martin, 2014).

This research study sought to identify how university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism, discover what strategies university administrators used when responding to student activism, and how social media affected university administrator's responses to student activism. Qualitative interviews were conducted to collect information from university administrators (i.e. President, Vice President, and Dean of Student) who experienced student activism, used strategies to

respond to student activism, and engaged with social media in response to student activism on their campuses. Qualitative interviews allowed the researcher personal access and insight into the participant's viewpoint (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to receive the most complete and comparable data for analysis.

This research study used a phenomenological approach to collect and analyze responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans of Students. Responses were gathered, analyzed, and interpreted using first and second cycle coding. The primary goal of this research study was to provide recommendations to university administrators on how to prepare to respond to student activism and define which strategies were most effective when responding to student activism. Although social media had become a new platform for student activists, there were few research studies on the effect social media had on student activism. Therefore, this research study also attempted to add literature on how social media affected university administrators' responses to student activism.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement served as the theoretical framework for this research study. Student involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p.297). Astin (1984) conducted a longitudinal study on student involvement and retention and discovered five basic assumptions about student involvement.

The first assumption was the invested amount of physical and psychological energy a student gives to an object. Objects can range from students' holistic experiences



to a specific activity in which students were engaged (Astin, 1984). The second assumption was student involvement was continual. Some students may be more active than other students and some students may be more invested than others may over time (Astin, 1984). The third assumption was there are two types of involvement that may occur, qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative referred to the degree of impact a student had with a certain activity or experience and quantitative refers to the amount of time given to an activity or experience (Astin, 1984). The fourth assumption was the amount of time given to an activity or program correlated with the quality and quantity of the student's development and learning. The more time a student puts into an activity the more a student will get out. The fifth assumption was the effectiveness of the program or activity was directly related to the impact it had on a student's involvement (Astin, 1984).

There were three overarching elements of student involvement theory; (a) academic involvement which is the amount of time a student will spend on academic learning; (b) involvement with faculty which is the extent a student will engage and interact with faculty; and (c) involvement with student peer groups which is the amount of time a student will spend engaged with student programs (Astin, 1984). This research study focused on Astin's (1984) first and fifth assumptions and the elements of involvement with peer groups and involvement with faculty as the primary framework related to student activism. For this research study, the term faculty was substituted for university administrators.

Student involvement was also related to students' experiences (Astin, 1984). Student activists tend to expend an exorbitant amount of physical and psychological energy on their cause. Astin's (1984) first assumption suggested students who invested

energy on an activity or experience were more involved. Using the assumption student activists were more likely to protest, demonstrate, and rally for their issue on university campuses, because they were more involved and were more willing to invest energy to accomplish their goal. This assumption was also related to the element of involvement with peer groups. Student activism was described as a group of students who gather to support a common goal. Student activists have the ability to influence each other thoughts, opinions, or behaviors, which was related to student learning and student development (Kezar, 2010).

Astin's (1984) fifth assumption suggested the effectiveness of the program or activity was directly related to the impact it had on a student's involvement. Using the assumption student activist who were involved in programs that had learning outcomes of democratic engagement and social responsibility would learn how to effectively communicate their issues with university administrators and be able to achieve their goals in a proactive manner. This assumption was also related to the element of faculty involvement. Faculty or university administrators could utilize intentional programming and activities as a way to develop student learning on social, political, cultural, or economic issues that concerned student activists. By doing so, faculty and administrators would proactively engage student activists through learning opportunities that focused on democratic solutions to their cause.

Astin (1993b) emphasized the relationship that peers had on one another as being "the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). This was important because student activists were each other's primary support and source of influence on social, cultural, and political issues.

Astin (1984) also argued faculty involvement was critical to student learning. In order to maximize student-learning faculty should be aware of student motivation and the time and energy, they were willing to spend on their development (Hunt, 2003). Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement served as a natural framework for understanding how university administrators respond to student activism.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this research study were (a) How were university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students prepared to respond to student activism; (b) What strategies did university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students use when responding to student activism; and (c) How did social media affect responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students?

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right protected under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. As a way to communicate the importance of protecting free speech, most administrators defer to the First Amendment when deciding how to respond to student activism. A statement from former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions illustrated this action, "university officials and faculty must defend free expression boldly and unequivocally" (Svrluga, 2017). University administrators were prepared to use the First Amendment as a method of responding; however, there were other strategic responses. Other strategies were active dialogue, student development, and democratic engagement, and collaborating with student activists as an opportunity for learning (Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Kezar, 2010).

When university administrators were perceived as gatekeepers of the current system and thereby used their power to continue the stability and consistency of the

university function, it hindered administrators' responses to student activism (Ropers-Huilman, et al., 2016). This could cause university administrators to respond to student activism through a public relations lens rather than a student engagement and student development lens, particularly when the activism was based on a social issue (Schmidt, 2015). Research presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) showed university administrators responded to racist incidents as a bad public relations situation and focused on individual incidents rather than addressing a culture of systemic bias on the campus (Schmidt, 2015).

Social media was not only a new platform for student activists it was also considered a new tactic or strategy used to promote student activism (Taha et al., 2015). This new medium could be powerful for student activists due to the depth, scope, and technological advances that continue to regenerate and improve with each new social media platform. Students received their news from social media, used social media as a way to express their political views, and formed groups that mobilized their cause using social media (Taha et al., 2015). University administrators should understand and value the impact social media had as a mechanism for gathering like minds, expressing political views and ideas, and moving the conversation on campus issues from the front lawn to a public forum at home and abroad (Taha et al., 2015). The research questions for this research study addressed the preparation, response, and understanding of social media from university administrators as it pertained to student activism.

### **Significance of the Study**

Most of the literature surrounding student activism focused on the student aspect of campus activism; however, there were studies that focused on the training of

administrators' responses to student activism, and how those responses aligned with institutional values and student perceptions (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The significance of this research study was to examine what type of preparation is necessary for university administrators when responding to student activism. This research study reviewed why it was important for administrators to have this knowledge along with implications for best practices for higher education administrators.

Universities experienced a surge in student activism over the past ten years. University Presidents and administrators have resigned or been terminated due to a lack of preparation when responding to student activism as evidenced by the University of Missouri President R. Bowen Loftin. Students at Yale, Oberlin, and Duke sent lists of demands and requests for extensive action to university administrators as a way to express their discontent with the campus culture (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). One student stated, "this is happening all over in a ton of different universities. The administration should be prepared for it." (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016, p. 278).

There were various reasons university administrators were unprepared to address student activism in a proactive manner. Diversity has become a focal point of college campuses and many universities have adopted policies and initiatives to achieve a diverse setting on their campus, however adopting an institutional message without the action to support the message revealed a misalignment of institutional values for students who feel oppressed (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Social media was another area university administration lacked preparation when responding to student activism. "I think that clearly the social-media platform and things like change.org and other kinds of places are allowing students to mobilize very quickly, really quickly, on a single issue and put

pressure on the institution to address a certain issue" (Lipka, 2015). Lack of understanding of the root cause of student activism also led to a lack of preparation. University administrators tended to respond to a singular incident rather than a potential problem that may be systemic (Schmidt, 2015). It was important for administrators to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to respond to student activism, so students and administrators could move toward democratic engagement.

Student development and democratic engagement was a productive outcome for students and administrators. When faculty and staff partnered with students on campus activism issues there were broad learning outcomes for students (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). University administrators provided civic learning opportunities for students who engaged in campus activism (Biddix, 2014). Student development was a direct outcome of social agency, civic awareness, and outspoken leadership (Biddix, 2014). In an effort to create inclusive, diverse, and equitable campus environments university administrators should use student activism as a unique opportunity to engage and develop students.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this research study, terms focused on activism as it related to students, faculty, staff, and administrators on university campuses. Legal terms that pertained to activism were also defined. Additional terms related to commonly used platforms where activism occurred were also defined.

### **Activism**

This term was defined as “the active participation of individuals in group behavior for the purpose of creating change – in attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and/or symbols.

The expected change can be directed towards individuals, groups, and/or systems.”  
(Chambers & Phelps, 1993, p. 20).

### **Bias-Response Teams**

Bias Response Teams were defined as institutional committees designed to receive and respond to reports of bias incidents, hate speech, and/or hate crimes on college campuses (LePeau et al., 2016; McDermott, 2013).

### **First Amendment**

This term had many interpretations. The most commonly used interpretation and definition for this research study was “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I).

### **Free Speech**

This term was defined by Merriam-Webster (2019) as the legal right to express one’s opinions freely. The law dictionary of Merriam-Webster (2019) expands to say “the right to express information, ideas, and opinions free of government restrictions based on content and subject only to reasonable limitations (as the power of government to avoid a clear and present danger) especially as guaranteed by the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.”

### **Tactics**

This term was defined as “the particular actions and behaviors used to communicate the groups message.” (Barnhardt, 2014, p. 44). Some examples of tactics

related to student activism were using social media to start online petitions, creating a demand letter for administrators, and starting a hunger strike as a form of protest.

### **Social Media**

This term was defined by Merriam-Webster (2019) as “forms of communication such as websites for social networking and microblogging through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos”.

### **Student Activists**

The term student activists were defined as “college students who were both involved and committed to social change” (Ropers-Huilman, et al., p. 300). Student activists were also students who participated in activism for a specific cause or purpose for the effect of creating change.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions were defined as philosophical assumptions or beliefs that a researcher brings into their work, which may inform or frame the research (Creswell, 2013). Assumptions can be worldviews that influence the research or study and should be identified and critiqued for biases. For the purposes of this research study, it was important to identify my assumptions as being axiological with a social constructivist framework.

Axiological was defined as a researcher who acknowledges research can be great in quantity and biases are present (Creswell, 2013). Axiological researchers discuss freely their values, which define the narrative and include his or her interpretations in conjunction with participant interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivism was



defined as "individuals who seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences – meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). A social constructivist researcher looks for the complexity in meaning instead of the narrow. The research relies heavily on the participant's viewpoint and how those viewpoints affect social and historical meaning. The researcher recognizes how their own background influences their position and therefore influences the interpretation of the research.

As a social constructivist who is a minority woman and an administrator in higher education, my assumptions will be impacted by my personal, cultural, and historical experiences. The intent of this research study was to understand the experiences and meanings of others regarding student activism. Therefore, in order to allow for trustworthiness, this research study used bracketing also known as epoche to reduce bias. Bracketing or epoche was defined as isolating personal experiences to take on new perspectives of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010).

Acknowledging my personal construct allowed for three basic assumptions used for this research study. The first assumption was participants in this research study would give honest feedback on their experiences with student activism and how it affected their decision-making process. The second assumption was participants were willing to share their experiences regarding institutional strategy as it related to student activism. The last assumption was participants would identify potential gaps in their preparedness to respond to student activism.

## **Limitations**

Limitations are the factors of research that cannot be controlled by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). One limitation of this research study was access to upper-level administration. The participants for this research study were administrators that had decision-making power. These participants included university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans of Students. In order to overcome this potential limitation this research study sought to interview one person in each of the administrative levels from universities across Texas. This allowed for the possibility of multiple interviews of upper-level administration to collect and analyze data.

Another potential limitation was the inability to generalize the data. For example, the participant sample included all three levels of administration (i.e. University President, Vice President, and Dean of Students) but the responses might have only been from Deans of Students or a variation that would exclude one administrative level. Responses might differ at each level and therefore data might not have been generalizable. This research study attempted to interview each level of the administrator so content could be generalized whereas other content might have been specific and unique for each administrator level. Since student activism was unique for each campus, thereby unique to each experience, specific and in-depth responses were useful for this research study.

This research study was also limited by the difference between colleges and universities. Colleges were often referred to as a four-year program that offered a bachelor's degree whereas universities were referred to as a group of colleges where students could earn a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree. Student activism at a

college might be perceived differently from at a university, in terms of scope, impact, access, policy, and change. Therefore, responses from administrators at colleges versus universities might have differed based on their experiences. This research study sought to close the gap in terms of student activism by recognizing all activism was important and had meaningful and lasting impacts.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations were the choices made by a researcher that limited the scope or sets boundaries of the study (Creswell, 2013). One delimitation for this research study was that it was only conducted in Texas. Student activism might be different based on geographical regions therefore; the data collected might not be generalizable to the U.S. Opportunities to include additional states in the U.S. may exist for future research. However, for the purpose of this exploratory, initial study, a focus on Texas higher education university leaders' perspectives on student activism was sufficient. Another delimitation of this research study was it did not include institutions classified as two-year community colleges, junior colleges, or schools known as vocational, professional, online, or technical. This initial research study sought to understand the traditional non-profit, four-year public university experience. Most of the literature reviewed for this research study was conducted at four-year institutions. Therefore, the decision to focus on four-year institutions was made to have comparative data that might align or misalign with previous studies in an effort to add to the literature. In addition, four-year institutions were a prime setting for student activism. For this reason, the decision was also made to gain insight into the experiences of university administrators with student

activism at four-year institutions. Opportunities to include other types of institutions exist for future research.

Another delimitation was the participant sample only included university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans of Students. There might be other levels of administration with decision-making power that were excluded from this research study. For this research study, the primary focus was on administrator response to student activism therefore responses might have been limited to this specific type of activism and exclude faculty or staff activism.

### **Conclusion**

Student activism has always been an integral part of higher education. Beginning with the colonial times to the modern era students have always found a way to protest. The renewed movement of student activism has steadily increased over the past ten to fifteen years especially with the expansion of social media. Students were able to gather support, connect, and mobilize in ways that were new to most university administrators. It was incumbent upon university administrators to prepare themselves and to utilize proactive measures when responding to student activism. This research study attempted to provide guidance on how university administrators can be prepared to respond to student activism.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Review of the Literature**

Historically, university administrators have labeled student activists as radicals (Martin, 2014). Students who protested against university policies for things such as storing liquor, cursing and playing cards were considered rebels (Broadhurst, 2014). University administrators would resort to expulsion and creating stricter rules rather than considering the cause of the rebellion (Broadhurst, 2014). University administrators may no longer resort to expulsion when students express their dissent, however, it was still imperative that university administrators understood student activism, particularly the impact social media had on student activism, and the various outcomes that occurred.

A detailed review of the literature on student activism was conducted using appropriate databases that included English only text, peer-reviewed scholarly journals, and relevant language, setting, and years (2008-2018). Valenzuela (2013) conducted a study in Chile on social media influences collective action toward activism, specifically how social media increased protest behaviors among adults. Although this study was conducted outside of the U.S. it was necessary to include this piece of literature due to minimal research published on the impact of social media on activism.

The databases used in this review included Education Source, Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse, and Google Scholar. An initial broad search was conducted using general terms such as student activism, college student activists, and higher education activism. A narrower search was conducted that used combined terms such as student activism on college campuses, student activists and campus administrators, higher education, and campus dissent.

This approach yielded a variety of journal articles from higher education and popular press publications relevant to this research study. Following the examination of these initial publications, six themes were noted in the literature. This chapter reviewed six themes noted in the current literature on student activism in higher education: (a) student activism, (b) tactics, (c) social media, (d) institutional strategy, (e) institutional response, and (f) student development and democratic engagement. Each section below described relevant literature that supported the importance of preparation for university administrators regarding student activism.

### **Student Activism**

Understanding student activists were critical for university administrators when preparing to respond to student activism. Student activists were defined as "college students who are both involved and committed to social change" (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005, p. 300). Broadhurst (2014) conducted a review of historical movement's on-campus activism that has been important to higher education from the 18th century to the present. The review explored the connections and shared experiences of various campus activism over time and compared similarities and differences in the approach and tactics used by student activists throughout history. Student activists were often unaware of the connections from previous historical protests and how these protests were related to the tactics currently used or how institutional leaders viewed protests through a historical lens (Broadhurst, 2014). Colonial colleges in the 17th and 18th centuries were described as the place where students began to rebel against *in loco parentis* and the characterization of student activism began (Broadhurst, 2014). During this era, students demonstrated by boycotting British goods, burning sculptures of British leaders,

demanding control over curriculum, criticizing professors, and revolting against disciplinary injustices by campus administration (Broadhurst, 2014). These behaviors by student activists continued to grow in size and scope through the late 18th and 19th centuries (Broadhurst, 2014). Administrators' responded to the protests by expelling students, disseminating their names to other colleges across the country, and implementing harsher rules (Broadhurst, 2014).

These types of protests continued into the 20th century but shifted to focus on social issues outside the academic realm such as homelessness, world hunger, and human rights (Broadhurst, 2014). At the beginning of the 20th-century social reform began to be the primary objective of student protests and socialism began to grow politically amongst student groups (Broadhurst, 2014). In 1915, ISS had grown to 70 campus chapters with over 1,300 members, and their primary purpose was advocating for the working class and developing programs that focused on educational and social reform (Broadhurst, 2014). In the 1930s, student activism was driven by the Great Depression and students began to embrace socialism and communism. (Broadhurst, 2014). American students copied the "Oxford Pledge" and began to protest any war conducted by the American government (Broadhurst, 2014). Anti-war rallies sponsored by student organizations such as the National Student League (NSL) had grown to have at least 25,000 students in attendance at the rallies (Broadhurst, 2014). The Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) and NSL combined their student organizations to become the American Student Union (ASU) and continued to host anti-war rallies throughout the rest of the 1930s.

In the 1940s and 1950s, student activism started to decline due to the end of World War II and Pearl Harbor essentially debilitating the Peace Movement (Broadhurst,

2014). Students became exhausted from the remnants of The Great Depression, World War II, and the Holocaust which led them to be more conservative and less inclined to engage in student activism (Broadhurst, 2014). Even though the decline in student activism occurred on a large scale there were still student organizations interested in the advancement and protection of underprivileged students. Student organizations such as YMCA and YWCA held community events for local students (Broadhurst, 2014). The 1950s was also a time where African-American students began to question the separate but equal law that was dictated by Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896. This concern gained momentum as students argued they had a heavier financial burden because there were no equal regional colleges for them to attend, and as a result, students had to move away from their home to attend college (Broadhurst, 2014). African-American students began to file lawsuits that eventually allowed them to attend predominately white college campuses but as they enrolled they were still met with separate residential living and dining facilities (Broadhurst, 2014).

In the 1960s, students also began to become dissatisfied with American society after World War II particularly as the Soviet Union began to emerge as a rival to America (Broadhurst, 2014). The Cold War began and to outmaneuver the Soviet Union the federal government began to fund research on unprecedented levels (Broadhurst, 2014). The increase in funding combined with the increase of baby boomers attending college, student enrollment increased and students began to complain they were disconnected from faculty and university administration and their interactions were no longer personal (Broadhurst, 2014). Similarly to the colonial period, students began to challenge in loco parentis again because of the disconnection (Broadhurst, 2014). The FSM began to



spread across college campuses as students began challenging in loco parentis and by the end of the decade, the policy began to disappear (Broadhurst, 2014). The Civil Rights Movement (CRM) of the 1960s empowered student organizations such as The New Left, SPU, SNCC, and the Yippies to emerge on the national stage (Broadhurst, 2014). Each of these organizations held protests and demonstrations that included sit-ins, freedom rides, and marches (Broadhurst, 2014). These student organizations raised concerns with university administration on issues such as increased enrollment for black students, open-admission for minorities, hiring of additional black faculty and staff, black studies programs, and increased financial support (Broadhurst, 2014). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law which banned segregation in public areas and discrimination for employment based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (U.S. Constitution, Pub.L. 88-352, 1964).

The success of the CRM for African-American students motivated other groups such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC) to advocate for similar rights (Broadhurst, 2014). The Chicano Power Movement (CPM) saw the creation of student organizations such as the Mexican-American Youth Organization (MAYO) began to grow as students advocated for improved campus climates, creating a curriculum that reflected their heritage, and ending racism toward their culture (Broadhurst, 2014). The Women's Movement (WM) specifically focused on confronting the patriarchal characteristics of the campus environment including advocating for discrimination policies that would eliminate unfair hiring practices for female faculty and administrators, and for female athletes to have the same rights and benefits as male athletes (Broadhurst, 2014). The LGBT groups

continued to grow as a community of students who also fought for equal rights and against discrimination of their student organizations (Broadhurst, 2014).

