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## Activism and Identity: How Asian American College Students Define Contemporary Activism for Social Justice

Lester Manzano

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

ACTIVISM AND IDENTITY: HOW ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS  
DEFINE CONTEMPORARY ACTIVISM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY

LESTER J. MANZANO

CHICAGO, IL

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For my family.

Activism can be the journey rather than the arrival.

—Grace Lee Boggs

*The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century*

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## ABSTRACT

Since the height of student activism in the 1960s, little research has explored how college students conceptualize and define activism for social justice. In addition, the extant literature on student activism has been limited in its treatment of marginalized communities, including Asian American students. Given an increase in students' self-reporting that they expect to engage in student activism while in college (Eagan et al., 2016), students' engagement in conventional forms of activism may be on the rise, but how contemporary activism is defined needs to be examined from the perspective of student activists themselves. Thus, contemporary notions of student activism may have implications for higher-education practice. Furthermore, in light of the perception that Asian American students generally do not engage with contemporary social justice activism, despite examples that evidence the contrary, exploring Asian American students' engagement with social justice activism is critical.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how self-identified Asian American college-student activists understand and define activism in terms of both awareness of social justice issues as well as actions and behaviors. This study utilized multiple semi-structured individual interviews with nine Asian American college students enrolled in colleges and universities across the U.S., including four-year public and private institutions. Data were interpreted through thematic analysis. Findings illustrate the influence of family histories and contexts; academic and cocurricular experiences; peer influences; and student-affairs and faculty mentors on participants' awareness of and engagement in social justice activism. In addition, Asian American identity informed participants' targets of activism, whether related to Asian

American concerns or to broader social justice issues. Finally, findings demonstrate how Asian American students defined contemporary activism beyond traditional forms of action to include actions to educate oneself, one's community, and others while being rooted in critical reflection and awareness of systems of oppression, their own social locations, and broader social justice concerns.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

My older brother, the oldest of four kids, was the smartest in our family, evidenced by his multiple accomplishments and honors in high school. He was the type of high-school student who would achieve a score of “5” on an Advanced Placement (AP) exam without ever having taken the AP course that typically prepared students for the exam. While academically successful, he was also involved in several extracurricular activities—from athletics and yearbook staff to student organizations and student-government leadership positions. As one of the oldest of our second-generation American relatives, he was also one of the first among our generation of Pilipino American siblings and cousins to attend college. He became our archetype for academic success, dutifully obedient and loyal to our parents, an exemplar of responsibility, and not really one to challenge authority.

This image of my brother would become much more nuanced when he left for college. When I was in junior high school, my brother went away to college—to a university that was about an hour’s drive away from home. This proximity allowed him to return home often on the weekends. I vividly recall one weekend when he returned home and placed a flyer on our refrigerator. The flyer displayed a close-up image of a bunch of green grapes that filled the page. Dotting the bunch of green grapes were miniature oil cans labeled with the word “poison” or images of skulls and crossbones. In large block letters across the top of the flyer was the phrase “boycott grapes”.

As a 12-year-old, I did not know what to make of this at the time. I would later learn

about the California table-grape boycotts and the concerns about pesticides harming farm workers and their families. But the notion that my family would engage in any type of action against something or in support of a cause was not part of my experiences growing up. Still, my brother encouraged my parents and family to support the boycott. I had imagined that my brother would get involved in college just as he had done in high school. A part of me, however, wondered, “What happened to my brother at college? What was he learning that prompted him to encourage us to support a boycott?” I knew he had become involved with the campus’s Pilipino student organization, but was this involvement something that influenced his engagement with the grape boycott and other activities, including those that connected with Asian American concerns and interests?

When I attended college, given the university environment that I was in, I did not fully engage with my Asian American or Pilipino American identities, nor any form of activism, boycotts or otherwise. At the time, my undergraduate university was a predominantly white institution, and there were no multicultural or cultural centers. Although there were identity-based student organizations, none, at least from my perspective, addressed political issues or issues of social justice related to identity. Overall, I would not characterize the university as having a culture of student activism, and this, I believe, affected my own experiences as an undergraduate student. Although I experienced development across my multiple social identities, I was not exposed to any spaces or programs that would have contributed to my awareness of larger systemic issues in society.