The Vietnam War was also one of the most significant anti-war movements on college campuses during the 1960s. The protests spanned almost the entire decade and were mainly supported by college students (Broadhurst, 2014). In 1965 the largest anti-war demonstration was held on the Washington mall with over 500,000 activists in attendance with college students as the majority (Broadhurst, 2014). In conjunction with protesting the war students protested the draft, military recruiters, ROTC, and military policies (Broadhurst, 2014). In May of 1970, students protested the U.S. invasion of Cambodia at Kent State when the National Guard opened fire on protesters (Broadhurst, 2014). There were many student casualties and injuries and as a result, outrage ensued which resulted in millions of students on over 1,000 campuses protesting against the police (Broadhurst, 2014). Students and police fought at over two dozen campuses where ROTC buildings were damaged and an onslaught of arson and bombings occurred (Broadhurst, 2014). These incidents put a strain on students and campus administrators' relationship as many college campuses had to shut down their operations from a period of one to two weeks to restore buildings and reestablish university operations (Broadhurst, 2014). After the incidents surrounding Kent State began to settle down so did student protests during the remainder of the 1970s (Broadhurst, 2014). Students remained active but shifted their focus to issues such as homelessness, world hunger, and human rights (Broadhurst, 2014).

In the 1980s and 1990s, students protested against the nuclear arms race between Russia and the U.S. and also against the Gulf War which reached sizes that mirrored the

protest of the Vietnam War (Broadhurst, 2014). The most prominent protest movement during the 1980s was against apartheid in South Africa. This protest began in the 1960s which grew significantly by 1980 and students particularly were upset about higher education's investment in apartheid in South Africa (Broadhurst, 2014). The demonstrations were successful as 60% of college campuses that experienced protests divested from South Africa and 3% of campuses that did not experience protests also divested (Broadhurst, 2014).

In the 1990s, students protested on social issues surrounding diversity, group identity, and multiculturalism (Broadhurst, 2014). In 1996 a Day of Action was held where college students across America protested about receiving increased access to education, immigration rights, affirmative action, and inclusivity for students of color and LGBT communities (Broadhurst, 2014). As with the protests of the 1960s, tactics such as rallies, teach-ins, and marches were held on the Day of Action to achieve political imagery and create a social message (Broadhurst, 2014). During the 1990s into the new millennium, students also protested for causes such as human rights and equal treatment for marginalized groups. From 1998 to 2002, student activists participated in the anti-sweatshop movement which was in response to retailers such as Disney, JC Penny, and Bloomingdales allowing children and adults to manufacture clothes in unsafe and unhealthy work environments for excessive hours while being underpaid (Barnhardt, 2014). Student activists urged their campus administrators to join in with the Clinton administration, the Workers' Rights Consortium (WRC), and other human rights groups to create fair labor policies and advance human rights (Barnhardt, 2014). As a result, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) was created. Its purpose was to ensure retailers upheld

health and safety standards for the work environment, regulated child labor practices, regarded human rights, and processed harassment policies for their workers (Barnhardt, 2014).

Students have continued to advocate for causes that mirror those of the colonial times. When students of color, members of the LGBT community, and women encountered adverse conditions on college campuses, these groups of students united to change their environment and continued to battle against issues that have existed for long periods (Broadhurst, 2014). However, with the invention of social media students have new avenues to choose from when engaging in student activism, and also have the choice to continue utilizing tactics such as marches, teach-ins, street theater, and sit-ins (Broadhurst, 2014). Similar to the FSM in 1964, modern-day student activists view campus administrators as the greater power system that subjugates their concerns (Broadhurst, 2014). The growth of the anti-sweatshop movement in the 21st century continued to demonstrate students' concern for the disadvantaged workers in the same way socialist groups did in the 20th century (Broadhurst, 2014). Students at the University of California, Berkeley have called on administrators to divest in companies doing business in Israeli on the West Bank of the Gaza Strip similar to the 1980s apartheid movement (Broadhurst, 2014). Without regard for the time or the tactics students have continued to fight for causes that mirror their experiences, and there is one common trait that exists between them "they are all trying to change the world" (Broadhurst, 2014, p.12).

## **Tactics**

Understanding the type of tactics and strategies used by student activists was important for higher education administrators. Barnhardt (2014) conducted a review of collective action tactics and organizing strategies used by students in the modern era to pursue their goals for social change. Although in some cases campus administrators have evolved their perceptions that student activism was a problem or a nuisance to a perception where students can learn democratic engagement and civic ideals, it was understanding how students pursued their goals for change that remained relevant for educators, administrators, and students (Barnhardt, 2014).

The social movement phenomenon was deconstructed into four components of the collective action of student groups. The four components were (a) determining who was seeking the change by defining the mobilizing groups of students, (b) determining the target group whom the student activists were aspiring to change (c) determining the claim or idea that was being advanced by the student group, and (d) identifying the method or tactic used to advance the groups claim (Barnhardt, 2014). Understanding the different types of methods or tactics was the primary focus of this review.

Tactics were defined as the "particular actions and behaviors used to communicate the group's message" (Barnhardt, 2014, p. 44). Tactics were used as the public expression to challenge authority and varied depending on the degree of uncertainty, challenge, and solidarity in the social context (Barnhardt, 2014).

Conventional and disruptive tactics were the two main types of tactics described in this review. Contained tactics were a subtype of conventional tactics and transgressive tactics were a subtype of disruptive tactics (Barnhardt, 2014).

***Conventional Tactics.*** Conventional tactics were defined as "behaviors that elaborate or rely on existing routines and come with a pre-established set of norms and meanings" (Barnhardt, 2014, p. 45). Examples of conventional tactics were when student activists spoke during an open comment period at a university board meeting or when student activists wore t-shirts or held up signs that expressed their dissent against the claims of the targets (Barnhardt, 2014). Contained tactics were described as a type of conventional tactic that tended to adapt to the existing political or institutionalized method of resolving conflicts (Barnhardt, 2014). Students who chose this type of tactical approach used methods such as demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns, or petitioning to highlight the issue for targets (Barnhardt, 2014). The objective of student activists who chose to use conventional tactics as a method of protest was to capitalize on established forums where targets or peers would be present to pursue their agenda (Barnhardt, 2014).

***Disruptive Tactics.*** Violent tactics begin to occur when other tactical approaches have not prevailed and the protest cycle begins to wane, but violent tactics don't need to be used to make an impact on a target (Barnhardt, 2014). Tactics that simply caused disruption tended to resonate more prominently when the mobilizing group gained reactions from targets such as state legislatures or campus administrators (Barnhardt, 2014). Examples of disruptive tactics included rallies, sit-ins, boycotts, and political theatre which generated reactions from campus administrators or student peers who sympathized with the cause (Barnhardt, 2014). Transgressive tactics were described as a type of disruptive tactic that tended to sporadically appear at a college campus that created paradigmatic changes that reframed or reestablished the issue of the protest in a

dynamic way (Barnhardt, 2014). Students who chose this type of tactical approach used methods such as sit-ins and hunger strikes to reach an outcome where cultural norms were disrupted and campus administrators or peers responded and took action (Barnhardt, 2014). The objective of student activists who chose disruptive tactics as a method of protest was to break the norms or the routines of the campus culture, to stir conversation, creative thinking, or create a responsive action toward the mobilizing group's claims (Barnhardt, 2014).

The student activists studied in this review were considered an internal mobilizing group. Because they were familiar with the organization and had a unique understanding and knowledge of the organization. These types of groups were able to use the information to their benefit when they employed conventional tactics on targets (Barnhardt, 2014). Because the student activists were internal groups, higher education administrators were more likely to experience challenges and therefore were more likely to be subjected to conventional tactics that reflected the identity, behaviors, and values that had been affirmed and cultivated by the institution (Barnhardt, 2014). Barnhardt (2014) discovered disruptive tactics had not been a primary choice for students since the violent protest of the 1960s, instead, students have chosen conventional tactical approaches from 1989 to 2010. Although students have chosen conventional tactics in recent history it did not mean the tactics had to be contained (Barnhardt, 2014).

Student activists who were familiar with their campus culture, curriculum, characteristics, and behaviors gained legitimacy in advancing their claims against targets when the foundation of their tactical approach was conventional and was based on the institution's rhetoric, policy, or administrative practices (Barnhardt, 2014). Students who

had access to institutional structure, culture, and behaviors were able to maximize their impact on targets who were most often campus administrators to advance their claim (Barnhardt, 2014). With the utilization of the internet, modern-day student activists were able to diversify on campus in ways student activists in past decades could not (Barnhardt, 2014). It was important for campus administrators to anticipate the types of tactical approaches students used to be proactive when they made policies that governed campus dissent (Barnhardt, 2014).

Barnhardt (2014) concluded that campus administrators who attempted to create rules and regulations governing the appropriate conduct for student activism such as time, place, and manner restrictions did so for the safety and well-being of the campus community and to reaffirm that a university is a place to freely express ideas and dissenting viewpoints (Barnhardt, 2014). However, dissent by its definition is disobedient, and therefore by expressing dissent, student activists created actions that were outside the norms or constructs of university policy which resonated or became more substantive (Barnhardt, 2014).

If student activists chose disruptive and transgressive tactical approaches campus administrators were less prepared to anticipate when, where, or how the student activism would occur or how to appropriately respond (Barnhardt, 2014). In its current form student activism is likely to occur at board meetings, homecomings, student organization offices, or during prospective student weekends as a convenient opportunity to assert claims against targets (Barnhardt, 2014). Student activists' tactical approaches tend to be conventional but it does not have to be contained, therefore campus administrators should



understand the different types of tactical approaches to be proactive and rational when creating policies and preparing or responding to student activism (Barnhardt, 2014).

### **Social Media**

Social media has integrated into college students' lives via their mobile devices as they walk to and from class, residence halls, and dining halls. Its permanent fixture is a part of the ever-growing technological revolution. As such, it would be incumbent upon university administrators to understand the scope and impact social media has on students' perceptions, opinions, ideas, and concerns. Social media has become a conduit of news and a source for many students to retrieve information (Taha et al., 2015).

The 24 hours a day news cycle began in the 1980s with the advent of networks such as the Cable News Network (CNN) and other networks that were under pressure to fill airtime (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). This caused news to go on-air that did not have time to be fact-checked, increased the use of inflated news stories, drew attention to non-news events, and injected personal opinion by anchors into the news cycle (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). The invention of the internet, blogs, and other mediums led to an even higher risk of unvetted news which affected public perception of actual news events (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008).

Valenzuela (2013) conducted a study on the use of social media and its influence on protests' behavior. The study was conducted in Santiago, Chile during a time where intense demonstrations were taking place regarding the wholesale of education and energy (Valenzuela, 2013). The participants were citizens of the region rather than college students so the term activists rather than student activists were used throughout the study. This research study was relevant because the findings indicated social media

had a direct effect on protestors' behavior. Social media users had a positive correlation on protest behavior in Chilean politics where activists used the platform as a tool to organize, gather information, and prepare street demonstrations in support of wholesale changes in education and energy (Valenzuela, 2013). Social media directly related to civic and political activism because of the influence it had on the collective action of users by mobilizing information and news that was not available in other mediums (Valenzuela, 2013). The use of social media by activists allowed them to coordinate and facilitate demonstrations which also allowed users to join forces and create opportunities to share ideas (Valenzuela, 2013). The activists used platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google Plus as mechanisms to increase protest behavior and spread their message (Valenzuela, 2013). Another example of the effect social media had on protestors' behaviors occurred in 2010 where a produce vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire as an act of self-immolation against government corruption, police extortion, and economic hardship (Taha et al., 2015). This action was widely viewed on social media and activists began to protest in solidarity with the produce vendor, which ultimately led to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions known as the Arab Spring (Taha et al., 2015). Moreover, since college students in the U.S. engaged in social media regularly, it would be reasonable to believe social media affected U.S. college student's protests behaviors (Taha et al., 2015).

Three potential explanations for the relationship between social media and increased protests behavior were discovered; (a) information – social media as a news source, (b) expression - social media as a place for expressing a political opinion, and (c) activism – social media as a mechanism for joining causes and retrieving mobilizing

information (Valenzuela, 2013). Social media used for information or news was found to not affect political protest behavior (Valenzuela, 2013). Traditional forms of media were used for news consumption including political, public, and social movements as well as for entertainment and the construction of personal identity and social relationships (Valenzuela, 2013). Although participants gained news information from social media sites such as Facebook's "news feeds" there was no correlation that retrieving news from social media effected protest behavior. This finding might be due to the redundancy of hard news on social media that is supplied by mainstream media outlets (Valenzuela, 2013).

However, both expression and activism had a positive correlation with social media use and political protest behavior (Valenzuela, 2013). The expression on social media involved a greater depth of reasoning and information processing in terms of political engagement (Valenzuela, 2013). When people engaged in political discussions on social media it lowered the threshold of political learning and engaged individuals to participate in social and political causes (Valenzuela, 2013). Activism and social media influence toward political protest behavior were described as the ability to mobilize otherwise disengaged persons to join political and social causes both online and offline (Valenzuela, 2013). It was easier to mobilize users on social media when commonalities intersected in both private and public worlds and when personal lives were shared in the public arena of politics, social movements, and protests. Therefore, the use of social media by activists directly affected protests behaviors for both expression and activism (Valenzuela, 2013).

Social media was not creating new forms of protest behavior rather than magnifying traditional forms of protest behavior (Valenzuela, 2013). Social movement leaders who sought to effect change understood the impact social media had in aiding both online and offline participation in the movement (Valenzuela, 2013). Valenzuela (2013) suggested governing bodies should also be cognizant of the types of discussions and information being shared on social media and use them as resources of knowledge when considering public opinion and beliefs (Valenzuela, 2013). Understanding the impact of social media on protests behaviors was critical for university administrators when preparing to engage or respond to student activism.

***Social Media Use.*** A positive correlation between social media use and activism, specifically student activism, was also discovered in a study on how student activists are formed (Taha et al., 2015). Students were asked to describe what category of activities they associated with student activism based on their use of social media (Taha et al., 2015). Specifically, they were asked to identify how they used social media to participate in student activism with groups who had similar interests (Taha et al., 2015). Groups ranged from those who supported political causes such as human rights to groups associated with Greek Life and LGBT communities (Taha et al., 2015).

One of the most frequent uses of social media by students was to follow the group's Facebook page to check on events and confirm attendance (Taha et al., 2015). Students also described social media as a place where they gathered information and found other members of the community with similar interests (Taha et al., 2015). Students also indicated social media presented a good opportunity to educate themselves on certain issues that involved student activism (Taha et al., 2015). The strongest

predictor of involvement and motivation for students to become actively engaged in student activism was having access to a network of peer activists with similar attitudes toward activism, specifically through social media (Taha et al., 2015). Participation in student activism was also increased due to the ability of social media to mobilize, connect with familiar peers, and connect with peers who had the same political views (Taha et al., 2015). Having online social networks consisting of offline friends also allowed student activists to continue the behavior of activism offline (Taha et al., 2015). Offline social networking was an integral piece of online mobilization when political messages were shared with familiar faces and informal discussions (Taha et al., 2015).

Social media was used in three specific ways for student activists. First, it was used as a way of reducing the uncertainty of networks by assessing familiar faces. Students described having the ability to check and track events, particularly for their friends who may also be in attendance, allowed them to be more certain and confident about attending the event (Taha et al., 2015). Second, social media was used as a way of gathering information that was directly related to their groups or areas of concern. Students described social media as a safe way to gather information and find other students with similar interests (Taha et al., 2015). Using social media allowed students to find out about organizations and interact with others who had similar interests without the risk of being exposed (Taha et al., 2015). Social media also allowed students to be in a protected space unlike in-person interactions (Taha et al., 2015). Finally, social media was used as a way for students to make decisions about student activism (Taha et al., 2015). Students described using social media as a way to educate themselves on social issues and as a means to get news from legitimate sources (Taha et al., 2015). Social

media was also used to promote students' opinions about social issues and motivate students to become involved (Taha et al, 2015).

Social media had become a platform for repressed or marginalized voices and an important avenue for student activists (Taha et al., 2015). Because student activists chose social media as a platform of expressing ideas it was important for the researchers to understand how students made sense of activism and how it was socially constructed to make recommendations for college educators (Taha et al., 2015). The researchers noted three recommendations for college educators who were inclined to use social media as a service-learning opportunity for student activism. First, college educators could teach students social media was a safe platform where they could join groups or causes without fear of the negative connotations that are historically associated with student activism such as sit-ins, boycotts, and picketing (Taha et al., 2015). Second, college educators could have an open and honest dialogue about the negative connotations of student activism and help students learn through case studies how to use social media as a positive and comfortable way to participate in student activism (Taha et al., 2015). Finally, college educators could reframe negative connotations of student activism by exposing students to new forms of activism which could lead to positively engaging in service-learning opportunities (Taha et al., 2015).

***Social Media Strategies.*** The current President of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Kevin Kruger stated in an interview with The Chronicle of Higher Education that there were two types of strategies students used when seeking to engage in student activism. The first was traditional student activism such as sit-ins, occupying buildings, and hunger strikes. The second was the intersection

between traditional strategies and social media. Kruger stated social media has gained the ability to connect students with other campuses and with each other. Kruger mentioned students were able to mobilize quickly over one issue which puts pressure on institutions of higher education. Kruger noted institutions do not have to act as swiftly as social media demands, and it is incumbent institutions to gather all the facts and information before making a decision. Kruger also explained that although this might be a difficult thing to do it is the responsibility of an institution to find out the facts before making a decision (Lipka, 2015).

This article illustrated another reason why it was important for university administrators to fully grasp the impact and influence social media continues to have on student activism. Understanding the impact and influence of social media should be a top priority for university administrators because of the ability to connect, mobilize, and streamline information to students that could be beneficial or detrimental to institutions of higher education.

### **Institutional Strategy**

Recently, student activism has seen a revival of both traditional and new era approaches, which include social media, for protests behaviors. There have been a few national incidents that revealed how institutions of higher education, particularly university administration, valued the optics of an incident rather than addressing the incident itself (Schmidt, 2015). Maintaining institutional reputation has become the focus of university administrators instead of responding to incidents that involved hate crimes, hate speech, and bias, which are oftentimes a reflection of the campus culture (Schmidt, 2015). For example, Martin Luther King (MLK) Day has become a day where

racial biases and incidents occurred on campuses across the U.S. In 2007, Tarleton State University experienced an incident where members of a fraternity ate fried chicken, drank malt liquor, and dressed in gang clothing to mock the annual celebration of the nationwide holiday using racial stereotypes (Associated Press, 2007). Members of the campus community were offended and in response, the university administration held a campus meeting with over 400 people in attendance to discuss the event (Associated Press, 2007).

Another incident involving MLK Day happened in January 2018 where a student at the University of Alabama recorded herself making racial slurs. In turn, the university expelled the student and the University President stated he was offended and hurt by the racial slurs and that the student's actions did not reflect the values of the student body or university (Eltagouri, 2018). In both cases, university administration strategy focused on addressing the incident or individual action of the student rather than addressing what might be a campus culture issue.

Another example includes an article published by The Chronicle of Higher Education that was written by various researchers and presented at an AERA conference which revealed college Presidents were ready to address the racist but not the racism (Schmidt, 2015). The study was conducted using discursive rhetorical analysis of statements made by thirty colleges' Chief Executive Officers or University Presidents in response to racial incidents over the past three years. The researchers considered three elements when analyzing the statements made by University Presidents (a) intended audience, (b) how Presidents responded to racial incidents, and (c) how Presidents



addressed the constraints of the incidents such as racism within the campus culture (Schmidt, 2015).

When considering the intended audience most University Presidents made remarks speaking to the broader campus community and only addressed students who committed the offenses by stating those students were not part of the campus community (Schmidt, 2015). Only 16 of the 30 university presidents responded directly to the racial incident and only eight responded in detail (Schmidt, 2015). In terms of how presidents responded to racial incidents, there was a problem with the initial responses from university presidents when they did not acknowledge racism as the problem rather they focused on students who caused the problem and labeled them as outliers to the values of the campus community (Schmidt, 2015). When University Presidents used this strategy they were more interested in the public-relations aspect of the incident rather than addressing the racism itself (Schmidt, 2015). Regarding how University Presidents addressed the constraints the racial incidents had on the campus culture, only five of the 30 presidents directly referred to racism as a culture of their campuses (Schmidt, 2015). Two of those five Presidents noted there was not a simple answer to correct racism on their campuses and there was an inherent challenge in moving away from centuries of racism (Schmidt, 2015).

In response to most of the racial incidents on campuses, university administrators created bias-response teams to reassure the campus community they were addressing racism (Schmidt, 2015). The bias-response teams interviewed for the study were typically mid-level administrators with no real authority or power to make a change (Schmidt, 2015). The bias-response teams generally handled complaints similar to those

of campus police or judicial entities even when there was no policy or law violation (Schmidt, 2015). Bias-response teams indicated they lacked the time, resources, and support to go further than responding to bias incidents and only responded on a case by case basis (Schmidt, 2015). Members of the bias-response teams also reported administrators created the teams in response to a perceived demand that the institution condemn bias incidents (Schmidt, 2015). The bias-response teams believed their mission was educational but described their work as a function of public relations (Schmidt, 2015).

In contrast, Emory University took a different strategy when addressing student protests regarding racial incidents that affected their campus culture. Students at Emory University protested in solidarity with the University of Missouri and Yale University students over racial injustices impacting their campuses (Brown, 2016). Instead of focusing on the optics of the protest or institutional reputation of the university, Ajay Nair the Senior Vice President and Dean of Students for Emory, decided to meet with students and unpack each of their demands one at a time, while asking each stakeholder to give their possible solutions to the problems (Brown, 2016). This strategy opened the door for a racial justice retreat that was held for students, faculty, and staff, as well as created outcomes that included mental health initiatives specifically for students of color and an opportunity to report racial biases in the classroom (Brown, 2016). Nair reported this strategy allowed the institution to reflect on how power and structure operated at the university, when those powers and structures were not working, and how university administrators created new power and structure when approaching racial issues or incidents that affected the sense of belonging by students on their campus (Brown, 2016).

Institutional strategy can affect the types of responses university administrators have toward student activism. University administrators should consider that responding to student activism through a reputation lens might portray a lack of sincerity when addressing issues that involve racial and social biases. University administrators can do more harm when creating committees such as bias-response teams that have no power to make or effect change, instead of creating new power structures that involve all campus stakeholders to address bias issues head-on while also creating a sense of belonging.

### **Institutional Response**

An institutional response can be a critical part of addressing student activism. Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) studied institutional response to student activism for equity and inclusion. The researchers conducted a case study using a discourse analysis of one student activists' movement at a large public institution. The student activists' movement involved students on the student fee allocation committee contesting the fairness of the physical space that was designated to multicultural student groups in the student union (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). In response to this assertion, the Chief Student Affairs Officer recommended a redesign of the space, which included a reconfiguration of the multicultural groups' space be completed, along with a process where the multicultural groups would have to justify their use of the physical space through a biannual application process (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The application process also called for the multicultural groups to describe their use of the space and present a presentation that highlighted their past and future use of the space to university administration (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). In response to the initiation of this process by university administration the student activists group began protests which included writing a list of demands to

university administration and a call for meetings with upper-level administration to discuss the demands (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). When these efforts did not work, student activists occupied the President's office which later led to student activists being arrested for trespassing (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

Interviews with students and university administrators were conducted to analyze their responses to the student activists' movement (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The researchers sought to answer two questions (a) what was the university administration's response to the student activists' actions that conflicted with the university stated values on equity and diversity, and (b) how did the student activists perceive university administrations' responses to their actions (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The focus of the study was specifically on how university administration used diversity language in their response to student activism, how it either aligned with or worked against the stated values of the university, and how those responses impacted the perceptions of the minoritized students (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Ahmed's (2012) work on institutional diversity language was used as the theoretical framework for the study. Ahmed's (2012) theory explained three outcomes of diversity language regarding institutional values; (a) institutions only supported diversity when it aligned with stated institutional values, (b) diversity language was "non-performative" which means it does not do what it claims, and (c) diversity language allowed institutions to frame accusations of racism where it could be used to restate a value that was not backed by action.

Using Ahmed's (2012) theory to frame their results the researchers discovered that institutional response to student activism produced a climate for diversity that was contrary to the stated institutional values. An example was the response by university

administration to the letter of demands written by the student activists. The letter demanded the university redefine its commitment to diversity through respecting historically marginalized groups, become transparent about the meaning of diversity in all of its communication, and honor the commitments it made to diversity for each marginalized community (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). In response, the university President issued a letter that restated the university's position on diversity from a 2007 statement and reinforced the institution could not be excellent without being diverse (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). However, the President did not redefine diversity as demanded by the student activists and did not explain the meaning of excellence or diversity (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). This type of response from the President reaffirmed Ahmed's (2012) theory that displayed non-performative language by using terms such as excellent and diverse without defining their meaning, and it ultimately reinforced the majority and marginalized the minority (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

University administrators also responded to student activism by reframing the actions of students back on the majority culture and placed systemic problems on the marginalized minority population (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Examples of this were when the student activists attempted to meet with university administration during "open hours" but were met with lines of students with problems that could not be addressed in the time allotted (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). In another instance, university administrators did not accept invitations to attend student group meetings to discuss issues because it was outside of business hours, effectively silencing students who tried to use collective opportunities to reach university administration (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Students attempted to work within the guidelines of the university administration

but were met with roadblocks which further reinforced the power dynamics of the institutions thereby reinforcing systemic problems ingrained in the university structure (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The university administrators' responses to student activism also created a discursive context where the student activists' concerns were silenced which was also consistent with Ahmed's (2012) theory. In one example, student activists asked the university administration to meet off-campus to discuss diversity issues on neutral ground. University administration refused to meet with students' off-campus labeling it as being in the "minutiae" of an issue because the real problem occurs on campus, effectively devaluing students' efforts and reinforcing the power dynamics as well as continuing to go against the stated values of inclusivity (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Another example included student activists demanding the university remove racial and gender descriptors in campus security alerts sent to the university because it did not list any other significant descriptors to help identify suspects (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The senior administrator responsible for safety responded by stating that since the email alerts began the university had been safer, that crime had declined over the years, members of the community had taken responsibility for their safety, and that the "feelings" about the email are subjective and personal (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The emphasis on feelings dismissed students' concerns that racial profiling had real effects on people of color and that racial profiling contributed to the disproportionate amount of citations, arrests, and brutality against the minority population (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

Outcomes of the study indicated university administrators should have engaged with student activists in ways that valued their experiences and understood their

viewpoints (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Other outcomes were for university administrators to have used student activism as a means to develop leadership or cultural acceptance that reflected institutional values on diversity and equity (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). University administrators should have also used student activism to advance and explore ideas of academic excellence and social justice in ways that celebrated diversity and inclusion (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). University administrators should not only seek to understand the experiences of student activists but also understand how stated institutional values might impact perceptions of the campus community.

Ropers-Huilman et al. (2005) conducted a study on how student activists characterized university administrators. The authors reviewed how student activists developed relationships with campus administrators and how those student activists understood those relationships. The researchers interviewed 26 student activists and discovered at least four different ways student activists' characterized administrators and how those characterizations affected both their actual and desired relationships (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student activists' actions came from tensions that existed between power systems and their ideas that were explicitly political, ideological, physical, economic, sexual, or generational (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). When these actions occurred at the university level they involved students, faculty, and campus administrators. University administrators were often viewed as the power system of higher education that had the most influence on student activists and their subsequent relationships (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

There were 26 participants identified as student activists and attended a southern research university in the U.S. (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Participants were categorized as black, white, Hispanic, multi-racial, or constructed their own racial identity, or chose not to elect. They ranged from age 19 to 25 and had different majors and different political affiliations (Ropers-Huilman, et.al, 2005). The student activists participated in several types of student activism that included a permanent space for the campus women's center, demonstrated against the privatization of the campus bookstore, and initiated a campaign to make the campus safer for students regardless of their sexual orientation (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). The purpose of the study was to describe how student activists characterized university administrators (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

The authors discovered four perceptions of campus administrators by the student activists, (a) administrators as gatekeepers of the system, (b) administrator as antagonists and enemies, (c) administrators as supporters, and (d) administrators as absentee leaders (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student activists described administrators as gatekeepers of the current system who were responsible for maintaining normalcy and stability of the university operations and functions (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Specifically, administrators retained a lot of power in the system and were interested in protecting the system (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Students also perceived administrators were constrained by the system within which they functioned and these constraints allowed administrators to have power over students' actions (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

Student activists described administrators as antagonists and enemies because students tried to change the system that was upheld and represented by the administration (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). The student activists interpreted the resistance of their



efforts by administrators as an attempt to disempower their activism by ignoring them or keeping information from them (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). The student activists viewed their relationship with campus administrators as being unwilling to listen, care, or give full attention to their concerns (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). In contrast, a few student activists described their experience with campus administrators as supportive (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student activists stated most of the support came from the availability of campus administration as well as having access to university resources (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

Student activists also mentioned they were unsure of what a campus administrator's job entailed. They were able to recognize a campus administrator's work was important but could not identify what that work might be, which was described as an absentee leader (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student activists described a lack of knowing what the roles and functions of administrators' duties were led them to have negative feelings toward relationships with campus administration (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Student activists were also aware of the roles both students and administrators played while on campus. Student activists' perceptions about their relationships with administrators indicated having regular and open dialogue would yield a positive outcome where collaboration could exist (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Other outcomes indicated in the study were developing positive relationships with campus administrators through groups such as Student Government Association (SGA) or Greek Life which could act as facilitators of interactions between campus administrators and student activists (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). An outcome that was not discovered in the study

was an opportunity for collaborative efforts surrounding positive social change (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

Student activists had a desire to be an integral part of improving the campus community and understood their primary purpose was to be able to fully engage in a society governed by democratic principles (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). The study also indicated university administrators should adhere to their mission of developing students by helping them learn how to be participants in society through leadership roles, recognizing the significance student activism has by allowing students to become actively involved in the campus community, and by understanding student activists can help campus administrators improve their connection to the campus community (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). Communication between campus administrators and student activists was essential when both parties sought to collaboratively improve campus climates, and this was especially true for administrators who wanted to promote civic engagement and active democratic participation (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005).

### **Student Development and Democratic Engagement**

University administrators have an opportunity to provide student development and democratic engagement for students when responding to or engaging with student activism. Service-learning has often been embraced by universities as a pedagogical tool that contributes to the learning process, community engagement, and service to others (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Stepteau-Watson (2012) reviewed a project on infusing student activism into the college curriculum through a service-learning project. The project was conducted to evaluate how service-learning can be used as a means to engage in student development by using student activism as the method to effect change.

The purpose of the project was to allow a group of undergraduate students who were taking a social work course the ability to develop, design, and implement a program that brought sexual assault awareness to the campus community (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students had the freedom to select the topic, attend courses that allowed them to develop and practice the skills they had learned through their generalist social work course, and to utilize the knowledge gained from macro courses on communities and organizations as a part of their problem-solving techniques (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). The premise of the project was to address a need of the campus community, develop a plan, empower the community to address the need, and use a strengths-based perspective (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). The intended pedagogical outcomes of the project were for students to increase awareness on the social issue, create opportunities for leadership development, apply empowerment and community change theories, and create opportunities for self-reflection and reflective learning (Stepteau-Watson, 2012).

The participants were undergraduate students who attended a mid-size public university and were grouped in different small groups where each had the same goal but different tasks (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students were evaluated on their ability to assess a community's needs, develop plans to address the need, implement the plan, and students' reflective evaluation of their success in the project (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students were allowed to work on the project inside and outside of the classroom and were given dedicated time to meet inside a classroom setting. Students were recently lectured on sexual assault and decided this was the issue they wanted to focus on as their social issue (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). After assessing the campus culture on sexual

assault students concluded there was a lack of awareness on the issue and decided to hold a campus march against sexual assault (Stepteau-Watson, 2012).

In conjunction with the office of health promotions at the university students planned a march that coincided with "Take Back the Night" which was an international event that brought awareness to sexual assault (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students selected which task group they wanted to be a part of which included logistics, marketing, business solicitation, and university liaison. Students logged their reflections on their time and activity on the project. Students were asked to assess if their approach was problem-based or strengths-based; if their work correlated with social work practices, values, and ethics; determine if the decision-making process was top-down or bottom-up; outline community organizing and empowerment theories used; and define how the event promoted social justice (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students were also asked to describe what they learned from the experience.

The participants reported different learning outcomes with the class project. Students indicated they developed an increased awareness about sexual assault on their campus and identified campus resources that provided support for victims of sexual assault (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students believed they were able to apply theory to both the community and the organizational practices used to complete the project (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students believed they had better leadership skills and learned valuable lessons on how to use strategy and coordinated efforts together (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Students also noted concerns were speaking to strangers about the issue because they believed others might not be interested in the issue and therefore not participate (Stepteau-Watson, 20112).

Seven different learning outcomes were gathered through evaluating this service-learning project (a) student activism was a mechanism for service-learning by creating opportunities for student learning inside and outside of the classroom, (b) opportunities were created for students to develop leadership roles that effected societal changes, (c) opportunities were created that prepared students for professional roles, (d) students were engaged in social and cultural issues, (e) students recognized their role in a global world, (f) student success was impacted by increasing the ability to learn and become motivated, and (g) opportunities for increasing self-awareness were made (Stepteau-Watson, 2012). Overall service-learning was a valuable method for teaching and learning that was infused into the college curriculum and used for democratic engagement.

In a similar study, Kezar (2010) examined how and why faculty and staff worked with student activists to impact the institution and the role the partnership played in student development. The researcher focused specifically on why faculty and staff partner with students to bring about structural change within the organization. The purpose of the study was to question the interactions between faculty/staff activists and student activists and how these relationships affected change. The research questions were (a) why do faculty/staff work with student activists to create change, (b) how do faculty/staff activists work with students activists to create change, (c) how does the institution's culture shape the type of collaboration between faculty/staff activists and student activists, (d) how does student participation with faculty/staff activists affect student development, and (e) what types of development are created (Kezar, 2010). The participants in the study attended a "typical" higher education institution which Kezar (2010) defined as an institution that did not have an "unusual structure, history, or

culture" (p. 458). This case study selected participants who self-identified as student activist leaders and volunteered to participate in the study. The study was conducted using one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 165 student activist leaders, 84 staff activists, and 81 faculty activists at five different higher education institutions (Kezar, 2010). The findings were based on motivation and the type of collaboration that contributed to student development and how faculty/staff activism impacted student development (Kezar, 2010).

Three types of college campuses were themed by the data. The first type of campus was described as a liberal arts campus where faculty/staff and students established long term partnerships on various initiatives (Kezar, 2010). The second type of campus was a community college that just began to experience partnerships between faculty/staff and students because of the changes in culture (Kezar, 2010). The third type of campus was described as a research institution where faculty/staff and student partnering were irregular and were limited to issues such as multiculturalism and diversity (Kezar, 2010).

The campus context at the liberal arts campus was that students had a certain amount of power because they would eventually become alumni and give back to the campus, and because of its progressive nature students were encouraged by administration to have new ideas and present them to the campus community (Kezar, 2010). The campus was also described as having progressive students who were interested in student activism which continued to increase over time (Kezar, 2010). Student activism was also informally introduced into the academic curriculum which faculty regarded as part of their responsibility (Kezar, 2010). Faculty and staff at this

campus became involved in student activism because they were previously student activists themselves, they had personal involvement with activism or community-based research, and they had a desire to develop future student activists because of students' ability to garner excitement and initiative behind an idea (Kezar, 2010). At this institution, the outcome and nature of collaboration between faculty/staff and the student activists were two instances where faculty/staff were the educators, mediators, mentors, and participants in activism (Kezar, 2010).

The campus context at the community college was one that originally served privileged students who had a conservative background and lived mostly in a suburban area. Over 10 years it became partly urban with a diverse population of lesser privileged students who were more liberal (Kezar, 2010). The campus also experienced an increase in faculty and staff that were more racially and economically diverse, who worked to promote student leaders on campus to become more progressive and encourage students to take on various leadership roles such as Student Body President (Kezar, 2010). In the same fashion as the liberal arts campus, the reasons faculty and staff became involved in student activism were because they felt a responsibility to develop the next generation of activists' leaders and desired to teach a democratic process to marginalized students. Students at this campus were more aware of the changes on campus than faculty and knew they contributed to the budget through their student fees. The outcome for the community college also had similar reasons for the nature of collaboration between faculty/staff and student activists which were the educational role, mediator role, and activist role (Kezar, 2010).

The campus context at the research institution was characterized as being conservative and focused on global issues rather than organizational issues. Students had high degrees of privilege and prestige, faculty and staff were considered conservative, and the administration had a large amount of power and was known for being oppressive toward students that did not want to partner with them and who chose to demonstrate their dissent (Kezar, 2010). The campus was also described as being forward-thinking but was formal and hierarchical (Kezar, 2010). The tactics used by student activists were described as questioning authority or trying to usurp the chain of command (Kezar, 2010). In contrast to the other campuses, the research institutions faculty and staff became involved with student activism as a means to forward their agenda rather than support student development. They also had a desire to use their power as a customer (Kezar, 2010). However, in a similar fashion to the other campuses, the research also showed faculty and staff at the research institution engaged with student activists because of their own experience as activists and their commitment to developing the next generation of student leaders (Kezar, 2010). The nature of collaboration between faculty/staff and student activists at the research campus was described as one that did not have to be in the spotlight, which meant faculty/staff were less likely to see students and be a part of the collaboration process and would do so only when it could be considered an open partnership (Kezar, 2010). As with the other institutions, the educational role was also an outcome of a collaboration between faculty/staff and student activists.

Faculty and staff were motivated to collaborate with students due to the creation of energy for change, students had a better understanding of technology, and students had power and influence (Kezar, 2010). The results indicated faculty and staff had an interest



in collaborating because of their activists' backgrounds and because students were able to engage and be more overt than they were in their professional roles (Kezar, 2010). The results also demonstrated the nature of collaboration between faculty/staff and student activists had three major themes which were educator, mediator, and initiator or activists (Kezar, 2010).

Student development opportunities that were provided to the student activists from faculty and staff included empowerment, learning the language of those in power, learning how to use tactics to create change, learning how to negotiate with those in power, and learning how to see the best of those in power rather than the worse (Kezar, 2010). Overall higher educational professionals learned how to maximize intentional co-curricular opportunities for student activists, create allies by partnering with student activists, and supported a culture of student activism (Kezar, 2010).