Since graduating from my master’s degree program where I learned about issues of diversity and inclusion and was largely influenced by Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—required reading for my graduate program. My exposure to the teachings of my



graduate-program faculty and interactions with professional colleagues engaged in social justice work contributed to my own learning and development of a critical consciousness. Learning in community also provided with opportunities to think about and name the experiences I had growing up as an Asian American in southern California. I would witness similar learning and development among Asian American college students with whom I would interact as a student-affairs practitioner. Having served as an advisor for Asian American student organizations throughout my career, I developed an interest in how Asian American college students not only engage in their college and university communities, but also, more important, how and why some students engage in student activism, whether on campus or off campus, and focused on issues of social justice across Asian American and other communities. At each institution where I have worked, I have met and learned from Asian American students who span what I would consider spectra of Asian American identity consciousness and engagement with social justice activism. For example, in one academic year, Asian American student organization leaders would focus their activities solely on the social aspects of community building—what Rhoads, Lee, and Yamada (2002) would label as the *social* or *cultural dimensions* of panethnicity. An academic year later, a different set of student organization leaders would focus their efforts on addressing issues faced by the Asian American student community—what Rhoads et al. (2002) would describe as the *political dimension* of panethnicity. These latter student leaders have inspired me to learn more about how they developed on their journeys as student activists with visions of social justice, because I have come to believe that everyone has a stake in advancing social justice across communities. Although I may not have been engaged in activism as an undergraduate student in the ways that these students have during their college years, my development as a student-affairs practitioner interested in issues of social justice, equity, and

inclusion has influenced me in supporting students who engage in social-change efforts. Thus, I embarked on a research project to understand the experiences of Asian American college-student activists. Specifically, I sought to understand Asian American students' notions of activism and how they came to define what activism is.

Studying student activism today—and Asian American student activists in particular—may be more important than ever. In its 2016 report of national norms for new first-year students who entered college in the fall of 2015, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) found that first-time, full-time students reported greater likelihoods of participating in student protests compared to first-year students who entered college in the fall of 2014. That is, 8.5% of students in 2015—up from 5.6% in 2014—reported a “very good chance” they would participate in protests while in college (Eagan et al., 2016), making this the highest percentage recorded since the question was added to the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey in 1967 (Eagan et al., 2016). Although rates of increase from 2014 to 2015 varied by race, an increase nonetheless was found across all racial groups, with Asian American and Pacific Islander students in 2015 representing a 1.8 percentage-point increase over their 2014 peers (Eagan et al., 2016).

Asian American college students' engagement in activism is not a new concept. Asian Americans in general have had a history of community organizing or working in solidarity with other communities of color, whether through the Civil Rights Movement or the farm laborers movement (Wang, 2016). Asian American college students, likewise, have had a history of engaging in activism to effect change in their campus communities and beyond (Osajima, 2007; Rhoads, 1998a; Ryoo & Ho, 2013). In their analysis of CIRP Freshman Survey data from 1971 to 2005, Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, and Nakanishi (2007) found that, during this time period, a

growing number of Asian American first-year students reported having participated in a demonstration prior to college—from 17.2% in 1979 to 46.3% in 2005. These findings were coupled with the observation that there was an increase in the proportion of Asian American first-year students who considered it “essential” or “very important” to “influence the political structure” (Chang et al., 2007). Contrary to notions that Asian American college students are apathetic and disengaged (Cheng, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Yeo, 2016), these findings have demonstrated that there is and continues to be a growing proportion of Asian American college students who are engaging with various social issues and forms of activism, seeking to create change and influence political structures.

### **Problem Statement**

Student activism has always been a part of American higher education (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Broadhurst, 2014; Hunter, 1988). Since the height of student activism in the 1960s (Broadhurst, 2014; Green, Bush, & Hahn, 1984; Levine & Cureton, 1998), research on student activism has ebbed and flowed with perceived increases in campus activism (Levine & Wilson, 1979; Martin, 2014). The array of research focuses has ranged from campus environments, campus cultures, and institutional characteristics that have had an impact on campus activism (Banning & McKinley, 1980, 1988; Barnhardt, 2015; Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005) to student activism’s learning and development outcomes (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Hernandez, 2012; Hunter, 1988; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Renn, 2007). Little research, however, has explored how racial and ethnic identities play a role in students’ engagement with activism, and, more important, how today’s college students, particularly those from marginalized communities, conceptualize and define what activism is.

The extant literature on student activism is limited in its treatment of marginalized

communities in higher education, including Asian American students, particularly with regard to how social identities such as race and ethnicity may have an impact on students' engagement with activism. Although there is a body of literature that connects social identities with leader identity and leadership processes (Arminio et al., 2000; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Ospina & Su, 2008; Renn & Ozaki, 2010), student activism's absence from the leadership literature perpetuates the marginalization of student activists in the conversations and spaces that promote and value student leadership development (Kezar, 2010).

Furthermore, there is limited understanding of how and in what ways social identities play a role in how students come to understand what student activism is and define that activism. The extant literature also has been limited to presenting conventional notions of activism—activism that, historically, has been employed by white students at colleges and universities that had historically been established to serve them (Allen, 2008). As a result, there is a lack of understanding of how marginalized social identities are an important dimension to student activism and how those identities may inform conceptualizations of what activism is.

Finally, given an increase in students' self-reporting they expect to engage in student activism while in college (Eagan et al., 2016), students' engagement in conventional forms of activism may be on the rise, but how contemporary activism is defined needs to be re-visited from the perspective of student activists themselves. Surveys and qualitative studies have often defined activism from the perspective of the researcher, leaving absent the voices of student activists, particularly Asian Americans and students from other marginalized communities, who may have different notions of what activism is. If student-affairs practitioners value the leadership development and other student-development outcomes that may result from engagement in student activism, it is important to acknowledge the various ways in which

student activists themselves conceptualize what activism is. Such new understandings may assist student-affairs practitioners in re-examining the ways in which they challenge and support student activists, but also create opportunities for the learning and development that has become associated with engaging in various forms of activism (Biddix et al., 2009; Chambers & Phelps, 1993, 1994; Hunter, 1988). The current study's methodological use of students' narratives and application of an Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) perspective brings Asian American student activists' voices into the process of defining contemporary student activism for social justice, thus challenging hegemonic notions of what activism is or can be.

### **Significance of the Study**

Exploring contemporary student activism in higher education and the experiences of Asian American student activists in particular is significant, given the “resurgence in campus activism” (para. 10) that campuses have experienced since the Occupy Movement in 2012 (Wong, 2015). As noted earlier, HERI findings have also indicated that incoming first-year college students are reporting greater likelihoods of engaging in protests compared with earlier cohorts of first-year students (Egan et al., 2016), supporting the need to study contemporary student activism. Furthermore, focusing on Asian American students' engagement with student activism is critical, given the perception that Asian American students generally do not engage with contemporary social activism (Cheng, 2015), despite examples that evidence the contrary (Chung, 2009; Tseng Putterman, 2016).

This study contributes not only to the narratives on Asian American college-student experiences that have been neglected in the literature on student activism, but also to the broader conversations on social justice activism and social identities in higher education. First, from a historical perspective, this study adds the experiences of contemporary Asian American student

activists to the larger story of Asian American activism and college-student activism in particular in U.S. history.

In addition, because there is limited research on how social identities inform students' engagement with student activism, findings from this study address the lack of research on how identity may shape the conceptualizing of what student activism is and how identity informs the social issues for which students engage in activism. In particular, Asian American college students who wish to effect social change may have varying notions of the concept of activism and how they enter various activist spaces, perhaps influenced by the saliency of their Asian American identities. Thus, studying Asian American student activists and their activism contributes to filling this void in the literature on student activism.

Finally, this study contributes to the literature such that student-affairs practitioners may understand student activism in all of its forms, however defined by students, and consider the ways in which different forms of activism may be supported. Although colleges and universities have responded to student activists' demands for changes in their environments, including calls for the development of academic programs (Arthur, 2009, 2011; Yamane, 2001) and the creation of identity-based cultural centers (Patton, 2005), there is a dearth of research on the relationships, if any, between how student activism is enacted in relation to marginalized social identities. An exploration of Asian American student activists is enhanced by investigating how Asian American students' experiences contribute to their understandings of what it means to effect social change and what student activism is.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study was characterized by personal, practical, and research purposes (Maxwell, 2013). From a personal perspective, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of

Asian American college-student activists. For several years, I have worked with and advised Asian American student organizations whose leadership and members have varied in the degrees to which they have demonstrated an Asian American critical consciousness or have engaged in activism, either related to Asian American concerns or to broader notions of social justice. Therefore, a compelling interest in conducting this research was to engage with the stories of Asian American students who participate in activism, thus increasing knowledge of the complex, lived experiences of Asian American college students, and, as a result, informing my own work as a student-affairs practitioners who aims to support Asian American students' various ways of engaging in positive social change and activism.

This study also had practical purposes. I anticipated that a study of Asian American college-student activists would provide additional insights for student-affairs practitioners regarding Asian American student experiences and student activism by racially marginalized populations. In particular, the purpose of this study was to understand the ways in which Asian American college-student activists came to define activism, given their life experiences that may have contributed to their journeys toward social justice activism. By understanding the various forms of student engagement in activism, findings may inform student-affairs practitioners' knowledge of how to support students who engage in student activism in different ways, challenging existing notions of Asian American students' engagement in activism, .

Finally, this study had research purposes. Scholars have studied various aspects of student activism on college and university campuses. While past research has provided perspectives on how campus environments affect student activism and how participation in student activism leads to learning development outcomes, less attention has been directed toward how student activists engage in any form of activism and conceptualize what activism is.

Understanding how today's college students define student activism, particularly related to social justice, may provide higher-education and student-affairs practitioners, faculty, and students new ways of thinking about, engaging in, or supporting activism that is directed toward positive social change.

In addition, this study aimed to challenge notions of what student activism is and who is engaged in social justice activism by focusing on Asian American students' experiences. Little research exists outside the larger studies and analyses of the Asian American Movement in the United States and even less so on Asian American college-student activists in particular (Chung, 2009; Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Rhoads et al., 2002). Thus, providing a more complex picture of Asian American student experiences contributes to research on student activism and the evolution of contemporary student activism.