Kezar and Maxey (2014) continued studying what impact supporting student activism had on student development by reviewing studies that focused on the collective action of faculty, staff, and students toward student development and democratic engagement. The research was conducted at five campuses in the U.S. The purpose of the study was to discover ways faculty, staff, and students collaborated to effect change on their campus, community, and nation (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). The review looked beyond how faculty and staff supported student activism by honing in on how the collaboration resulted in student development (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Approaches used by faculty and staff to engage students in collective action were described along with the types of learning outcomes. Key learning outcomes were (a) developing plans for change, (b) determining strategies, (c) understanding methods of

consciousness-raising, (d) learning the language of those in power and how that power translates to the community, (e) understanding mediation and negotiation, (f) using data to influence decision-makers, and (g) navigating and overcoming obstacles in the change process (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). An example of one outcome was that faculty and staff were able to help students develop plans for change by working with them to expand their approaches to change and helping them understand that change is a process that occurs over time and can be fluid (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Another example outcome was that faculty and staff created plans for change that influenced administrators, lobbyists, and state officials for long term academic or curricular changes that students desired (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Faculty and staff also helped students determine appropriate strategies that moved their cause forward (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). One example included a campus where students organized an LGBT group that supported students of that community and campus administrators denied their request. Students wanted to protest against the university administration, but faculty and staff working in collaboration with students advised a different approach. The approach included writing a new proposal that used already existing resources and did not have major economic implications the university could not support (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In this example, this strategy was proven to be successful and the administration approved students' requests to create a new LGBT community group. Using faculty and staff knowledge of the university background and structure helped students develop a more effective strategy (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Faculty and staff were also able to help students understand that raising the consciousness of the community required more than protesting or involving media, it

required multiple levels of strategy (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Some of the strategies were holding one-to-one mentoring sessions or meetings across the campus community to raise awareness about a particular social issue. Another was sharing stories of students own personal experiences with campus administration about an issue. Other strategies included using groups such as alumni or the local community to be advocates toward a cause and hosting events such as speaker series or lunches that brought awareness to a particular issue (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

This type of collaboration taught students how to understand the language of campus administration and how power worked within the system (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Faculty and staff were able to help students learn the language of those in power and how the system worked because they were familiar with the institution's power relationships, understood the political landscape, and could identify what campus administrators considered a priority (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Sharing this knowledge with students allowed them to be aware of the campus dynamics and understand the important elements that made the system work (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Through collaboration faculty and staff also developed students' knowledge of understanding the value of mediation and negotiation (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In one study, students wanted to create a community farm so that homeless people could use the food to feed themselves however, campus administrators along with the local community were concerned this might create a health and safety hazard because some of the homeless begun to loiter and dispose of trash on campus (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Students did not want to negotiate with campus administrators on how to keep the initiative aligned with their original goal and determined they would not negotiate with

campus administrators (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Faculty and staff were able to help students understand the campus administrators' concerns and facilitated negotiations between students and campus administrators that could address the health concerns and continue the project in the most constructive manner (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Faculty and staff were also able to help students understand how to use data to influence decision-makers (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Students were taught how to collect, analyze, and present data that would influence positions of authority to make a change (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In one case study, a faculty member created a semester project where students had to collect, analyze, and present data to campus administrators that would reduce the campus's carbon footprint (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Students advocated for this issue before the assignment and the campus administration did not address the issue, but when the data from the project was presented to campus administration they changed their minds and approved some of the recommendations made by the student group (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Navigating and overcoming obstacles during the change process was a difficult experience for students who did not know how institutional hierarchies and power dynamics were structured (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Faculty and staff were able to help students learn that obstacles and challenges were part of the change experience and assist with some strategies that helped them overcome their challenges (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). By sharing their personal experiences with overcoming obstacles faculty and staff taught students how to persevere and continue to strive to accomplish their goals (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Faculty and staff explained that partnering with students allowed for fewer disparities between students and campus administrators, created opportunities for student development, and allowed opportunities for relevant teaching on the democratic process (Kezar & Maxey, 2014). Collective action between faculty, staff, and students helped advance student development as well as adhered to the institution's mission of political involvement and democratic engagement (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Democratic engagement and civic responsibility for student-athletes were also discovered in the literature. Gayles, Rockenbach, and Davis (2012) conducted a study on colleges' and universities' civic responsibility in the lives of student-athletes. The purpose of the research study was to assess how athletic participation molded the relationship between student activists' goals and subsequent charitable involvement (Gayles, et.al, 2012). The researchers defined student activists' goals as the measure of student's civic values, and subsequent charitable involvement as the measure of a student's civic behavior or engagement (Gayles, et.al, 2012). The conceptual framework of the study was based on Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model (I-E-O) model. This model was used to account for a student's prior college experiences with civic engagement and their current college influences on social activism and charitable involvement (Gayles, et.al, 2012). Student's co-curricular involvement was included in the conceptual framework because of the direct influence on student's behavior and values (Gayles, et.al, 2012).

The researchers conducted two national surveys that measured students' behaviors, attitudes, values, self-assessments, and expectations as they entered college and matriculated through college (Gayles, et.al, 2012). Both national surveys were

developed by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and were conducted in 2000 and 2003 with the same group of students to capture their freshman entry experiences and the subsequent years' experiences (Gayles, et.al, 2012). The setting of the research study was 46 institutions across the U.S. which included four-year colleges, universities, public, private, nonsectarian, and religious institutions. The results of the study revealed college students maintained equal levels of commitment to social activism regardless of their athletic involvement (Gayles, et.al, 2012). However, high-profile student-athletes were less involved in charitable activities than their nonathletic peers (Gayles, et.al, 2012). Although student-athletes shared the same values as their nonathletic peers, Gayles, et.al (2012) discovered student-athletes had less time to engage in charitable activities and were not able to translate their social values into social activism.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding the history of student activism, student motivation to engage in student activism, tactics used to protest, and recognizing social media as a new platform for student activism, should better prepare university administrators to respond to student activism. University administrators should not respond in haste but have a clear message that demonstrates the values of the institution and directly addresses students' concerns. University administration should also seek to incorporate service-learning or democratic engagement opportunities into programming and perhaps curriculum, to educate students on the values of the institution while also teaching the value of building relationships.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

This research study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze data on (a) the preparedness of university administrators' response to student activism, (b) the strategies used by university administrators' when responding to student activism, and (c) how social media affected university administrators' response to student activism. Specifically, a phenomenological research design was constructed to gather data on university administrators' preparedness to respond to student activism, their views on strategies to respond to student activism, and how social media affected their responses to student activism. Using this research design, the researcher addressed an important topic of concern for many higher education leaders.

Phenomenological research is the understanding of the essence of an experience shared among several individuals by using interviews, documents, observations, or art as a source of information (Creswell, 2013). This information can be analyzed for significant statements and textual and structural descriptions that describe the essence of the shared experience (Creswell, 2013). This method allowed participants in this research study to tell their individual stories to find both the differences and similarities of their lived experiences when responding to student activism; evaluating what strategies were effective when responding to student activism, and what impact social media had on responses to student activism. This chapter outlines the research questions, research design, procedure, setting, participants, data collection, and data analysis that was used for this research study.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this research study were (a) How are university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students prepared to respond to student activism; (b) What strategies did university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students use when responding to student activism; and (c) How did social media affect responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students?

To understand the shared experience of a phenomenon a researcher should ask the "what" and "how" of the experience (Moustakas, 2010). Specifically, researchers should seek to understand the experience of the individual with the phenomenon and the context or situations that have affected or influenced the experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach can have challenges when individuals who have had the same experience are not specifically identified (Creswell, 2013). In this research study, each participant was specifically identified to gather the most reliable data for an analysis of the shared experiences with student activism.

## **Research Design**

Phenomenological research can be both qualitative and quantitative, however, most qualitative researchers use this approach to study a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology can be defined as participants who have a universal experience (Creswell, 2013). The phenomenon for this research study was the experiences university administrators had with student activism on their campuses. This research study used a qualitative phenomenological research design by conducting interviews with



specific individuals who had the same shared experience. The researcher collected data from participants who experienced the phenomenon and composed a detailed description of the "what" and the "how" of the lived experience (Moustakas, 2010).

Phenomenological research uses descriptions rather than analysis or explanation of the phenomenon because it allows researchers to capture the essence of the shared experience (Moustakas, 2010).

Phenomenological research is usually conducted in social sciences, education, and other health science arenas (Creswell, 2013). This type of research identifies a group of individuals normally three to 15 in size who experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The discussion of the phenomenon is philosophical and allows the lived experiences of the participants to be both subjective and objective (Creswell, 2013). Subjective experiences are the individual's personal experience with the phenomenon. In this research study, the subjective experience was the participant's personal experience with student activism. Objective experiences are common experiences shared with other people. In this research study, the objective experience was the commonalities between the participant's experiences with student activism. This research study analyzed both the subjective and objective experiences of the participants to get a holistic view of the phenomenon.

The researcher bracketed themselves out of the study by identifying their own experiences with the phenomenon and isolating these experiences from the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Using a qualitative phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to understand the shared experience to develop practices or policies to understand a deeper meaning to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This

research study sought to recommend policies and strategies that would assist university administrators' responses to student activism productively. Thus, a phenomenological research design was best suited to address the research questions in this research study.

**Researcher Positionality.** Researcher positionality is described as philosophical assumptions or beliefs a researcher brings into their work which may inform or frame the research (Creswell, 2013). This positionality can include world views, values, beliefs, or experiences that influence the research or study and should be identified and critiqued for biases. For this research study, it was important to identify my assumptions as being primarily axiological with a social constructivist framework. Axiological assumptions are defined as present biases a researcher acknowledges as being great in quantity or influence over their approach to research and the topic at hand (Creswell, 2013). In attempting to outline their axiological orientation researchers should discuss freely their values which define the narrative and include his or her interpretations in conjunction with participant interpretations (Creswell, 2013).

Social constructivism is defined as individuals who seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2013). Social constructivist develops subjective meanings of their experiences which are directed toward certain objects or things (Creswell, 2013). In this context, a social constructivist researcher will look for the complexity in meaning instead of the narrow. This research paradigm relies heavily on the participant's viewpoint and how those viewpoints affect social and historical meaning (Creswell, 2013). The researcher recognized how their background influenced their position and therefore influenced the interpretation of the research.

As a researcher, it was also important to understand both the ontological and epistemological assumptions that applied to the research process. For this research study the ontological stance, how social constructivists understand reality, was defined as the different interactions with student activism that might frame multiple realities between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological stance, how social constructivists make reality known, was defined as the co-creation of reality that might exist between both the researcher and the participant (Creswell, 2013). As a researcher who has experience with student activism, it was important to understand how both of my ontological and epistemological assumptions might have impacted my researcher positionality when analyzing the data.

As a university administrator who is responsible for implementing, enforcing, training, and educating students on First Amendment rights it was important I understand how my professional, personal, and historical experiences impacted my researcher positionality. This research study intended to understand the shared experiences and meanings of others regarding student activism. Therefore, to allow for trustworthiness, this research study used bracketing also known as epoche to reduce bias. Bracketing or epoche is isolating personal experiences to take on new perspectives of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 2010). The following sections outline my experiences with social justice, racial equity, and university administration which might have framed or impacted my perspective of student activism.

**Social Justice.** As a social constructivist who is a minority woman and an administrator in higher education, my assumptions were impacted by my personal, cultural, and historical experiences. As a black woman who grew up in central Texas

during the 1980s and 1990s, I recall both positive and negative discourse between black and white America. I also recall the stigma that came along with being homosexual or bisexual. During this time, both HIV/AIDS and intravenous drug use were at a high for both black and homosexual people (Avert, 2019). It was also a time where "gangster rap" music was seen as a weapon used to rally minorities against law enforcement and racial profiling was on the rise for minorities (Catalan, 2014). I was unaware of the social constraints at the time but could sense race relations in the U.S. were strained.

My first understanding of protests and activism occurred when I was in high school. I attended a predominately white high school and had many friends that were white. I did not realize the constraints between races until the news reported the story of Rodney King being brutally beaten by the Los Angeles Police Department. I saw this story unfold first hand and through my television screen saw the pain and tension between black and white America. Watching the protests and riots that happened after the police were acquitted of all charges was surreal. I understood the anger and the reasons why so many black people were upset. The opinions of the black culture fell along racial lines and most blacks identified with those who protested against the acquittal of the four white officers who beat Rodney King (Catalan, 2014). Instead of a civil protest similar to sit-ins of the 1960s to demonstrate frustrations, black people reacted to the acquittal by rioting, destroying property, and harming other individuals. I believe this behavior contributed to the fear many white people had about the black race. During this time "gangster" rap music was popular which I believe fueled the anxiety of white America while also empowering black America to resist conformity.

I also remember people being afraid of the homosexual population because they believed any contact with homosexual people would transfer HIV or AIDS directly to themselves. In eighth grade, I was a part of a program that allowed me and my classmates to meet a woman who contracted HIV/AIDS through her first sexual encounter with a man. We learned this deadly disease was not just a homosexual disease and that HIV/AIDS did not have to be transmitted through drug use. As a participant in this program, I had the privilege of bringing awareness about the HIV/AIDS epidemic to my middle school classmates which was my first personal experience with advocacy. Both of these experiences prepared the lens for which I would view protests and advocacy.

**Racial Equity.** Another experience that shaped my perceptions of activism occurred during my time as an undergraduate student in college. I attended a predominately white institution (PWI) as an undergraduate and graduate student. During both undergraduate and graduate school, I did not participate in student activism however, I identified with some of the social issues student activists advocated. One of the social issues was the perceived lack of care by university administration concerning the black Greek population. As a member of a black Greek sorority, I remember feeling university administrators preferred white fraternities and sororities over the black organizations.

An example of this perceived lack of care was that white fraternities and sororities were able to hold on-campus events without police presence and use campus facilities, whereas black fraternities and sororities had to ensure police were going to be present and were routinely denied access to on-campus facilities. This perception permeated

throughout the black Greek organizations and caused tension between black students and university administration. Black student activists tried to complain about this perceived disparity to university administration through one-on-one meetings and emails that expressed their concerns. University administration would meet with students but no change would occur. University administration would list out the reasons why they required police presence at events, listing safety as the most important reason.

Upon reflection, I believe the university administration was probably doing the right thing however, their method of communication perpetuated the perceived lack of care. This was evident to all of the black student organizations which created more tension between university administrators and students instead of inclusiveness which was an institutional value. These experiences helped reaffirm the disparities of racial inequity from my high school years and helped to further impact my view of racial inequity. Ultimately, these experiences gave me a desire to support racial equality and inclusivity in my role as a student affair professional and within the higher education community.

**University Administration.** My high school and college experiences shaped my world view of activism and protests. It was not until I began to work as a higher education administrator that my perceptions shifted. As a university administrator who works with both majority and minority students and who also is responsible for implementing and enforcing free speech policies on campus, I am now able to relate to both the student and university perspectives on student activism. At my current place of employment minority, students perceive university administrators as not caring about issues that affect them.

One example is the perceived lack of response by university administration after a student-athlete dressed in blackface and posted it to social media. Students at my institution were upset and demanded to meet with university administration. University administrators met with students who had a list of demands which included taking the student-athletes scholarship away and removing the student-athlete from the team. University administration could not agree to this action because it would infringe on the student-athlete's First Amendment rights. However, instead of addressing each demand one at a time and trying to understand the student activists' perspective, university administration reemphasized all of the diversity programming's it had such as hosting diversity luncheons, having an office dedicated to diversity, and hosting diversity conferences. Few if any changes related to racial dynamics on campus were implemented.

Student activists were aware of the positive diversity programming held by the university, the message they were trying to get across was even with positive diversity programming, racism was still a perceived issue amongst students and that university administration did not care about racism either implied or explicit. As a university administrator who was involved in the discussion with the student activists, I understand why the university decided to reemphasize the good work it had done with diversity. However, as a researcher who has studied student activism, I also believed it was important to hear the students' concerns about racism and acknowledge each of their demands. This incident not only taught me the importance of how institutions communicate core values to student activists, but it also taught me the importance of acknowledging how student activists choose to be actively involved in solving issues that

affect their communities. Each of these historical, personal, and professional experiences have framed my perceptions of protest behavior, social issues, and student activism as it relates to being a university administrator.

### **Procedure**

The procedure for this research study described when, where, and how data will be collected. The setting, participants, method of data collection, and process for data analysis is described in detail so it may be replicated for future research. This section will also include information on obtaining informed consent along with the storing and securing of data.

**Setting.** The setting for this research study was four-year public universities. This research study was conducted using participants located across Texas. Since the researcher resides in Texas and could travel within the state, in-person interviews were attempted to limit distractions or interruptions that might have occurred. If in-person interviews were not able to occur then interviews were conducted over the telephone or using video chat services such as Zoom or Skype. Efforts to examine and remain cognizant of collection medium biases were employed during data analysis. The locations of the universities were both in rural and urban areas. As a researcher who has worked at both rural and urban four-year public institutions, it has been my experience that the culture, values, communication, organizational structure, and population have differing perspectives on student activism. Therefore, to have the most conclusive data set possible at this time it was important to gain the perspective of participants in both rural and urban areas.



The universities ranged in size from 5,000 to over 40,000 students. Students were enrolled as undergraduates, graduates, transient, or transfer students. Students attending the institutions ranged across all races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. These demographic variables could be the focus of many forms of activism and the positionality of participants' experiences in these areas must be taken into account in interviews. The universities could be identified as either liberal arts, comprehensive universities, or research institutions. This research study focused on the traditional university experience and did not include research on community, junior, vocational, technical, professional, or online colleges and universities. Although these aspects might be of interest for future research, this research study sought to gather information from university administrators similar to the characteristics of the universities described in chapter one and two of this research study. Those characteristics included four-year, public, liberal arts, comprehensive universities, or research institutions.

**Participants.** This research study used purposeful sampling—specifically criterion-based sampling—to select participants. Criterion based sampling is used when all participants meet criteria for assurance of the shared experience with the phenomenon and meet the characteristics of the sample (Creswell, 2013). The participants for this research study were identified by their position or title at the university which included the following terms; (a) President, Chancellor, or Chief Executive Officer, (b) Vice President of Student Affairs, Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs, Vice President of Student Services, Vice-Chancellor of Student Services, Chief Student Affairs Officer, or Chief Student Services Officer, and (c) Dean of Students or Dean of Student Life. A

primary participant confirmation was conducted using detailed internet searches and a review of participant position. Participants were in their role for at least five years, experienced student activism on their campus within the past 10 years, and were able to implement and make policy changes at their respective institutions. A secondary check was confirmed by contacting the prospective participant or an administrative assistant to determine if they have met the additional criteria. At this second level of participant confirmation, potential participants were questioned about their criteria for inclusion in the study via phone or email communication. The information gathered from both the primary and secondary checks is outlined in a matrix that indicated if all criteria were met (Appendix A). If the criteria were met perspective participants received an introductory email that asked them to indicate if they met the criteria (Appendix B). This indicator supported the validity of the participant sample.

University administrators at the institutions ranged in races, ages, genders, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religious backgrounds. Participants were not excluded based on the type of doctorate (i.e. Doctorate of Education or Doctorate of Philosophy) or level of degree (i.e. doctorate, masters, or bachelors). This decision was made to enlarge the sample size to include the most possible number of participants for data collection. Moreover, participants were not included or excluded in the study based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other demographic variables. Participants were asked to give their informed consent for interviewing by signing a participant consent form that detailed the nature and scope of this research study and defined how the information collected was used and analyzed (Appendix C). Using this

criterion-based sampling approach I anticipated interviewing between seven to 15 University Presidents, Vice Presidents, or Deans of Students.

**Data Collection.** Purposeful sampling was used to collect rich data from persons who had experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this research study, data was collected from criteria-qualified participants who experienced the shared phenomenon of being a higher education administrator and who experienced student activism on their campus (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research allowed for the use of artifacts, poems, observations, and other types of documentation that described the phenomenon, however, individual interviews were typically used as the method of data collection (Creswell, 2013). This research study conducted individual interviews using an interview questionnaire (Appendix D). Open-ended questions that were semi-structured allowed participants to reconstruct and reflect on the shared experiences in their context (Seidman, 2013). Multiple interviews might have been necessary to ensure the collection of information captured the essence of the experiences which included the breadth and depth of the individual and shared experience (Moustakas, 2010).

Interviews were conducted with at least six participants who had lived the shared experience of the phenomenon. This number of interviews allowed for various experiences to be collected and analyzed for a detailed descriptive analysis (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were set at a maximum of 90 minutes per session to accomplish the three-interview format, described below, as recommended by Seidman (2013). Ninety minutes allows participants to not limit their time by unconsciously counting down 60 minutes and two hours can be overwhelming to both the participant and the researcher (Seidman, 2013).

The three-interview format for a qualitative phenomenological study is a series of interviews that involve focusing on the life history of the participant, concentrating on the details of the experience of the participant, and reflecting on the meaning of the experience of the participant (Seidman, 2013). For this research study, the interviews did not exceed 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Participants reviewed transcripts and made changes as they deemed necessary to account for the trustworthiness of the data, a standard member checking procedure.

The data was stored and organized using an internet-based management system that was secured by encryption and required password protection. Interviews were labeled by date, time, and used a pseudonym name for the participant to protect participant privacy. Attribute codes were used to protect the names and identities of the participants and interview responses. Attribute codes are both descriptive and varied and include information such as gender, ethnicity, and age (Saldana, 2016). This information was included in the interview questionnaire and entered by the researcher. Interviews were reviewed and highlighted for significant statements that were reflective of the lived and shared experiences (Creswell, 2013).

**Data Analysis.** This research study used structural coding as a method for analyzing the data. Structural coding allowed for a comparison of the commonalities, differences, and relationships of the information gathered (Saldana, 2016). Structural coding is appropriate for studies that employ multiple participants and semi-structured interviews to categorize or theme the data (Saldana, 2016). Structural coding is also applicable for interview transcripts and appropriate for open-ended survey responses

(Saldana, 2016). The broader research questions are preceded by the structural code which is related to the interviewer's questions and the participant's responses (Saldana, 2016). Structural coding also allows qualitative researchers to focus on the weight of the theme rather than the frequency (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, structural coding was the proper coding method for this research study because it helped identify the most impactful themes related to the shared experiences of the participants.

This research study also used analytic memo writing as an additional way to bracket and record how the conceptualization of themes emerged. Analytic memo writing is defined as a process that documents the researcher's reflections on how they identify themes, patterns, categorize, and create concepts when analyzing the data (Saldana, 2016). Analytic memo writing is conducted before, during, and after the coding process to ensure researchers challenge their assumptions and understand how the research can shape thoughts, actions, and decisions of the researcher (Saldana, 2016). Analytic memo writing also serves as an additional method of coding or categorizing (Saldana, 2016). Analytic memos are embedded with codes and categories from the researcher's reflections about the unanswered questions, frustrations, connections, and understanding of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). Therefore, as a university administrator who has had experiences with student activism, it was beneficial to add analytic memo writing in the data analysis process, for the data to be reliable and dependable (Creswell, 2013).

As the researcher, I will memo my thoughts, feelings, frustrations, connections, and initial reactions for each of the participant interviews both before and after interviews. This allowed me to write about biases, preconceived perceptions, and

understandings I had during the interview process. I also used memos to look for themes, meaning, and understanding of the data collected to assist with the coding process.

Structural coding and analytic memo writing can be done concurrently when analyzing qualitative data to achieve a reciprocal relationship between the coding system and the understanding of a phenomenon (Saldana, 2016).

Significant statements of the participants were analyzed to identify themes of the lived and shared experiences which are defined as horizontalization (Moustakas, 2010). The themes are developed by finding clusters of meaning from significant statements (Creswell, 2013). Using both the significant statements and themes a descriptive analysis was written to describe the shared experience of the phenomenon by the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Three types of descriptions can be written when analyzing the significant statements and themes: (a) textural description which is describing the experience of the participants, (b) structural description which is describing the context and setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, and (c) using both the textural and the structural descriptions to write an essential description that describes the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). To develop a rich analysis of the phenomenon five data analysis tasks were followed: (a) the transcripts were read through multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data, (b) significant statements or phrases were identified that related to the experience of the phenomenon, (c) meanings were formulated and clustered into themes that were similar to each of the participants, (e) data was integrated into in-depth, exhaustive descriptions of the phenomenon, and (f) findings were validated by including pieces of participants

interviews in the final description. These data analysis tasks were developed following Creswell's (2013) guidance.

Analyzing the data for significant statements and phrases that can be expanded into themes required first and second cycle coding (Saldana, 2016). First-cycle coding is defined as processing the data into subcategories that are "grammatical, elemental, affective, literary and language, exploratory, procedural, and a final profile entitled "Theming the Data" (Saldana, 2016, p. 68-69). In this research study, participants' data were analyzed for grammatical, literary, linguistic, and other noted similarities, constituting first-cycle coding procedures for the research study. Second-cycle coding is defined as the continued exploration of the data by classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and applying the theory to the data sorted in the first-cycle (Saldana, 2016). During second-cycle coding, participants' data were re-coded using the categories identified in first-cycle coding and then the data was classified, synthesized, conceptualized, and applied to Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Through the rigorous, consistent application of this coding scheme, themes should emerge. To reach saturation of the data a coding team that included the chair of this research study, a doctoral student, and myself as the researcher was utilized. This process increased the validity of the data.

This proposal was presented to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. The IRB is responsible for protecting human research participants by ensuring studies are compliant with laws and regulations regarding human subjects. This proposal also included an informed consent agreement that could be withdrawn at any time without penalty. Participant identities were protected through attribute coding.

Interview responses including audio recordings were secured through an internet-based management system that was both encrypted and require password protection. After completion of the research study interview responses, transcripts, coding materials, memos, and audio recordings were uploaded and stored in a secure data software management system that is encrypted and password protected for data analysis. After the data was analyzed all stored information will be destroyed within one year with the completion of the research study.

### **Conclusion**

This research study sought to answer the "what" and the "how" using three semi-structured questions related to the experience university administrators had when responding to student activism; (a) How are university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students prepared to respond to student activism; (b) What strategy did university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students use when responding to student activism; and (c) How did social media affect responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students?

This research study attempted to add to the literature the types of strategies and methods that are best utilized when university administrators were prepared for and responded to student activism proactively and collaboratively. Information gathered in this study concluded with recommendations for an approach, strategy, or possible policy implementations that might assist university administrators' response to student activism. Future research can be expounded upon using the limitations presented in this research study.



Student activism has been a part of higher education since the colonial period and continues to have a strong presence in modern times. Therefore, it was important for university administrators to understand the dynamics of student activism and how to address student concerns regarding social issues in a way that is not in name only but by active integration of the institution's mission, vision, and values. This research study adds to the literature the impact student activism has on higher education administration.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Results**

The purpose of this research study was to discover how university administrators prepared to respond to student activism, what strategies worked best when university administrators responded to student activism, and how social media affected university administrators' responses to student activism. This research study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to answer the three research questions. Those questions were (a) How are university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students prepared to respond to student activism; (b) What strategy do university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students use when responding to student activism; and (c) How does social media affect responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students? The results gathered from this phenomenological research study attempted to answer the "what" and the "how" of the lived experience from each of the respective university administrators (Moustakas, 2010).

Structural coding was used as the method of data analysis for this research study. Structural coding allowed for a comparison of the commonalities, differences, and relationships of the information gathered from the participants (Saldana, 2016). There were six participants interviewed for this research study and one at each university administrator level (i.e. president, vice president, and dean of students). Structural codes were determined by reading each transcript and identifying significant statements. These statements were coded and examined for patterns. Patterns that consistently emerged were categorized into themes. Analytic memo writing was used as an additional method of data analysis. Analytic memo writing was conducted before, during, and after the

coding process to challenge researcher assumptions and to compare and contrast the data provided by the participants (Saldana, 2016).

There were six participants interviewed for this research study. There was at least one participant for each level indicated by the research questions. Each participant was given a pseudonym name to protect the identity of the participant and the integrity of the data. Each institution was also given a pseudonym for the additional trustworthiness of the data provided by the participants. The first institution was Brookegate University, a research doctoral university with approximately 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students located in southeast Texas. Three participants from this institution were interviewed for this research study. Lauren Sutter, president of the university; Ronald Perry, vice president of student affairs; and Jack Ashton, dean of students all worked at Brookegate University with each having a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 30 years of experience as higher education administrators. Each participant at Brookegate also had a minimum of 5 years in his or her current positions. The second was Riverside University, a research doctoral university with approximately 70,000 undergraduate and graduate students also located in southeast Texas. Lance Thibodaux, vice president of student affairs at Riverside University had over 15 years of experience as a higher education administrator and 5 years in his current role. The third was Sienna Stone University, a research doctoral university with approximately 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students located in north Texas. Rebecca Fillmore, assistant vice president and dean of students at Sienna Stone had over 15 years of experience as a higher education administrator with 10 years in her current role. The fourth was Stone Creek University, a research doctoral university with approximately 39,000 undergraduate and graduate

students located in central Texas. Sarah Sullivan, associate vice president and dean of students had over 20 years of experience as a higher education administrator with 10 years in her current role. Participant interviews were between 30 – 60 minutes, were transcribed and returned to each participant for member checking, and then reviewed by a coding team for analysis.

The data analysis revealed 29 structural codes that were categorized into nine major themes; (a) external and internal pressure, (b) balancing act and competing values, (c) varied degrees of student activism, (d) faculty activism, (e) student development and engagement, (f) empathy, (g) impact of social media, (h) institutional and organizational support, and (i) roles and responsibilities. The categorization of these structural codes into themes can be viewed in Appendix E1. Social media was the most prominent theme discovered in the data analysis, which had several chunks of data within the six transcripts. Appendix E2 displays the prominence of each code within the categorized theme.

### **External and Internal Pressure**

Participants described external pressure as a series of contexts from outside the university that were not controlled by institutional policies or leaders. Lauren Sutter, President of Brookegate University, discussed off-campus groups that incited students to some degree of student activism. Lauren explained,

I would say a third to 25% [of campus activism] was driven by off-campus. It wasn't the students really that were driving it. It was driven more by groups off campus inciting the students to some degree.

Jack Ashton, Dean of Students at Brookegate University, echoed this claim by noting that "outsiders" are usually the agitators of campus dissent. Jack explained,

I've discovered that there are professional people who create dissonance, that will come and try to agitate. They're the ones that are hoping you'll overreact and arrest them. You want to make sure that the police, the administration don't overreact and give them more press than they should have.

Another participant, Associate Vice President and Dean of Students' Sarah Sullivan at Stone Creek University described student protests in an urban city where community members joined the protest

...the group was originally about a hundred, this other crowd was about 200 and most of them were not students. Most of them were people from the community. The problem is that we can control students or at least try to, I cannot control people that don't have any connection to the university.

Participants explained because there was no actionable recourse that could be implemented on external protestors, such as suspension from the university, there was little to no control of the outcome. However, Sarah recognized that she was able to use the moment to teach her students that counter-protestors were guaranteed the right to speak, but they could not stop her students from expressing their First Amendment right. In this particular instance, Sarah described how she went back and forth from one group to the other explaining the process to each side, "I remember I felt like an orchestra director". Sarah recalls the protests were ultimately successful because each group respected each other's right to protest and both practiced civility.

Participants described internal pressure as a series of contexts or events that were often more detailed and focused on institutional change and were governed by internal policies. Ronald Perry, Vice President for Student Affairs at Brookegate University, described a social fraternity affiliated with Greek Life, was prohibited from having social events and was banned from bringing canes to campus which was symbolic to the fraternity. The fraternity would use canes to hit people when physical altercations occurred at social events. The fraternity wanted to dispute the sanction and advocate the importance of carrying the canes from a cultural and historical perspective. Ronald explained to the fraternity members if they were going to use the canes to violate the code of conduct, the significance of the cultural importance was no longer valid. The university had a responsibility to protect the safety of all students. Ronald clarified, if the fraternity wanted to exercise their right to express themselves through utilizing the canes, the fraternity would have to self-govern. Ronald elaborated, "I like to put the responsibility for monitoring back on them, and they do such a good job at self-governance."

In another instance, Ronald described several years ago, the U.S. Surgeon General recommended that condoms were the best way to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. In contrast, the Board of Regents for the university decided that it was best to eliminate the ability to have condoms on campus. During this time, the university complied with the board's decision and removed condoms from the health center and other parts of campus. The student body decided to respond by holding a protest rally in the mall area requesting the ability to have condoms on campus. Ronald explained, "He [board of regents] isn't

going to do anything about it, but their request is their fundamental right and they are not breaking any rules."

In another case, Jack explained that internal pressures occurred when equality was the issue. "We had a blackface incident where one of our student-athletes decided to do blackface and it went out on social media, and that ended up in a big outcry". The student chapters of the NAACP, BSA, and other campus leaders responded by writing a list of demands asking for the athlete to be removed from the team, to revoke the student-athletes scholarship, and for the student-athlete to make a public apology to the university community. University administrators met with the student groups, explained to them what the university policy would, and would not allow them to do under the First Amendment. Jack stated,

A lot of times in these situations, students just want to be heard. They are not expecting you to come up with this great policy that is going to solve all the problems. They just want you to know they are upset. Everybody wants a voice.

Jack's position was one point of view of how administrators navigated internal pressure. Other participants noted that allowing students to self-govern and empowering them to protests on matters they cared about was also effective. The participants summarized that internal and external pressures were challenging in unique ways and that responding to both pressures required knowing and understanding institutional values and having a balanced approach when responding to student activism.

### **Balancing Act and Competing Values**

Participants described balancing act and competing values as student activism that required a non-extreme balance between activists' calls and non-activists' rights to an

education. Also, participants described the challenges between balancing competing values as situations where two parties were at odds and both of their demands must be addressed. In terms of balancing students' rights to actively express themselves and other students' rights to have an uninterrupted academic experience, Lauren explained,

If it's [student activism] not being invasive to activities, then you just support it and let them kind of work it through. They [student activists] have to understand if other students want to go to class, then those other students should be able to go to class. I think you have to be balanced in that we want you to have the ability to act, but we want to protect the rights of the other students to go on with their lives should they wish.

Lauren also expressed that determining a balanced response was a challenge when it pertained to student development.

Allowing them to have the activism is important and I think it helps them develop what their values are going to be later. I think the challenge is going to be, what is the balanced response, and how do you also use it as an educational opportunity. How far can you take this and make it educational, and not take it too far and make it seem like you are trying to squelch some activism in a certain area.

Understanding institutional values was another important aspect of balancing competing values. Lance Thibodaux, Vice President of Student Affairs at Riverside University described,

We have to make sure policies reflect what your values are and what the laws are and those two aren't always congruent. So you have to make sure that we are



ensuring that we socialize those things with our peers, but also with our administration, our boards, and even the legislature.

In another instance, Rebecca Fillmore, Dean of Students at Sienna Stone University, described that her institution values inclusivity and diversity. When the campus preachers came to campus, her team were proactive in their approach. Rebecca stated,

That's a big thing because we are very inclusive and a very diverse campus, and so when there's somebody in there talking badly about a group of students or a group of faculty or staff members because of their identity, it's definitely something that we need to address and take care of. When we knew they were coming, we had some pretty proactive meetings with students, and that was really helpful because then they could counter-protest by putting on an event, in another part of campus, so really opening up the lines of communication has been very helpful.

In this instance, the institution did not stop the campus preachers' First Amendment right to speak, but the institution used the moment to stay true to their values of inclusiveness and diversity by offering students an alternative solution.

In terms of balancing competing values in situations where two parties were at odds and both of their demands must be addressed, Lance explained that conservative students on his campus felt like they were being muted and if they engaged in activities to express themselves, then socially liberal students would try to shut them down. University administrators were tasked to balance responses that adhered to institutional values, protect the First Amendment, while also supporting both groups. Lance noted

that there was a commonality between both groups. Both groups were concerned about immigration, economic disparities, religious freedoms, and liberty, but simply had different perspectives. Lance stated,

So it's not either one or the other, but each of those carries two or more perspectives, so we try to make sure that we're understanding of these things when they happen. University administrators aimed to find a balance where both groups could freely express themselves. Again, it's one of those, are we able to have the connection points with the students.

In another instance, Sarah noted that when university administrators attempted to be proactive by planning for potential consequences of a high-profile person who might compromise the safety of students, the students who were sponsoring the person believed that you are against them. Sarah stated,

When responding to the potential consequences of an event or potential implication of a person coming to our university, regardless some people think, only because they are Republican, you are already against them. No, we would do the same thing if it were another extreme group. We look at the history. Have there been other events or extreme groups who may bring a tendency for out of control protests.

In some cases, university administrators had to find a balanced approach of both safety and freedom of assembly while supporting the values of the institution.

### **Varied Degrees of Student Activism**

Participants described varied degrees of student activism as having two levels. The first was low-level student activism, which was described as the realization that some

activism was not majorly supported or widely believed. The second was high-level student activism, which was described as some activism that was widely supported or focused on a major issue. Participants reported more encounters with low-level student activism rather than high-level student activism. Examples of low-level student activism included students expressing their concerns directly to university administrators resulting in one on one conversations, university administrators holding luncheons where students could express their concerns on issues they cared about, and small protests that did not amount to large crowds and only lasted a few hours or days. Ronald explained,

Student activism, it's more we have students who come talk to you about a concern, you know, they are not protesting in the mall as we vision, or I vision when I was in college. But it is more students who will come talk to you and share concerns about what's going on, on campus. I would say 99% of any activism are issues that are important to some students, not every student. Sometimes I'm amazed the students come to me, they're not really activists, but they're concerned about an issue.

Regarding low-level student activism on her campus, Lauren echoed, I think we have had some of the luncheons where we have brought up some of the issues and discussed them. I think there were probably a few [protests] at other places that were more activism in a role that you would think of like sit-ins and marches and things. Less so here. I will say a large percentage of our students work here. There is less time to do some of that. If you are at a university where students don't work, there is a lot more time to actually ramp those things up and get them going.

Jack described that low-level activism was also associated with apathy. Jack explained,

We had someone, about two or three years ago who tried to incite and things like that because of perceived injustices about issues. But really, he lost traction after a few days because you know, while people care, they didn't care enough to get out and demonstrate. About four years ago we had a demonstration where some people got out there and it ended up being 10 people marching down to the courthouse to protest abortion. So, you can't say our whole student body was against abortion because 10 people showed up and went down there.

There were two specific examples of high-level student activism. Lance described students who held a Black Lives Matter march that began at the alumni association building and went to the administration building. The march was about a mile long and students gathered in large numbers outside of the building. The student activists decided not to enter the administration building but instead gathered outside, which turned out to give them a lot of publicity. Lance stated,

They walked from our alumni association about a mile over to the senior administration office and they didn't enter, they went outside, it was really some publicity piece and really stressing their message. Well, we were supportive of what they were talking about as much as they were. So I think it was learning on each side because they were a little surprised that we were supportive of them exercising their rights and even some of the content.

Sarah described her encounter with high-level student activism that occurred when students gathered to silently protest a group of young Republicans who were selling

baked goods for one dollar, which represented a white person while selling five or 10 cent baked goods, which represented African American people. Sarah stated,

It was insensitive, then somebody had shirts about immigrants and catch me, it was as if you catch somebody with mud. I mean it was horrible. Our students decided they wanted to protest, they decided to protest in silence, and it was beautiful. They were all silent looking down with their hands behind their backs, kind of like praying, so it was a huge number. It was very organized, they were protesting without words. But then a crowd came in and that's when it got a little out of hand and we had to actually arrest some people from crowds who came from the city.

The participants agreed that different levels of protest had different university administrator responses. Low-level protests that were more conversational in nature and did not disrupt academic progress did not require university administration intervention. These protests generally had low numbers of participants and often could be resolved through discussion. High-level protests required more university administration support and at times required intervention by university administrators or law enforcement. However, higher levels of student activism resulted in students gaining the support of university administration whose ultimate desire was to help students have a successful protest.

### **Faculty Activism**

Although faculty activism was not the primary focus of this research study, it emerged as a theme. Participants described faculty activism as faculty tackling societal issues that created dissension between students and university administrators. Jack

mentioned an incident where faculty members at his institution decided to have an area where people could write their thoughts on bulletin boards. A person wrote an explicative next to the name Obama and an older faculty member became upset and took that portion of the bulletin down. This action upset the students on campus and they began "trash talking" the professor. Jack stated,

Someone dropped the F-bomb and then put Obama, which got the older faculty member upset who came down and cut it out of the wall. That got students very upset about it, they were starting to gather, they were trash-talking this teacher, putting it on social media, and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) started getting involved about censorship.