Given the scarcity of research and lack of theories on how Asian American students or other marginalized communities come to engage in student activism, this study sought to understand how Asian American student activists define activism. Correspondingly, this study employed a qualitative research approach that centered student activists' own stories—their own perspectives and voices—in understanding the ways in which they defined contemporary student activism.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand how self-identified Asian American college-student activists come to understand and define student activism. Thus, the research question and sub-questions guiding this study were:

How do contemporary Asian American college-student activists define activism?

1. What experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists' journeys toward



social justice activism?

2. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of consciousness and awareness of social issues?
3. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of actions and behaviors?

### **The Challenge of Defining Activism**

A challenging aspect of this study was defining or, more important, refraining from defining *activism* at the onset of the study. In the existing research, scholars have defined activism from their point of view rather than from students' perspectives. For example, while Chambers and Phelps (1994) defined activism as “the active participation of individuals in group behavior, for the purpose of creating change—in attitudes, knowledge, behavior, and/or symbols” (p. 45), Kezar (2010) defined student activists as those who engage in “efforts to create change on or off campus related to a broad range of social, political, and economic issues often using techniques outside institutional channels such as protests, demonstrations, and rallies” (p. 451). Kezar specifically defined activism as utilizing techniques outside institutional channels. She posited that activism is not institutionally sanctioned.

There are, however, forms of activism and actions that do not necessarily operate “outside” institutional channels, but still raise awareness and are intended to effect social change, including through social media (Lopez, 2016). Canvassing, writing petitions, and sharing information (e.g., leafleting, pamphleting) are just some activities that student activists might employ in their strategies to effect change. Correspondingly, as noted by some scholars, the ways in which students engage in activism have evolved over the decades (DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016).

The literature on student activism, as discussed in Chapter Two, will reveal that students

have participated in many forms of activism, from protest demonstrations to social media activism. The common thread is that activism has been defined as taking *action* to effect change—action beyond simply caring about or understanding an issue. Still, these notions of activism are researcher-defined. Because of the value I placed on this study’s participants’ own constructions of what activism is, this qualitative study was designed to invite participants to share their own stories about and definitions of activism. Exploring student activists’ own definitions of activism allowed for disrupting existing notions of what activism is, expanding the ways in which scholars and practitioners, along with developing student activists, may think about what social justice activism is or can be.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This chapter provided the background, significance, and purpose of the study. It highlighted the problems related to a lack of research on contemporary college-student activists and Asian American student activists in particular. More important, it noted the concern over how past research has defined student activism from a researcher’s perspective, thus leading to the research questions for the study. The following chapter provides an overview of the literature on student activism in higher education, including a focus on Asian American student activism, and provides the conceptual framework for the study based on the review of the literature. Chapter Three presents the qualitative approach to the study, describing the methodology, theoretical perspective, and methods for data collection and analysis employed in the study. Chapters Four and Five present findings from a thematic analysis conducted on the participants’ interviews. Finally, Chapter Six provides a discussion of the findings and concludes with implications for higher-education practice and suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study explored the experiences of contemporary Asian American college students who participate in student activism and, in particular, how they define that activism. To situate the study in the field of extant literature and to provide a context for the study, this chapter examines the research on student activism in higher education. First, I provide a historical overview of student activism since the 1960s' height of student activism in the U.S. with a focus on how scholars have conceptualized and defined student activism vis-à-vis student characteristics and goals of activism. Next, I review the literature that addresses students' development of a critical consciousness and awareness that informs their activism as one aspect of how researchers have conceptualized student activism. Finally, I review literature that has focused on Asian American college-student activism specifically. I conclude this chapter with an overview of the initial conceptual framework that guided the study.

#### **Historical Overview of Student Activism in Higher Education**

A significant body of literature on student activism in higher education spans the decades since the 1960s (Altbach, 1974, 1989; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Altbach & Klemencic, 2014; Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975; Broadhurst, 2014; Foster & Long, 1970; Light & Spiegel, 1977). In order to understand how student activists and student activism have evolved during the most recent waves of campus activism, it is important to review what scholars have observed and how they have presented what student activism is. Here, I review the historical development of student activism using decades (i.e., 1970s, 1980s, 1990s) as markers for describing the activism

that occurred on college campuses, as studied by researchers, since the 1960s. Although there is nothing that differentiates student characteristics or goals of activism, for example, between 1979 and 1980 or between 1989 and 1990, this review organizes the history of post-1960s activism in this manner because scholars of the extant literature often presented their findings as representative of student activism of a specific decade (Altbach, 1979b; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Beeler, 1985; Hernandez, 2012; Levine & Wilson, 1979).