University administration had to intervene and explain to the professor that they had to put the cutout portion of the bulletin back up. University administration explained to the faculty that students had the right to express themselves and because the faculty originated the idea, they could not control what people wrote, even if they disagreed with the content. Jack stated that it became an opportunity to educate both students and faculty.

Another incident described by Rebecca was when she held a program about free speech and how new legislation in her state impacted free speech. One of the administrators at the institution used the "N" word while speaking at the program and then proceeded to use the "F" word; however, it was censored, which led to student activism on her campus. Rebecca noted students were upset because the administrator censored herself on the use of an explicative, but did not do the same using a racial epitaph. Rebecca noted, "We had about two weeks of pretty significant activism about

that, I mean she resigned the next day." Rebecca elaborated that the incident was all over the news. Rebecca reported that students gave a list of demands to the president of the university the next day and they came to the institution's board of regents meeting the following week. Both of these incidents caused university administrators to take action to correct messages to students about First Amendment rights and to be advocates on behalf of the student population in response to faculty activism. Participants also reported that faculty activism facilitated student development and engagement by presenting educational opportunities for students.

### **Student Development and Engagement**

Participants described student development and engagement as the realization that activism was a way to seek improvements to social context and the realization that activism can have educational opportunities for students. Lance described student engagement not as managing student activism but as engaging with students by working with them to exercise their rights. Lance also stated, "We are really preparing students to engage in the political process and the social process in healthy and constructive means and that is really our job." Lance also explained that the second aspect of student development and engagement was to educate students' about their rights as a citizen, at a public institution, under the first amendment, and to make sure those rights were not abridged. Lance noted the way to make sure that education and student development occurred was to be innovative with how to help students. One of the ways university administrators at Lance's institution assisted students was by developing a team called Activity Response and Resource Team (ARRT). Instead of having law enforcement be present, this team was responsible for sending educators and student affairs staff to be

onsite during a rally or protest. The ARRT would be onsite to help deescalate situations, disperse events that had become disruptive to academic progress, and provided additional support to students. The AART was also charged with being proactive. The team would provide guidance before, during, and after events, paid attention to what was occurring across campus before events took place, and had trained educators as counselors on call at different events. Lance and his team decided that being proactive was important. Lance stated, "You asked the question, how do you decide when to, we've already decided we're going to respond. We're going to be at every party of the educational process with the students."

The ARRT was one innovative way of educating and developing students, another was the creation of multimedia websites as a tool for both students and faculty to find educational information on the First Amendment. Brookegate University had recently published an expressive activity website with information on university policies related to the First Amendment, how students can plan an event with the help of university staff, and a video, which interviewed students on campus describing their definition of free speech. Jack stated,

Also, I think we've done some really good things proactively to help coach by creating a website about exactly what we do on expressive activities and what we should do beforehand and how we should respond. That I think has really helped both our students as well as faculty.

Riverside University had a similar approach by creating a website that helped educate the university as a whole but also answered questions that were harder to understand about the First Amendment. Lance noted,



We're also working on a First Amendment website that provides a little more constructive commentary and education and guidance, to the whole campus, not just to the students, because people will say you need to shut those students down, our response is no, we're not, it's not what we do here. You may not like what they're talking about whether it's left, right, faith-based, you name it, the reality is that's their right to be able to express themselves and we're going to help them do that in a way that is consistent with our values and it's going to benefit them for the remainder of their life.

Sarah also described that educating and developing students was one of the top priorities at her institution, particularly education on the First Amendment. Sarah explained,

We need to make sure our students understand what is their First Amendment, what are some of the things we can do or not do because they don't understand how hate speech is not illegal, and it's not a hate crime. They confuse both of them. They think hate speech is a crime and it is not. Hate speech is insensitive speech protected by the U.S. constitution and if we wait to teach them, then it's too late.

Sarah elaborated that if institutions waited to train students until the day of a protest that the institution might be in trouble. Sarah explained that students needed to know certain types of protest could have landed them in jail. Sarah detailed,

They are activists and they really want to take over the president's office and that's something they want to do and they want to be arrested, I respect that, it's their choice, but I don't want them to think that nothing is going to happen to them if

they do that, or if they stop a police car in the parking lot, or things like that. We have to play scenarios with them, train them, and look for opportunities before, and build relationships with them.

Building relationships was also a proactive measure and a priority for the participants. This type of relationship-building was defined as empathy one of the nine themes identified by this research study.

### **Empathy**

Participants described empathy as students having empathy for those in society who had less or were oppressed which in response led to heightened student activism. Participants elaborated by describing empathy as the realization that Millennial and Generation Z students cared about equity and fairness and had empathy for those in need and became active about those issues. Another characteristic described by participants was a lack of empathy by university administrators or tension with being able to empathize with student activists because there was a lack of understanding of how the methods chosen by student activists would advance their cause. However, there was a realization of empathy by university administrators for students who were caught up in media firestorms.

Lauren described students at Brookegate University as students who cared about others who had less and were concerned about diversity and inclusion on campus.

Lauren elaborated,

I will say as a whole we [students] have a lot of empathy for people that have less. I like seeing that. I think that this Gen Z is going to very interested in the fact that others have opportunities. Because there is less and less support, let's say of

education as a public good, but the younger generations thoroughly see that everyone should have an education. I've seen more concerns about diversity and inclusion than ever before.

At Sienna Stone University, Rebecca described two occurrences where she expressed empathy for student activists and how expressing empathy helped develop trust between university administration and student activists. Rebecca stated that when the street preachers at her university were going to be on campus one of the first things her office did was to email the marginalized groups that the preachers target and how her team had open conversations with those groups about the preachers First Amendment rights. Rebecca added that having that type of conversation with students was helpful and was on the proactive side of educating students instead of reactive. Another experience Rebecca noted was being able to relate to this generation of student activists by showing them care and meeting with them in informal settings. Rebecca detailed,

I will take them for lunch because I think you have a very different conversation with those kinds of things [student activism] rather than sitting in an office and being dean. Sometimes I get a bad reaction from that. I say let's go grab coffee or let's go grab dinner, and people say, why are you minimizing the issue. And I said, I'm not, I believe when you break bread together or when you can sit down informally and have a conversation on a patio with a cup of coffee, I'm not the dean anymore, even though I am, I am very much somebody that you can speak with.

Some university administrators struggled between empathizing with the student activist's desires and understanding how the student activists' protest methods would

advance their cause. Ronald described that sometimes students came to him with an issue and wanted to protest or complain but did not want to resolve the issue. Ronald explained,

Sometimes I'm amazed, the students come to me, they're not really activist, but they're concerned about an issue. I say well, we have someone who will work with you to resolve that and I might send them to our money management center or to the dean of students, or whoever it may be that needs to help them with that particular issue.

Lauren also shared that students at her university can be apathetic. Lauren gave an example of students who were going to protest because the school changed vendors for the snack and soda machines at the university. The administrators were anticipating several students to participate but there were only 10 -12 students who showed up.

Lauren described,

It doesn't really add up the impact that you see. Like when we changed from one soda vendor to another there's going to be this whole thing and there were 10, 12 people out there. On social media, it was going to be huge. Whether it's gun violence, whether it's political issues, you just don't see that. If you go back you would've seen several hundred kids out on campus in the sixties and seventies. Right now they sit in their dorm room and retweet something.

The tension between having empathy for student activists causes and relating to their protest method was a struggle for some university administrators.

University administrators also had empathy for students who received negative responses on social media for expressing their opinion. Rebecca explained a situation

where students were "trolled" on social media if they disagreed with other students on certain issues. Trolled refers to people on social media using inflammatory and offensive language to purposefully incite a reaction from other users. Rebecca referred back to the incident where student activists sent a list of demands against the faculty member who dropped the "N" word during her speech. Rebecca explained, "Because what ends up happening when you have that kind of activism, is people then troll you on social media if they disagree with you. Making sure those students are safe and knowing the resources should they need assistance." Jack also mentioned having empathy for students who were victims of social media harassment. Jack detailed a situation where a student at his institution made insensitive remarks on social media about a deputy police officer who was killed. The post went viral in a matter of hours and soon the student and the institution were on national news. As university administration reacted to the negative attention, Jack had to care for the student who was distraught because of reaction to the social media posts. Jack stated,

This student was in tears. She was freaking out. It almost became a mental health thing because all of these people were after her and she's feeling like the whole world is against her. We arranged counseling and things like that. So the person who said it or did it often can eventually be the victim.

This type of care and empathy particularly occurred with students who had freely expressed themselves on social media and quickly became the center of the media firestorm. Social media was a direct link to empathy and how university administrators responded to social media was unique and different for each situation.

## Impact of Social Media

Social media was the most prominent theme discovered in the data analysis, which had several chunks of data within the six transcripts. There were seven characterizations or categories within this theme and each had its definition described by the participants. Those categories were (a) power of social media, (b) positive social media, (c) negative social media, (d) doxing, (e) rapid response, (f) war stories, and (g) lack of social media policy.

**Power of social media.** Participants described the power of social media as the realization that social media was a powerful tool that could have both positive and negative outcomes. Lauren described social media as a tool used by student activists that were more personal and confrontational due to the anonymity associated with social media. Lauren elaborated, "I don't like the anonymity of that [social media], that lends itself to be more personal and confrontational, and less willing to listen to the other person, then if it's in person." Ronald echoed this perception by explaining social media was something where people could hide. Ronald noted, "Social media has given a lot more people an opportunity to make comments is how I see it. That's something that you can hide behind if that's what you want to, and it's something you can leave out front."

Some participants described the power of social media as having a positive impact but also recognized there were negative impacts. Sarah stated,

Well I think social media is good and is here to stay and we cannot say it's bad.

It's like when TV came, people thought the TV was bad. TV is not bad, it's how we choose to use it. It's the program that we put on. I think social media is the

same, but definitely social media has created a way that people take for granted everything they read.

Lance also noted that social media was used as a way to miscommunicate a message to an audience. Lance explained,

Everything is videoed, everything is tweeted. Then not everybody tells the full stories on that. People will cut and paste and it works in different ways. I'm going to take this snippet and one side's going to cut it to reflect their narrative and the other side is going to show the opposing piece to tell their narrative. And no one really gets to the heart of the conversation.

Social media was reported to be negative and at times divisive for the general student body population. However, Lance also mentioned how social media can be used to work in tandem with student activists and therefore could be perceived as a positive tool.

**Positive social media.** Participants described positive social media as the use of social media, which led to positive outcomes and connections. One positive effect of social media described by Rebecca was being able to get a message to students quickly. Rebecca explained that if there had been a social media reaction to a university decision regarding a Title IX case, parking, financial aid, homelessness, food insecurity, or any issue, university administrators could simply reply on social media to offer an opportunity for dialogue or other resources. Rebecca stated, "So it might be a tweet message and saying, hey, I'm the Dean of Students. I'm here to help. Would you like to meet?" Rebecca clarified that you have to be very intentional about what you respond because everything could be screenshotted and you would not want any adverse reaction

to any statement. Another positive aspect of social media was the use of social media as an early alert of student activism for university administrators. Lance described that because he was able to establish trust with student leaders, that when an issue arose on social media, he could simply reach out to the student leader and start a discussion.

Lance detailed,

When something happens on social media, I am typically one degree away from wherever that is, because of this group. I can reach out to a particular [person] or a group of student leaders and say, hey, this is going on, I'm right here, let me know what's happening. I get notes, [that read] Hey, Dr. L...thank you so much.

Lance recalled because of the trust established with student groups, he could bypass what was said on social media and contact the student leader. These accounts were a few examples shared by participants on how social media could have positive outcomes.

**Negative social media.** Participants described negative social media as the use of social media that was divisive and harmful to discourse on campus. One of the negative aspects of social media already mentioned was the ability for people to construct their narrative. Several participants gave examples of how students or university constituents only read certain parts of social media posts to draw a conclusion or opinion on an issue. Rebecca elaborated,

People believe everything they read. I try to have conversations with people, students, in particular, all the time, that there's usually three sides to every story, yours, mine, and the truth. Then the kind of stories that are created based on



social media itself? So what are the secondary and tertiary factors that come out of that post? And so people are very quick to judge.

Sarah expanded that social media caused an immense amount of distrust. Sarah explained,

I think social media has created a lot of distrust. An immense amount of distrust.

There has always been a little distrust from students, the faculty, the administration, all of that. But I think social media has exacerbated it today.

Jack described the viral nature of a post that directly affected students as social media exacerbation. In response to the social media post made about the deputy police officer, Jack stated,

Now it can happen in a matter of hours if not minutes, and unfortunately social media is effective, but it's kind of like the old gossip game. You're only going to get a small part of the truth usually with something. It just all of a sudden explodes because so-and-so said something or other. You don't know what led up to it. You don't know what else happened. You don't know who else was involved. You just know this poor student is being blamed for all of this stuff.

These examples were a few of the negative outcomes related to social media.

**Doxing.** Doxing was a term described by two participants as a form of social media harassment to cause harm. About the deputy police officer post made by the student at Brookegate University, Jack explained,

I think the term is doxing. They'll start dumping on them and telling all these bad things and posting where they live and ordering 50 boxes of pizzas and everything else. Well, that happened to one of our students. It became a firestorm. People

just went crazy. She just posted it and had no idea. Like three hours later somebody called her, have you seen social media? There were like 500 posts about this. People found out where she lived and ordered all these pizzas and her parents, they started harassing them.

Lance also referenced doxing as it related to cutting out pieces of a narrative to fit one's agenda. Lance stated,

So the inappropriate use of social media has created some challenges with regards to advancing civil dialogue on a college campus. It has also exposed a lot of things out there with regard to some things that are inappropriate. But even in some of the worst things that we've seen, the follow-up for secondary posts become equally concerning with regards to doxing threats. That's a challenge because the excuse will be, I didn't send anybody to get the other person, but I did put their phone number out there. That's not probably the best in the civil society of what we're trying to accomplish here.

Social media harassment or doxing was related to the viral nature of posts or firestorms that occurred from social media posts. Another contributing factor to social media firestorms were rapid responses.

**Rapid Response.** Participants described rapid response as the amount of time between an incident being posted on social media and the response from the public or the institution. The institutional response was from either a university administration or the university marketing and communication department. Lance explained that he had noticed university administration across the nation at times being caught in a 20-minute window of responding to a social media post. Lance elaborated,

As a university administrator, as the university, we somehow have gotten caught up into this 20-minute window, that we've got to somehow mute this, we better respond before this goes viral. The majority of the items out there, if you let it play out over the next five hours and sleep on it. It doesn't exist anymore, but we feel so compelled to be able to respond to something in the immediacy. The reality is, within 24 hours, something else is going to take everybody and it's going to be shiny and they're going to look in different directions. But now the news cycle is 24, and so we think we've got to track the same way when it was TV news. I don't think we have to fall prey to the same news cycle as being 24 seven in the same way.

Lauren's assessment of not feeling compelled to respond rapidly was similar. Lauren's analogy was to "ignore the noise". Lauren stated when responding to social media,

I think the big thing there is really balancing what your response can be on social media and knowing how to ignore the noise. You can say, okay here is the university's position, and then just stop and don't react and go forth.

Lauren explained a situation where she responded to a complaint made about a professor on social media and she instructed the complainer to go to the chair instead of social media because that would not accomplish the goal of resolving the complaint. Some people took that a certain way and said that because she responded on social media the situation was, at the very least, highlighted. Lauren stated that she would have given the same instruction if the complaint was brought to her office, but it was in her best

interest not to respond because what she already responded was accurate. Lauren noted that when administrators do not respond, the firestorm calms. Lauren elaborated

It's really trying to measure that balance, here is a position and knowing what to ignore. So it's tough sometimes. I will say the positive on that I learned, is you just go out and make comments and retweet other stuff and once it's buried 10-20 down, people don't even look. You have to understand the medium a little bit too, which has taken a period of time for me.

Rebecca reported that the situation might dictate the response time and that social media had created challenges for university administrators who responded to incidents.

Rebecca detailed,

It's really created a lot of challenges for us. So there are many times I will have to defend a decision to somebody or what we did very quickly. There are no eight to five's anymore. The night that situation happened [professor who dropped the "N word"] I was working well until one o'clock in the morning. So it's very much one of those things that you have to be on your toes all the time, and how do you respond, and how do you make sure that you're not doing more damage to the institution, or whomever works for you, or the student, like responding to a survivor of sexual violence that you're not, you know re-victimizing them.

Jack noted that he deferred to the marketing and communication department for decisions on when or how to respond to social media. Jack explained,

Well I generally try to get our marketing communications office involved and try to get them to do a deep dive in whatever it is because usually there are things that lead up to it. The more we know, the more we can respond more effectively and

I'll go to them to try to get university responses, you know something that will ideally deescalate the situation.

Determining how to respond or when to respond to social media for most participants depended on the situation and lessons from previous social media encounters.

**War stories.** Participants described war stories as reflections on specific stories or issues learned as the first generation of university leaders having to manage social media as a tool or medium where students expressed dissent. Sarah at Stone Creek University noted university administrators were not prepared for social media. Sarah explained,

I'll tell you, we invented something that we didn't know what it was going to do and we're just learning how to deal with it. Before we had clear delineations either a student made a mistake or the student committed vandalism on campus, we have boundaries and we call and say hey, this is not permitted. Now social media has no boundaries. If somebody does something in Houston they call us from Houston and say, your student did this. We're like that's in Houston. They are citizens if they committed a crime, let the police in Houston take care of that. People don't see that we have boundaries anymore. Then people say, well they're your students. So people want us to go back to in locos parentis.

Lauren also mentioned what she learned from having to utilize social media as a university administrator. Lauren explained,

I will tell you that once I am no longer president, I'll probably have no social media accounts. I have learned that it is so impersonal and people would never say some of those things to people's face. I don't think it has been a positive

aspect of our society as we move forward. I have probably gotten a little bias on perception and response because of some of that.

War stories were mostly lessons learned from social media encounters and were reflective of not having guidelines or policies to help administrators navigate social media responses.

**Lack of social media policy.** Participants described a lack of social media policy as having no policies related to when to engage on social media. Jack mentioned that if there was a policy violation it was clear how to proceed. However, if the complaint or grievance was related to social media, there was no real guidance or strategy on how to proceed. Jack explained,

If it's a policy violation, we'll try to get with people and say, okay, this is how you need to let us know if this policy was being violated so the university can take action. We can't try people because of a social media post through our judicial process.

Sarah stated that because social media was still new at times it was hard to know how to respond to a social media incident. Sarah elaborated,

A student may write something that is not true, because they are not checking their facts, or a person, a student makes a mistake, because we all make mistakes, and immediately social media is kind of overpowering them. I mean, it's a new thing that we don't know how to deal with yet, and every time there was somebody who said something insensitive, we get like 10 emails. Why is the Dean of Students not doing anything? And sometimes it falls into a realm of First

Amendment, and we don't like it, but it is not against the law, and it's not against university policy. It's hard for people to understand that via social media.

Lauren indicated that although university policies at her institution on free speech were strong, strategies of handling social media responses have changed. Lauren explained,

I think strategies for dealing with activism in my opinion, I wouldn't say have changed for me in the last 25-30 years since I have been an administrator in higher education. I think that social media has changed the strategies. That medium has changed some of how we have to respond.

Polices or guidelines on how, when, and who should respond to social media was lacking in the data.

### **Institutional and Organizational Support**

Institutional and organizational support was described by participants as the policies and professional organizations that support or lack the support of university administrators' responses to free speech or expressive activities. State legislation was recognized as one of the policies that provided guidance and support to university administrators. Lance detailed that as soon as he received information from a senate-hearing meeting on First Amendment rights his team began to incorporate policies that reflected the forthcoming state legislature. Lance added that guidance through white papers, webinars, and conferences was helpful on how to be prepared to respond to student activism. Lance also described that working with organizations like FIRE and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) were helpful resources on First Amendment rights guidance outside of the traditional student affairs organizations such as the

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) or the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). Lance explained,

I think what we've got to do is be willing to look outside of the traditional NASPA and ACPA kind of groups and look to groups like FIRE and ACLU, the different think tanks that might be left and right.