I also review the history of activism through researchers' presentations of student characteristics and activist goals and strategies that drove their research or informed their historical observations of student activism. Scholars examined the goals of and levels of student activism in relation to changes in student characteristics and activism within the different decades. These factors shaped researchers' understanding of activism. Thus, they represented the ways in which scholars conceptualized student activism and student activists within each corresponding decade.

### **1960s' Height of Student Activism**

Activism in the 1960s represented a growing dissatisfaction with American society and higher education after the Second World War. With increased government funding of higher education and growth in the student population (as a result of the post-World War baby boom and the G.I. Bill), college and university enrollment more than doubled from 1960 to 1970 (Broadhurst, 2014). Activism of the time increasingly focused on students' rights as students challenged the doctrine of *in loco parentis* and called for greater student input in campus governance, challenging curricula, social policies, and campus rules, as well as calling for greater support and representation of students of color in higher education (Broadhurst, 2014). Black student protests demanding the creation of Black studies programs and cultural centers and

Berkeley's Free Speech Movement gained national media coverage, paving the way for students to advocate for a greater voice and inclusion on college campuses (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Broadhurst, 2014). The 1960s undoubtedly represented the height of student activism in the U.S. (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Green, Bush, & Hahn, 1984; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Van Dyke, 2003).

I focus the following section of this literature review on post-1960s student activism because activism of the 1960s laid a foundation for future student activism, and student activism that has taken place since the 1960s is often compared with the activism of that time (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988). Correspondingly, 1960s student activists' focuses on civil rights, civil liberties, peace, and student-life issues (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988) can be viewed as the connective threads of future student unrest.

### **Post-1960s Decline**

Researchers attributed what they considered a post-1960s "decline" in student activism to a subsequent decade characterized by "meism" (Levine & Wilson, 1979, p. 633) where students focused on individual interests rather than on community goals. Later research, however, challenged this notion and found student activism indeed existed but was simply directed toward different goals than those of 1960s activism (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Beeler, 1985; Levine & Hirsch, 1991). In addition, scholars of 1970s student activism defined student activism in different ways than scholars of 1960s activism—student activism was viewed in the 1960s as direct student action toward ideological concerns.

Although some scholars argued that student activism in the 1970s decreased in level of activity as compared with activism during the 1960s, others argued that student activism simply changed in approach, including the resurgence of student governments and the development of

student lobbies (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). This represented a change in scholars' understanding of what activism is, citing a difference in tactics and strategies utilized during the 1970s compared with those utilized during the 1960s. Although these scholars' views of student activism were retrospective in nature in an attempt to understand how activism might be different in their day than that of decades prior, their analyses represented a noteworthy change in how scholars described who student activists were.

**Student activists.** Scholars argued that students who were more likely to have participated in student activism tended to be social science majors, highly intellectual (Altbach, 1989; Kahn & Bowers, 1970), affluent, and from well-educated families with liberal upbringings (Altbach, 1989). This notion aligned with Levine and Wilson's (1979) observation of a prevalent focus on the individual, but countered Altbach's (1979a) assertion that careerism and a focus on professional fields like business had become more common. It is possible that both ideas accurately characterized general student bodies in the 1970s, perhaps signifying a transition to the even more career-oriented decade following. The extant literature on general student activism, however, did not take into account differences among racial groups, and other scholars would contest such broad generalizations about students of the 1970s.

Green et al. (1984), for example, challenged the notion that student activists were more likely to be affluent, intellectual, and come from well-educated families. In their analyses of three years of student surveys conducted in 1973, 1974, and 1975, they found no significant differences in comparing family backgrounds, political attitudes, political participation, and college-related factors (e.g., academic majors, residential vs. commuter students) among students whom they identified as activists and non-activists. It is important to note that, for their quantitative study, their definitions of activist and non-activist were based simply on an activism

scale composed of responses to three questions about whether the student had participated or planned to participate in a demonstration. This study did not include other forms of activism that students may have employed, nor did the study ask participants to self-identify as activists.

While the post-1960s period was characterized by less activism as compared to that of the 1960s, students engaged in different forms of political action (Levine & Wilson, 1979) beyond a protest demonstration, as Green et al.'s (1984) survey defined activism. Although a student activist, in Green et al.'s study, was defined by a specific action or planned action (i.e., participating in a demonstration), Green et al. did not explore other characteristics of the students who participated in this single form of activism.

**Goals of student activism.** The 1970s was characterized by less focus on the underlying issues that were prevalent in the 1960s (e.g., civil rights, war, student-life policies, etc.), leading some to believe that an increasing number of activists were focusing on the emerging women's movement (Astin et al., 1975). Altbach (1979a) later argued, however, that the idealism and concern for community that were hallmarks of 1960s activism shifted toward the self-focused, individual "inner life" (p. 620). Altbach (1979a) further posited that the decline in activism was a result of various factors. After the Vietnam War ended, students returned to other focuses (e.g., their studies, their own self-improvement, careers); leaders in student-activist organizations moved on, so it was difficult to sustain broader-scale student movements; mass media focused on other issues; and universities adapted, moving away from *in loco parentis* and adding curricula that reflected students' interests. This, however, was not likely the case, given the perspectives other researchers provided on the changing forms of activism.