Jack mentioned that going to conferences and building networks were a good resource for support and guidance. Jack explained, "It's always good if you're able to go to conferences and create a network. If you know people who've been through something or just bounce something off." Jack also mentioned calling his peers as a method of finding support. Jack contacted his peers to ask questions about student activism on their campus and to be advised on policy questions.

Participants also reported a lack of policy guidance, professional organizational support and training, and deferring to other professionals to find the support needed for university administrators. Sarah mentioned that her institutional policies were good but the lack of educating students about those policies is what became difficult when responding to student activism. Sarah explained,

I think our policies have always been there to allow student activism. I think the part that has hindered us, is that we probably haven't taken the time as we should have to educate them before, to be better activists. But we're going to put postcards, we're going to social media, we're going to bombard them with First Amendment things, so they understand it.



Regarding professional organizational support, Sarah noted that she was not sure if NASPA or ACPA had been at the forefront of the discussion involving student activism.

Rebecca reported that she used the police as a support and resource for enforcing the policy. Rebecca elaborated, "I use the police a lot more just because of my job and some of the things that we do because of the tension." Rebecca also stated that the Higher Education Law Conference was a good resource for her to find support and guidance but that she had not researched if NASPA or ACPA could offer any support. Lauren mentioned other professional organizations such as the American Association of State and Colleges Universities (AASCU) were possible resources for support, although she had not seen a lot of discussion about student activism within the professional conference arena. Lauren elaborated,

I am more involved with AASCU and some others. I haven't really seen a lot. I don't think I have seen a training on how do you balance that [student activism], how do you respond. I think that they could take a more active role in trying to train.

Most participants agreed that state legislation guidance and university policy established the necessary guidelines of how to process a complaint about First Amendment rights violations. However, most professional organizations did not provide training, resources, or support for university administrators on how to prepare for or respond to student activism.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

Participants described roles and responsibilities as the difference between having an active role when preparing for or responding to student activism. Some of the differences discovered were described as primary versus secondary roles and responsibilities. Primary roles and responsibilities were university administrators who were considered the first point of contact or "boots on the ground". Secondary roles and responsibilities were those that did not require daily interaction with student activists but were responsible for setting the tone, providing a measured response to the public, and assisted with conducting a balanced approach when responding to student activism. Other elements of each administrator's roles and responsibilities included direct communication, support, and help with developing a response.

As president of her institution, Lauren described her role as secondary and not on the frontline. Lauren explained,

I kind of see mine as a secondary role. I only say that because I am probably not the main place that students interact with on a day to day basis. I would say that a lot of our faculty and staff have more of the frontline role of that. I think that setting the tone is important from a presidential role, and realizing that student activism can be positive, if it is handled, more managed in the right way. I think we have to learn better how to understand and manage it today, but not be overactive."

Lance who was Vice President of Student Affairs at his institution expanded on the aspect of managing student activism. Lance stated,

So there's an expectation that we're somehow managing activism, if you will. I'd like to say we are somehow engaged in working with our students on how they exercise their rights of citizenship. The secondary piece to that is we are a public university and part of my job is to make sure that their rights as citizens under the first amendment are not abridged. So we find ways for students to be able to express themselves.

Ronald, whose role was Vice President of Student Affairs, described his role and responsibility as overseeing multiple departments such as student activities, residence life, counseling center, and the university police department. Ronald stated that his primary responsibility was for students to be healthy and safe. Ronald elaborated, "So it's kind of a diverse group of things, but it all fits into student health, life, and safety. So that's one of my primary responsibilities that I'm held accountable for, the safety and lives of the students." Both the president and vice president for student affairs roles were considered secondary when responding to student activism and their responsibilities were to manage, engage, and keep students safe.

The associate vice president, assistant vice president, and dean of students' roles and responsibilities were considered primary. Both the associate and assistant vice presidents were also deans of students. Sarah noted that she was the number two in her division and when her supervisor was absent, it was her responsibility to oversee their division. Sarah mentioned there were several different departments under her purview. Sarah elaborated,

So my role is an Associate Vice President and I am the number two in the division. When my boss is gone, like today, I do her functions. I also oversee housing and residential life, the student center, and campus recreation. I oversee

three auxiliaries in our division. As the dean, we have seven different areas in our office. The dean of students is over student conduct and community standards, student emergency, ombudsman, Greeks, leadership institute, and alcohol and drug compliance services.

Sarah elaborated that her responsibilities related to student activism was a dotted line to the person that works directly with the students but that she has an active role in the day to day of student protests. Sarah explained,

I oversee the student center, so this person that makes the decision has a dotted line to me, we work indirectly. When there are any protests or something, she always goes over it with me. When we do a cease and desist, for example, I am the one who does it. My involvement is that I advise, sometimes if it's very high profile, I'm also there. As you know student involvement typically has the first contact with the student."

Sarah also mentioned that she was the senior reviewer for policy related to the First Amendment for her institution.

Similarly, Rebecca who was assistant vice president and dean of students at her institution, mentioned that her role was having oversight of multiple different departments. Rebecca detailed,

I am responsible for several different offices. The conduct office, our intervention team, student legal, center for leadership and service, the substance abuse and resource center, and then all things student crisis in regards to student deaths, mental health, and deputy Title IX coordinator.

Rebecca's responsibilities when responding to the student activism were working with her vice president of student affairs when she needed support but mainly were to be "boots on the ground." Rebecca explained,

So if it's related to free speech, I am usually boots on the ground, and at the location of the situation. If it's more social media, I'm reaching out to the students to make sure they are taken care of and get what they need, and that they're safe first and foremost, and that's how I explained my role no matter what the issue is."

Jack described his role as being in charge of the students of concern team, overseeing Greek life, parent relations, and many special programs. Jack also noted that he handled grievances and absence notifications for students. Jack stated that his responsibilities for responding to student activism were to work with the associate dean in the office and be the "go-to people" when activism occurred. Jack detailed, "Well, myself and the associate dean in our office are the ones who would be the sort of going to people when we get word that there may be activism on campus or if activism breaks out." Jack also mentioned that his responsibility was to make contact with the student activists and find out if they had any questions, make them aware of the resources the university provides to assist with student activism, make them comfortable, listen to their grievances, and offer to meet with them face to face if they wanted. Jack also described that he would be the initial spokesperson for the university. Jack elaborated,

We would offer to meet with them in our office if they wanted to talk to someone because we would be quote, the initial spokesperson for the university. I've done that a few times before because it's not usually wise to have the President be that initial person or even our Vice President, because it's always good to have

somebody higher in rank that they can go to if they don't like what we have to say or whatever.

University administrators in primary roles were responsible for direct communication with the student activists, facilitating requests or protests in a way that was safe for all parties, and speaking on behalf of the university if necessary.

## **Conclusion**

This research study was conducted to answer three broad research questions. Those questions were (a) How are university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students prepared to respond to student activism; (b) What strategy do university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students use when responding to student activism; and (c) How does social media affect responses from university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Dean of Students? The results of this research study provided insights into the shared and lived common experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 2014). The results of this research study revealed that each theme was connected to one of the three research questions.

University administrators prepared to respond to student activism by (a) knowing the difference between external and internal pressures; (b) understanding how to have a balanced response to student activism that also aligned with institutional values; (c) utilizing institutional and organizational support guided by state legislation, university policies, and networking; and (d) understanding the difference between primary and secondary roles and responsibilities. University administrators who knew the difference between external pressure (i.e. off-campus preachers) and internal pressure (i.e. on-campus student groups) were able to reactively or proactively navigate and respond to the

activism appropriately. Rebecca proactively notified the targeted groups of the external pressure coming to campus, which caused disruption. Jack worked directly with student activists who put internal pressure on university administrators to suspend the basketball player by simply understanding the student activists wanted to be heard and have the opportunity to voice their concerns. University administrators who knew their institutional values and were able to have a balanced response to the student activism were also successful. Lance explained incorporating institutional values into university policies and socializing those values to other administrators, boards, regents, and state legislatures was a proactive measure when responding to student activism. In terms of a balanced response, Lauren reported creating a space for both student activists and non-student activists to accomplish their independent goals as appropriate. Utilizing institutional policies, state legislation, and guidance from groups like FIRE and ACLU, along with building peer networks at organizational conferences, also prepared university administrators' responses to student activism. Understanding the difference between primary and secondary roles and responsibilities also prepared university administrators' responses to student activism. Primary roles were broad and were more actively responsible for daily interactions with student groups, direct communication, and student safety. Whereas secondary roles were narrow and only occurred when prompted for guidance, advice, or public statements when necessary. The distinction between roles and responsibilities allowed university administrators to be better equipped and prepared to respond to student activism.

University administrators used several strategies when responding to student activism. Those strategies were (a) defining the differences between varied degrees of

student activism; (b) discovering how faculty activism affected student activism; (c) using student development and engagement as educational opportunities, and (d) utilizing empathy as a method of response. Defining the differences between low and high levels of student activism allowed university administrators to be strategic in their response to student activism. Jack and Lauren described strategies used for responding to low-level student activism as having one-on-one conversations with students, holding luncheons where students could express their concerns, and by allowing small protests that only lasted a few hours or days to run their course. Lance and Sarah described strategies used for responding to high-level student activism as providing support for students who organized large protests. Lance recalled supporting a BLM march where students marched over a mile from the alumni association building to the administration building. Lance noted how students were surprised that university administrators supported the activity. Sarah recounted supporting students who silently protested against the selling of baked goods, which represented non-white students as having less value than white students' have. Although Sarah supported the students, law enforcement was also used as a strategy. Sarah described arrest made during that particular event and described other protests, during her tenure as a university administrator, where law enforcement had to intervene. Throughout her interview, Sarah expressed concern that students did not understand the gravity of law enforcement intervention when responding to student activism.

Discovering how faculty activism affected student activism helped university administrators strategize a response to student activism. Jack described using student concerns about a faculty member removing free speech content from a bulletin board as a



teachable moment for both faculty and students. Rebecca detailed how her institution strategically worked to correct the messages students received after a faculty member used the "N" word in her speech. University administrators responded by directly communicating with the students about their concerns.

University administrators also used opportunities for student development and engagement as strategies when responding to student activism. Lance described student engagement, not as managing student activism but working with student activists to exercise their First Amendment rights. Lance's team created the ARRT to work with students to have successful events. Lance and Jack both had multimedia platforms to educate the university community on the First Amendment. Sarah described playing scenarios with student activists to educate and prepare them for student activism. Several participants mentioned using protests, faculty activism, websites, and dedicated staff as a strategy or opportunity to engage, educate, and develop students about student activism.

University administrators also utilized empathy as a strategic method of responding to student activism. Utilizing empathy allowed university administrators to connect with both Millennial and Gen Z students who also exhibited empathy for others. Lauren described how she understood that the new generation of students cared about others who had less and cared about diversity and inclusivity. Rebecca had empathy for students who were targeted by off-campus groups, and to prepare those students, she gave them prior notice before the off-campus groups came to campus. Rebecca also expressed empathy for student activists by taking them for coffee or lunch. Rebecca wanted to relate to the students by creating a space where she was just Rebecca and not the dean of students. Jack expressed empathy for students who were caught up in media

firestorms. Jack contacted those students to provide mental health support for those students during times of crisis. Utilizing empathy proved to be successful for university administrators when responding to student activism.

University administrator's responses to social media were affected by (a) understanding the power of social media; (b) knowing the difference between positive and negative social media; (c) understanding the effects of doxing; (d) understanding the effects of rapid response; (e) learning from war stories; and (f) and learning how to manage social media despite a lack of social media policy. University administrators who understood the power of social media were able to navigate more effective social media responses. Lauren and Sarah understood that social media was a tool for student activists to express themselves privately and as a result created more power through anonymity. Lance recognized that certain groups created their narrative on social media, which fueled negative reactions. Understanding the power and influence of social media was essential for university administrators when responding to student activism.

Understanding both the positive and negative effects of social media was also important for university administrators when responding to student activism. Positive social media was associated with connecting directly with students and becoming alerted to student activism in a timely fashion. Negative social media was associated with being divisive and harmful to the institution and exacerbating student activism. Jack mentioned how the viral nature of social media posts often created firestorms and resulted in negative effects on students, specifically through doxing. Doxing was described as a form of social media harassment to cause harm. Lance understood that doxing was an inappropriate use of social media and highlighted that doxing created challenges against

civil dialogue. In response to doxing, Jack provided mental health support for students affected by doxing.

University administrators understood that a rapid response to social media post was not an effective way of communicating. Lance noted university administrators should not feel pressure to respond to social media posts as with a 24-hour news cycle. Lauren stated to ignore social media posts that could cause distraction and by not responding administrators could calm the firestorm. Learning from war stories was an effective way to respond to social media posts. Sarah understood that social media was boundless and could affect the institution at any time. Lauren learned that her experience with social media has caused her to disengage once she is no longer president. University administrators reported a struggle or tension between effectively responding to social media posts because of a lack of policy guidance. Jack mentioned there were no policies on how to adjudicate social media posts. Sarah noted students struggled to understand the difference between fact and reality on social media particularly when the posts related to First Amendment rights. Lack of policy or guidance on how to respond effectively to social media posts at times prevented university administrators from being confident in their approach to respond to social media posts.

The results of this research study revealed a need for policy guidance on social media responses, additional institutional and organizational support, training, and networking opportunities, and innovative ways to educate students and faculty on First Amendment rights. The results of this research study also discovered university administrators utilize several strategies when responding to student activism including empathy, student development and engagement, and understanding the varied degrees of

student activism. The results also indicated university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism when they understood the differences between external and internal pressures, had a balanced response that aligned with institutional values, and understood the difference between primary and secondary roles and responsibilities.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

As early as the 17th and 18th centuries, students held protests in response to university policy, curriculum, and housing (Broadhurst, 2014). Constant news cycles and social media platforms have reconstructed the complexity of student activism. Social media disinformation could cause students to have negative reactions and ultimately leave universities exposed to a social crisis before it has had the opportunity to assess and respond (Schmidt, 2015). Challenges were also presented when universities had a history of producing an atmosphere for diversity language that was counterintuitive to institutional values (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). When universities ignored social issues, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, universities were unprepared to address student activism and were exposed to criticism (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). The primary goal of this research study was to discover how university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism, reveal which strategies university administrators used when responding to student activism, and understand how social media affected university administrator's responses to student activism.

It is important to note that Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was directly linked to these findings, specifically varying degrees of student activism, student development and engagement, and empathy. Astin's (1984) assumption was to maximize student-learning faculty, which can be substituted for university administrators, should be aware of student motivation and the time and energy students were willing to spend on their development. The participants in this study had an understanding of student motivation on their campuses. They knew the difference between low-level and high-

level student activism. They knew how to engage and develop their students by meeting with them for coffee or lunch, creating the AART, and educating them on the differences between unprotected speech and hate speech. The participants also knew students on their respective campuses valued equity, inclusion, and fairness for each other and those who had less. Therefore, these findings are supported by Astin's (1984) theory, and also provide insights into the shared and lived experiences of university administrators who encountered student activism on their campuses.

The interview responses revealed that university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism by (a) knowing the difference between external and internal pressures; (b) understanding how to have a balanced response to student activism that also aligned with institutional values; (c) utilizing institutional and organizational support guided by state legislation, university policies, and networking; and (d) understanding the difference between primary and secondary roles and responsibilities. The first two components of Barnhardt's (2014) study supported the first two elements of this research study. The first component was determining who was seeking change by defining the mobilizing groups of students (Barnhardt, 2014). This component supported understanding the difference between external and internal pressure. Jack worked directly with student activists who put internal pressure on university administrators and by identifying the mobilizing groups; NAACP, BSA, and other minority groups, Jack responded to their concerns by allowing them to be heard. Jack's response was a good first step, however, university administrators should go beyond allowing student groups to be heard and work with them directly on accomplishing their goals. Most student groups want to be heard but also want to see action. This action should not be non-

performative language embedded in mission statements, but performative actions through the development of diversity committees to review institutional policies that might have biases, forming bias-response teams for reporting incidents of bias on campus, and collective action with students through faculty staff mentorship to help students accomplish their goals. The second component was determining the targeted group whom the student activists were aspiring to change (Barnhardt, 2014). This component was also consistent with knowing the difference between external and internal pressure. Rebecca proactively notified the targeted groups of the external pressure coming to campus, to prepare those students about the activism. Rebecca's response should be a model for university administrators on how to proactively support students through education on the First Amendment. Also, university administrators should provide alternative options such as staging areas to counter the messages by the external groups or provide counseling services to be on-site for students who may need additional coping support.

Hoffman and Mitchell (2016) studied institutional response to student activism for equity and inclusion. One outcome of the study was university administrators should use diversity language that reflects institutional values (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). This outcome was consistent with understanding how to have a balanced response that also aligned with institutional values. Lance noted that university policies should reflect institutional values. Lance stated, "We have to make sure policies reflect what your values are and what the laws are and those two aren't always congruent. So you have to make sure that we are ensuring that we socialize those things with our peers, but also with our administration, our boards, and even the legislature". This assumption was also

supported by Rebecca who went beyond written policy and completed action steps that reflected institutional values. The action of taking students to lunch or coffee to discuss their concerns showed empathy and created a trust for university administrators.

Through trust, relationships can begin to form, and through relationships, educational opportunities become present for university administrators.

Utilizing institutional and organizational support guided by state legislation, university policies, and networking was not discovered in the literature for comparison or support of these findings. However, this correlates with participant responses that there was a lack of institutional and organizational support for university administrators who respond to student activism. Participants revealed that state legislation helped provide guidance, but were unclear how to translate this guidance into policy. For example, student conduct is clearly outlined and marked by boundaries that are defined. University administrators know how and when to impose sanctions on students who violate the code of conduct. However, university administrators were unclear about how to enforce sanctions when it pertained to free speech, particularly with social media posts. Professional organizations also lacked providing guidance or support for interpreting laws related to free speech, which left a vacuum for university administrators to fill on their own. Free speech and expressive activity are widely protected by the First Amendment. However, there should be some specific guidance from state legislatures on how to translate the law into policy at institutions of higher education. Professional organizations should provide annual or bi-annual training, workshops, or sessions tailored specifically toward institutional policies on free speech and best practices for student education and development. Understanding the difference between primary and



secondary roles was also a unique finding. This might have been because specific questions were asked about the university administrator's roles and responsibilities related to student activism.

This research study also presented findings on strategies university administrators used when responding to student activism. Those strategies were (a) defining the differences between varying degrees of student activism; (b) discovering how faculty activism affected student activism; (c) using student development and engagement as educational opportunities, and (d) utilizing empathy as a method of response. Effective strategies are important for university administrators to consider when responding to student activism. Choosing the wrong strategy might increase tension and frustration among student activists, but choosing the right strategy could have positive long-term effects on student development.

Defining the differences between varying degrees of student activism was one effective strategy. Barnhardt's (2014) discovery of identifying tactics used by student activists was consistent with defining varied degrees of student activism and faculty activism. University administrators had an advantage when they were able to identify the type of low-level or high-level student activism happening on their campuses.

Low-level student activism created space for personal conversations or luncheons where university administrators could address student concerns. High-level student activism allowed university administrators to prepare for the safety of the students who participated in the protests, along with the ability to provide support during and after the events. University administrators also used faculty behavior as an educational opportunity for students, faculty, and staff on the protections afforded by the First

Amendment. University administrators showed support for students who had grievances against faculty behavior that was inconsistent with institutional values. Rebecca shared how students at her institution protested against the professor who used the "N" word and the institution responded by acknowledging the insensitivity associated with the language, which ultimately led to the administrator's resignation.