Scholars found that activism took on different forms (Levine & Wilson, 1979) and that activism began to focus on multiple issues. Altbach and Cohen (1990) argued that "the areas of

activism that have been most successful in the 1970s and early 1980s were those that combined individual interests and social concerns” (p. 38), evidenced by the growth of women’s studies programs, Black studies programs, and the emergence of the gay rights movement on college campuses. The 1970s also witnessed growth in the environmental movement, the women’s movement, the continued momentum of other identity-based movements (e.g., Chicano movement, Asian American movement) and student organizations, demands for multicultural and women’s centers, as well as equity in campus programs and services (Levine & Wilson, 1979; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). In other words, there would appear to have been a shift on what students focused their attention (from anti-war protests to social and individual concerns), although this perceived shift may have also been a result of changing research focuses and a decline in media attention.

Beyond the issues that students seemed to address during the 1970s, scholars noted a change in the tactics and strategies that students used to engage in political action or to effect change, and this observation evidenced a change in how researchers defined activism. Student activists of the 1970s were involved with new forms of action, including Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG), student lobbying efforts (Altbach, 1979a; Levine & Wilson, 1979), and litigation (Levine & Wilson, 1979). While these tactics would appear to indicate that student activists attempted to effect change by working within institutionalized and accepted means, Levine and Wilson (1979) argued that these strategies were characteristic of the decade’s new generation of students and were considered “less dangerous, more practical, and more accommodating to causes lacking popular support” (p. 634). It would seem, then, that students in the 1970s were more “politically sophisticated” (Altbach, 1979a, p. 610), indicating maturation in their approaches to activism, likely based on what they learned from their predecessors of decades



past (Altbach, 1979a). Correspondingly, scholars did not simply define activism or limit activism to the direct-action activities of the 1960s, but also to the more savvy approaches to effecting change including these new forms of engagement.

Despite the decline of 1960s-style activism, scholars argued that students attempted to effect change in different ways while focusing on goals that were more issues-based social concerns, as opposed to the ideological concerns of the 1960s (Levine & Wilson, 1979). The identity-based movements that had their origins in the 1960s and continued through the 1970s would garner the interests of an increasingly diverse, yet politically conservative (Altbach & Cohen, 1990), student population in the 1980s whose focus would shift from improving oneself to effecting change with their communities closer to home (Altbach & Cohen, 1990).

### **1980s Activism: Volunteerism in a Conservative Era**

Scholars contrasted the relative calm of the 1970s (Altbach, 1979a, 1979b; Green et al., 1984) with the increased activism of the 1980s (Beeler, 1985; Hamilton, 2003; Levine & Hirsch, 1991), despite general perceptions that students of the 1980s were politically apathetic (Loeb, 1994). Researchers of activism of the decade found that the focus of student activists varied with targets that evidenced global interests and concerns (e.g., divestment from South Africa, U.S. involvement with wars in Central America, and environmentalism) as well as personal, individual interests and local campus issues (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Beeler, 1985; Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Vallela, 1988). These variations in student activists' interests would mirror the variations in student-activist characteristics as described by scholars of that time.

**Student activists.** Characterizations of college students of the 1980s varied among researchers of student activism, and the make-up of the student population of the time influenced the issues and types of activism that students brought to the college campus. Beeler (1985)

compared students of the various decades since the 1960s, remarking that if students of the 1960s were the “We” generation, and students of the 1970s were the “Me” generation, then students of the 1980s were the “Gimme” generation (pp. 9–10). By many accounts, college students of the 1980s were certainly focused on career and professional preparation, were economically driven to pursue high-paying careers (Chambers & Phelps, 1993), and were influenced by a larger cultural message of “getting ahead, and getting ahead for themselves” (Beeler, 1985, p. 10).

Not all scholars, however, described students of the 1980s as simply economically driven and career-oriented. In contrast to such observations, researchers also described students of this decade as socially engaged (Levine & Hirsch, 1991) and committed to social change through volunteer work. Levine and Hirsch (1991) added their qualitative, focus group-based study to the body of literature by arguing that the proliferation of community-service programs at colleges and universities in the 1980s evidenced students’ interests in effecting social change, noting that two-thirds of students surveyed in the 1989 Freshman Survey administered by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) indicated they were interested in careers that would lead to making a contribution to society. While greater interest in effecting social change and making contributions to society did not necessarily manifest specifically into what earlier scholars would have labeled as student activism, Levine and Hirsch (1991) argued that the greater focus on volunteerism and social engagement of the 1980s represented a different form of engagement that was a precursor to increased student activism. They posited that cycles of student activism are often preceded by a period of social engagement (e.g., the 1980s) which, in turn, is preceded by a period of personal, self-focused preoccupation (e.g., the 1970s). Thus, they predicted that the 1990s would be characterized by increased student activism.

Loeb (1994) would later write about this generation as one of contrasts. Despite

commentaries by faculty and people in general society arguing that students of the 1980s were apathetic and indifferent to political and social issues, Loeb (1994) argued that students in the 1980s were not apathetic, but were simply influenced by the U.S. context and culture of the time—one characterized by a focus on economic gains, careerism, and personal wellness being prioritized over the common good. While he described students of 1980s as being largely withdrawn from political activity, referring to most students as “adapters” (p. 7), he also found exceptions to this idea in the form of student activists who, despite the U.S. political conservatism and economic focus of the decade, worked toward social change and engaged in activism that addressed moral issues of the time. Countering the myth of student apathy in the 1980s, Loeb (1994) and others argued that incidents of student activism, although not at the level of student activism in the 1960s, had still increased since the lull of the 1970s (Altbach & Cohen, 1990) and were generally more frequent on campuses as compared to the decades prior to the 1960s (Little, 2012; Van Dyke, 2003).

**Goals of student activism.** The growth in compositional diversity of the student population contributed to the multitude of issues toward which students targeted their activism during the 1980s (Beeler, 1985; Vallela, 1988). Students protested Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruitment on campus, connecting this issue to the larger concerns with U.S. military involvement in Central America and elsewhere. The 1980s also witnessed sustained activism from the 1960s and 1970s in the form of the women’s movement and the gay rights movement (Vallela, 1988). Campuses were also affected by continued focus on student governance and student rights (Vallela, 1988).

Although some scholars would argue that the focus of student activism in the 1980s shifted from national and global issues to individual “*me-oriented*” (Beeler, 1985, p. 10)

concerns, accounts of the student activism that took place in the 1980s challenged this argument. Protests surrounding U.S. foreign policy in Central American as well as the nuclear arms race and federally-funded military research on college campuses dominated much of campus activism landscape (Yamane, 2001; Vallela, 1988). Arguably the most visible and media-attracting target of student activism was the anti-apartheid movement in the mid-1980s when thousands of students nationwide demanded colleges and universities to divest from South Africa (Altbach, 1989; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Little, 2012; Loeb, 1994; Vallela, 1988). It would seem, then, that much like the media attention that was afforded to student unrest in the 1960s, media attention on the large numbers of students involved in anti-apartheid demonstrations in the 1980s affected scholars' perceptions that this was the most notable concern for student activists of the time.

Despite the political conservatism, economic focus, and career orientation that characterized many students of the decade, incidents of student activism increased during the 1980s, relative to the calm of the 1970s. Activism would only increase into the 1990s as student populations continued to diversify, and incidents of racism on college campuses and beyond gained heightened attention from students, campus administrators, and the media beginning in the late 1980s and continuing into the 1990s (Rhoads, 1997). Issues of multiculturalism and identity would become hallmarks of the decade that followed.

### **1990s Activism: Multiculturalism and Identity**

Much of the focus of post-1960s student activism, particularly in the 1990s, addressed issues of identity and multiculturalism (Broadhurst, 2014; Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Hernandez, 2012; Renn, 2007; Rhoads, 1998a, 1998b). Researchers of student activism of this decade explored identity movements (Gupta, 1998; Sanchez & Welsh, 1999) and coalition-building

across movements (Van Dyke, 2003). Scholars also investigated student activism focused on changing the curricular and cocurricular offerings, including the implementation of diversity-course requirements (Pascarella, Salisbury, Martin, & Blaich, 2012), the creation of new academic programs (e.g., women's studies, Black studies, Asian American studies; Arthur, 2009, 2011; Rogers, 2012; Yamane, 2001), or cultural resource centers (e.g., Black culture centers; Patton, 2005). Similar to the literature on activism in the 1980s, scholars suggested that 1990s activism focused less on national issues and more on issues local to the campus or community in which the students engaged in activism (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Regardless of focus, there was a significant increase in student activism in the 1990s; Levine and Cureton (1998) found that 25% of undergraduate students in the late 1990s reported participating in a demonstration, up from 19% in 1976 and close to the 28% of students surveyed in 1969 near the height of student activism.