University administrators should proactively prepare for student activism by identifying the differences between low-level and high-level student activism. The proactive approach for low-level student activism should include holding town halls, meetings, or luncheons on campus to openly discuss student grievances or concerns. Meeting with student leaders regularly to address issues before they become problems. Continuing education for both students and faculty on the protections of the First Amendment. And ensuring institutional values align with institutional actions. This can be accomplished by holding faculty and staff accountable for their behavior and institutionalizing policies to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized groups on campus. Additionally, university administrators should provide ongoing training on sensitive topics to students, faculty, and staff, about the value of deliberative dialogue and how free speech activities provide educational opportunities. Results of this research study also indicated using student development and engagement was an effective strategy.

Similarly to the Kezar and Maxey (2014) study, this research study indicated that student development and engagement was a strategy university administrators should use when responding to student activism. However, one outcome not implicated by this research study, was university administrators partnering with student activists to

determine appropriate methods to move student activists causes forward. A proactive response for this diversion would be for university administrators to develop programs that allow faculty and staff who identify as activists to be paired with student activists to assist students with achieving their goals. Faculty and staff activists could partner with student activists and teach them how to use data to illustrate their concerns or work with students activists to navigate hierarchical systems. Additional opportunities would be to create service-learning opportunities for student activists such as democracy projects, which include voter registration drives and deputizing students to register their peers to vote, and sponsoring programs that encourage deliberative dialogue and civic engagement. University administrators could empower these types of programs by providing funding and resources to support student development and engagement.

Using empathy as a strategy for preparing and responding to student activism is critical for university administrators. Empathy allows university administrators the ability to identify with students and their concerns. In this research study, students became motivated to protests when professors censored speech or used inappropriate language. In response, university administrators had empathy for the students and worked with students to deescalate tensions by addressing the issues and ensuring that students had the right to freely express their dissent. In addition to ensuring First Amendment rights, university administrators should show empathy by taking time to address student demands. This requires vulnerability on the part of university administrators. University administrators should not respond to demands by restating what types of programs are already occurring on campus to address diversity, or whatever the issue might be. Rather, they should take demands seriously and find opportunities for collaboration with students

to develop short term solutions and long term plans that will heal and create positive change.

This research study also provides clarity on how social media affected university administrator's responses to student activism. The power of social media indicated that anonymity allowed students to be bolder online than if they were in person. One solution for university administrators would be to create opportunities for students to openly express their dissent in non-judgmental ways. This can be through town halls or encouraging students to join organizations like student government to be their voice and advocate for their concerns. University administrators should use positive social media as a way to communicate with students when issues arise. This should not be done in haste, but with timely responses that are informed and are also aligned with stated institutional values. University administrators should also empower marketing and communications departments to use social media as an early alert system when issues arise. This could be done by contacting student leaders promptly to address whatever concerns might be occurring. Guidelines and policies for responding to negative social media should be a top priority for university administrators. Some suggestions would include developing a protocol for redirecting posts that have been edited to fit a particular narrative to the source; developing a statement that provides transparency for responses to claims the university is currently investigating, and ensuring the public that as information becomes available, new information will be released; and working with student leaders to draft responses that involve student outcry or unrest about particular issues.

When doxing begins to occur, university administrators should have a proactive plan to provide support, including mental health support, for the student being targeted.

University administration should also announce that it does not condone doxing and that any criminal threats will be reported to the proper authority. University administrators should also remember at times it might be better to “ignore the noise” and have no response at all. This strategy might be beneficial when dealing with social media issues that do not directly affect the institution. If the issue does directly affect the institution, university administrators should not be in a hurry to respond with partial information. They should have a plan to collect all the information quickly so that an accurate and timely response can be made. As the first generation of university administrators to manage social media responses, both best practices and failures should be shared at professional conferences and with peers to help prepare future administrators on how to respond on social media. Finally, the development of policy on who, how, and when to respond to social media posts, as it relates to student activism, must also be a priority. University administrators should review current practices and determine which ones failed or succeeded and draft policy to help guide responses.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, these findings indicated the shared and lived experiences of the university administrator's responses to student activism. These findings were significant in understanding how a university administrator's prepared to respond to student activism, what strategies were effective when responding to student activism, and how social media affected responses to student activism. To the degree that these findings are generalizable beyond the participant's responses, the shared and lived experiences might provide insight for university administrators at 4-year public institutions in the U.S.

Recommendations for institutions might include updates to policies and guidelines with specific guidance on how to respond to student activism; university administrators presenting workshops and learning opportunities about student activism and its effects on higher education administrator's for continuing education or at professional conferences; and creating policy on who, when, and how university administrators will respond to social media related to student activism.

One limitation of this research study was a participant sample at 4-year public institutions. Therefore, future research opportunities at institutions such as two-year community colleges, junior colleges, or schools known as vocational, professional, online, or technical are present. Another limitation was the setting of the research study only included Texas. Opportunities to include additional states in the U.S. may exist for future research. Finally, this research study only included participants who were university Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans of Students. Therefore, additional research might be necessary to get the shared and lived experiences of other university administrators who experienced responding to student activism and have decision making power. Other recommendations for adding to the literature include researching how social media affects higher education in various aspects, such as institutional response, utilization of social media as a mechanism for an institutional response, and how institutional reputations may be affected by social media responses. Additional opportunities for future research include further defining roles and responsibilities of university administrators when responding to student activism and how university administrators can use educational opportunities to guide student activist's methods of protesting in a proactive manner that will produce the desired outcomes.

Studying the impact of student activism on higher education administrators indicated university administrators were prepared to respond to student activism, had effective strategies for responding to student activism, and at times, were able to navigate social media responses to student activism. Student activism will continue to be a relevant topic for higher education administrators for the foreseeable future. Understanding how to engage, educate, and support student activists should be a primary goal for higher education administrators.

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## APPENDIX A

### *Participant Criterion Matrix*

| Institution Name (i.e. 4-year public university) | Criteria  | Meets Requirement | Does Not Meet Requirement | Additional Information Needed |
|--|---|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
|  | Position Title (i.e. President, Vice President, Dean of Students) |                   |                           |                               |
|  | Years of Service (greater than or equal five years)               |                   |                           |                               |
|  | Able to make policy changes                                       |                   |                           |                               |
|  | Encountered student activism within the past 10 years             |                   |                           |                               |

**APPENDIX B**

Dear President \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Chelsea Smith, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. I am currently beginning my dissertation research on the Impact of Student Activism on Higher Education Administrators: Implications for Institutional Response, Strategy, and Social Media.

In recent years there has been dialogue across campuses in the United States about policies which govern First Amendment rights. The Federal Government, State Legislatures, and lobbying groups have addressed the importance of protecting free speech. Student activism has become increasingly popular especially through new platforms such as social media. At times higher education administrators, particularly Presidents, Vice Presidents, and Deans of Students have been underprepared to respond to student activism especially when the response will be viewed as harmful to the institution.

I am writing to you as a higher education administrator of a four-year public university to request your participation in my research study by sharing your stories and experiences of student activism on your campus. The research study will explore how university administrators' responded to student activism when it occurred, how administrators' responded to student activism when it was perceived as harmful to the institution, and what role social media played when responding to student activism. Interviews will be conducted face-to-face or Skype for one 90-minute session. Interviews will be qualitative and semi-structured at day and time that is convenient for you. I will share the interview questionnaire with you prior to the interview and will send a consent form for your approval to participate. Please review the attached consent form for additional details about the research study.

If you are willing to participate and share your experiences, please fill out the consent form and return it to the email address below. My plan is to conduct interviews between the months of June – September 2019. My email address is cksmith@shsu.edu and my direct contact number is 936-294-4155. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Matthew Fuller at mbf005@shsu.edu or 936-294-1147 with any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Chelsea K. Smith

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT AUTHORIZATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

**Title of Research Study:** Impact of Student Activism on Higher Educations  
Administrators: Implications for Institutional Response, Strategy, and Social Media.

**Institution:** Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas

**Principal Investigator:** Chelsea K. Smith

**Research Advisor:** Dr. Matthew B. Fuller

**Name of Participant:**

#### 1. Introduction

You are being asked to participate in a research study. This document describes the research study purpose, procedures and duration, risks, discomforts, and incentives. It also describes the benefits of participating in this research study, your rights to withdraw from the research study, and the assurances of your privacy and confidentiality. Please read the information below and feel free to ask questions, and share any concern or comment to the researcher. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

#### 2. Study Purpose

The purpose of this research study is to describe the experiences of higher education administrators who have engaged with and responded to student activism and who also have the ability to implement policy changes.

#### 3. Procedure and Duration

You will be part of an interview of approximately 7-15 higher education administrators. Between June 17 and September 30, 2019, the interview will meet for 90 minutes on one occasion. You will meet in a specific location at the university or via Skype during the work day at an agreed upon time. The interview will be audio-recorded, and later transcribed. The participants will be asked about their experiences with student activism.

#### 4. Potential Risks and Discomfort

There may be minimal physical or psychological risk or discomfort of your involvement in this research study. At the meeting, you will be asked to speak freely about your experiences. Your comments will not be shared with your supervisor or campus administrators, or to other faculty members.

Participants' names will not be on any document or transcript of the interviews.

### **5. Incentives/Compensations**

There will be no costs for participating in the research study. Participants will not be paid to participate in this research study. Complimentary refreshments will be available to you during the meeting if applicable (i.e. water or light snacks).

### **6. Anticipated Benefits**

There are not direct personal benefits by participating in this study. However, the findings of this research are expected assist higher education administrators to design and implement policies regarding free speech that will better serve a diverse population.

### **7. Right to Refusal or Withdrawal of Participation**

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty. Each participant is free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this research study at any time.

### **8. Confidentiality**

All information gathered from this research study will remain confidential. Participants' identity will not be disclosed to any unauthorized persons. Only the researchers at Sam Houston State University and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) will have access to the research materials which will be kept in a locked file cabinet and/or on secured software system with encryption and password protection. Any references to the participants' names that would compromise the anonymity will be removed or disguised prior to the preparation of the research report and publications. The audio recordings will be destroyed or erased at the completion of the research study. Participants' names will not be used in the transcripts of the recording.

### **9. Questions About the Research Study**

If you have questions or wish more information about what you are being asked to do or the contents of this consent form, the researchers are available to provide a complete explanation. Please direct them to:

Chelsea K. Smith  
Principal Investigator  
Higher Education Leadership  
Doctoral Candidate  
Tel. 936-294-4155  
Email: cksmith@shsu.edu

Matthew B. Full, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor and Director,  
Higher Education Leadership  
Doctoral Program  
Tel. 936-294-XXXX  
Email: mbf005@shsu.edu



**Participant Signature**

I have read this consent document, have had the opportunity to discuss any concern or questions with the researchers, and totally understand the purpose of this investigation and my involvement as well as any risk or discomfort. This agreement states that you have received a copy of this informed consent, and that your signature below indicates that you agree to participate in this research study.

---

|                             |           |       |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Printed Name of Participant | Signature | Date: |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-------|

Chelsea K. Smith

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|                        |           |      |
|------------------------|-----------|------|
| Principal Investigator | Signature | Date |
|------------------------|-----------|------|

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Questionnaire

Attribute Codes: Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Institution Type: \_\_\_\_\_

Time/date: \_\_\_\_\_

In-Person/Skype: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Tell me about your journey in becoming President, Vice President, or Dean of Students of this university.
2. What is your definition of student activism?
3. Tell me about any personal experiences you have had with activism? What about student activism?
4. Tell me about your experiences with student activism as a higher education administrator or practitioner.
5. What social issues are students most concerned about at your institution?
6. How have they expressed their concerns in terms of student activism?
7. What is your role in responding to student activism?
8. How are you prepared to respond to student activism?
9. How do you respond to student activism when it is perceived as harmful to the institution?
10. How has social media influenced your perceptions of student activism?
11. How has social media affected your responses to student activism?
12. What challenges or barriers have you encountered in your response to student activism?
13. How have you overcome those challenges or barriers?

14. What strategies or policies have worked in preparing you to respond to student activism?
15. What strategies or policies have hindered your ability to respond to student activism?
16. What type of collaborative strategies between student activists and administration would you suggest are best when supporting student activism?
17. Given what you have learned in your role as a higher education administrator along with your interactions with student activism, what advice would you give future higher education administrators?
18. Based on your experiences with student activism, what strategies or policy recommendations would you advise four-year public universities implement?
19. Would you like to add any other thoughts about student activism and its impact on higher education administrators?

## APPENDIX E

Table E1

### *Structural Codes Categorized into Themes*

|                                       |   |                                    |
|---------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| External pressure                     | A series of context from outside the university that are not controlled by institutional policies or leaders                        | External and Internal Pressure     |
| Internal pressure                     | Contexts or events that are often more detailed and focused on institutional change and are often governed by internal policies     | External and Internal Pressure     |
| External versus internal pressure     | Realizations that internal and external pressures are challenging in unique ways  | External and Internal Pressure     |
| Balancing act                         | Activism requires a non-extreme balance between activists' calls and non-activists' rights to an education                          | Balancing Act and Competing Values |
| Competing values                      | Often two parties are at odds and both of their demands must addressed  | Balancing Act and Competing Values |
| Low-level activism                    | Realization that some activism is not majorly supported or widely believed  | Varied Degrees of Student Activism |
| High-level activism                   | Some activism is widely supported or focused on a major issue   | Varied Degrees of Student Activism |
| Professor activism externally focused | Professor tackling issues in society  | Faculty Activism                   |
| Professor activism internally focused | Professor critiquing institutional policies   | Faculty Activism                   |
| Professor activism and behavior       | Realization that a few professors have mistreated students and others in their activism (often, earning the institution a bad name) | Faculty Activism                   |

|                                 |  |                                    |
|---------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| Positive student activism       | Realization that activism is a way to seek improvements to social context  | Student Development and Engagement |
| Positive student of activism    | Realization that activism can have educational opportunities for students  | Student Development and Engagement |
| Student empathy for others      | Empathy for those in society that have less or are oppressed is heightened by activism   | Empathy                            |
| Empathy for those in firestorm  | Recognized some empathy in leaders for those students caught up in a media firestorm   | Empathy                            |
| Empathy for generational issues | Millennial and Gen Z students care about equity and fairness; they have empathy for those who have less than they do and are active about it   | Empathy                            |
| Struggle for empathy            | While the leadership team empathized with the activist's desires, they struggled to see how their delivery was advancing their cause. This left them with a sense of tension about the activism to begin with that they had to process through | Empathy                            |
| Power of social media           | Realizing that social media is a powerful tool   | Impact of Social Media             |
| Positive nature of social media | In some occasions, social media has led to some positive outcomes and connections  | Impact of Social Media             |
| Social media divisiveness       | In most occasions, social media is divisive and harmful to discourse on campus   | Impact of Social Media             |
| Lack of social media policies   | No policies related to when to engage on social media, who, and how to engage  | Impact of Social Media             |

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Lack of social media control                    | Social media platforms lead to wide public comments that spread quickly and lose control of the narrative   | Impact of Social Media                   |
| Social media war stories                        | Reflection on specific stories or issues from social media; university administrators are the first generation of leaders having to deal with social media and they have stories about it | Impact of Social Media                   |
| Social media firestorms                         | Social media can fan the flames of an event that would otherwise die down   | Impact of Social Media                   |
| No institutional policies                       | Recognition that institutional policies about who does what, when, and how with student activism are underdeveloped   | Institutional and Organizational Support |
| Need for specific policies                      | Policies needed on when to engage student activists, how to limit off-campus disruptions on-campus, how to keep students' safe, who specifically responds to student activism             | Institutional and Organizational Support |
| Lack of support from professional organizations | Calls for professional organizations to provide more resources  | Institutional and Organizational Support |
| President, Vice President, or Dean of Students  | Differences between active role when addressing, preparing, or responding to student activism   | Roles and Responsibilities               |
| President, Vice President, or Dean of Students  | Differences between frontline, primary, secondary, supportive, responsive roles   | Roles and Responsibilities               |
| President, Vice President, or Dean of Students  | Deciding who should have direct communication with student activist, be present during student activism, and set the tone and prepare a balanced or measured response                     | Roles and Responsibilities               |

Table E2

*Prominence of Structural Code from Themes*

| Theme                                    | Structural Code   |
|--|---|
| Impact of Social Media                   | Power of social media<br>Positive nature of social media<br>Social media divisiveness<br>Lack of social media policies<br>Lack of social media control<br>Social media war stories<br>Social media firestorms |
| Empathy                                  | Student empathy for others<br>Empathy for those in firestorm<br>Empathy for generational issues<br>Struggle for empathy   |
| External and Internal Pressure           | External pressure<br>Internal pressure<br>External versus internal pressure   |
| Institutional and Organizational Support | No institutional policies<br>Need for specific policies<br>Lack of support from professional organizations  |
| Roles and Responsibilities               | President<br>Vice President<br>Dean of Students   |
| Faculty Activism                         | Professor activism externally focused<br>Professor activism internally focused<br>Professor activism and behavior   |
| Balancing Act and Competing Values       | Balancing Act<br>Competing Values   |
| Varied Degrees of Student Activism       | Low-level activism<br>High-level activism   |

## **VITA**

Chelsea K. Smith, MEd  
Senior Associate Dean of Students  
Sam Houston State University

### **Education**

Doctor of Education, Sam Houston State University, 2020, Educational Leadership

Master of Education, Texas State University, 2009, Student Affairs

Bachelor of Arts, Texas State University, 2002, Communication Studies

### **Professional Experience**

Senior Associate Dean of Students, Sam Houston State University, May 2011 -current.  
Duties: Oversee Student Engagement & Retention and Parent & Family Relations.  
Oversee and implement free speech policies and procedures. Oversee and maintain  
office budgets, assessment, and daily operations.

Academic Advisor, Texas State University, September 2008 to May 2011. Duties:  
Advise liberal arts students, calculate GPA, complete degree audits, process graduation  
applications.

Recruiting/Admissions Counselor, Huston-Tillotson University, September 2005 to  
August 2008. Duties: recruit high school students for admission, process admission  
applications, accept applicants to university.

Graduate Intern, Texas State University, August 2008 to December 2008. Duties: assist  
with advisor round tables, assist with homecoming activities, distribute newsletter.

Graduate Research Assistant, Texas State University, May 2007 to August 2007. Duties:  
advising Greek life students, coordinate leadership retreats, coordinate awards ceremony.

### **Teaching Experience**

Instructor, Sam Houston State University, August 2016 to present, Introduction to  
Collegiate Studies

Instructor, Texas State University, August 2010 to Dec 2010, University Seminar

Teaching Assistant, Texas State University, January 2010 to May 2010, University  
Seminar

### **Publications**

Smith, C.K., and Slate, J. 2017. Female Faculty at Texas 4-Year Public Universities:  
Changes Over Time. Journal of Advances in Education Research.



### **Presentations at Professional Meetings**

Smith, C.K. and Fuller, M.B. The Negative Impact of Free Speech. Division of Student Affairs Staff Development, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 15 June 2018.

Smith, C.K. and Fuller, M.B. Expressive Activity: What College Campuses Need to Know about Student Activism. Staff Council Professional Development Conference, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, 14 March 2017.

### **Committee Memberships**

Chair, Division of Student Affairs Year-Round Staff Development Committee, July 2017 to December 2017

Chair, Free Speech Preparedness Committee, Sam Houston State University, August 2016 to December 2016

Member, Meta-assessment Committee, Sam Houston State University, August 2013 to December 2013

Member, Staff Council, Sam Houston State University, August 2013 to July 2015

Member, Special Events Committee, Sam Houston State University, May 2011 to September 2013

### **Honors and Awards**

Staff Excellence Award, Sam Houston State University, 2019

Sammy Award, Sam Houston State University, Division of Student Affairs, 2018

Bearkat Spirit Award, Division of Student Affairs, 2017

Chi Sigma Iota Honors Society

### **Association Memberships**

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators

Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.