**Student activists.** Since the 1960s, despite the growing diversity of student populations bringing to college campuses diverse interests and concerns, Levine and Cureton (1998) suggested that characteristics of student activists had not changed significantly. They found that “full-time students, ‘traditional-age’ students, residential students, students at selective universities, students whose parents attended college, and minority students are most likely to protest” (p. 145). However, they also identified two noteworthy characteristics of activists in the 1990s, compared to those of earlier decades: In reviewing the survey responses from a sample of over 9,100 undergraduate students, (a) there was no difference in the self-reporting of participation in past demonstrations between men and women, although, historically, men were more likely to engage in activism; and (b) African American students had a higher involvement in activism than other racial groups (Levine & Cureton, 1998). This is not surprising, given,

respectively, the influence of the women's and feminist movement that existed throughout the 1970s and 1980s and the attention directed toward multiculturalism, identity, and campus racial climates in the 1990s (Rhoads, 1998b).

Compared to students of earlier decades, students in the 1990s were also more optimistic about their futures (Levine & Hirsh, 1990, 1991), despite a distrust of U.S. political systems and the government. This optimism was in contrast to the concerns that students of earlier decades expressed about their futures. Coupled with this optimism was an efficacy that indicated students felt they as individuals could make a difference in the world (Levine & Cureton, 1998). The growth in volunteerism and community-service programs during the 1980s would continue into the 1990s and served as an indication that social activism and concerns for social change were on the rise (Rhoads, 1998b).

**Goals of student activism.** Generally, student activists, historically and across the U.S., directed their activism toward societal issues and broader political concerns (Yamane, 2001), characterized by a deep concern for moral issues such as anti-war movements and civil rights (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Broadhurst, 2014; Loeb, 1994). However, as scholars conceptualized and defined student activism and its goals, the focus of student activism in the 1990s largely centered on issues of diversity and multiculturalism. For example, Rhoads (1997) examined media coverage of student activism and found that nearly 60% of campus incidents were “associated with racial and ethnic struggle, women's concerns, or gay rights activities” (p. 626). Although other activist causes of the time included higher-education funding and tuition increases, campus governance, and environmentalism (Rhoads, 1998b), as well as fair-labor agreements for athletic-apparel manufacturers and fair-trade agreements for farmers (Little, 2012), Rhoads (1997) argued that the larger focus on identity politics evidenced a broader

concern with fostering a “multicultural democracy”; in other words, student activism in the 1990s largely focused on “opportunity, especially in terms of improving higher education access and campus climates for underrepresented and marginalized populations” (Rhoads, 2016, p. 194).

Meanwhile, Levine and Cureton (1998) argued that the activism in the 1990s focused on “localism” (p. 137) as a strategy. Describing student activists of the 1990s, Levine and Cureton (1998) defined student activism in terms of how students approached effecting change:

They do not expect government to come to the rescue. Instead, they have chosen to become personally involved and to focus locally—on their community, on their neighborhood, and on their block. Their vision is small and pragmatic. They are attempting to accomplish what they see as manageable and what they see as possible. (p. 140)

This strategy of focusing on local issues and causes for which student activists felt they could make an impact manifested as increased volunteerism enacted by students of the 1990s. Levine and Cureton (1998) found that nearly two-thirds of students in their 1993 survey across all types of institutions—four-year, two-year, public, and private—as well as across various demographics—age, race, full-time vs. part-time students, residential vs. commuter students—were involved in some form of volunteer work in their communities. Colleges and universities responded by continuing the growth of student programs to support community-service initiatives (Levine & Hirsch, 1991). This sense of service to community would be echoed by activists in the new millennium (Hamilton, 2003).

While students in the 1990s thought globally, but acted locally (Hamilton, 2003; Levine & Cureton, 1998), the goals were diffuse among student activists (Hamilton, 2003). Levine and Cureton (1998) found that regional and national student organizations, such as the Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) declined in numbers, owing to the desire of 1990s students to forge their

own issues-based student organizations, rather than working within umbrella organizations that aimed to address multiple issues. This notion was evidenced by the rise of advocacy and support groups, with both social and political aims, during the 1990s, when, as Levine and Cureton (1998) found, two-thirds of college campuses reported increases in the number of identity-based student organizations.

The strategy of forming issues-focused and identity-based student organizations to address concerns lays in contrast to other scholars' findings suggesting that multi-issue collaboration and coalition-building were still important tactics among student activists (Hernandez, 2012; Rhoads, 1998a, 1998b; Van Dyke, 2003). For example, at some institutions, campus organizations representing students of color collaborated and established student-initiated programs to increase retention, a form of activism in response to attacks on affirmative action and to campus environments that students felt were not meeting the needs of racially- and ethnically-diverse campus communities (Rhoads, Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004).

Within this context of diverse communities and coalition-building among student communities, student activists have continued voicing concerns about educational policies and curricula. Much of this originated in the 1960s movements through which students demanded greater voice in the governance of colleges and universities and more curricula connected with their immediate concerns and their identities (Arthur, 2011; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Rhoads, 1998b; Yamane, 2011). Student activists in the 1990s continued to be influential in effecting curricular change, extending the work of the Black student, Chicano, and Asian American movements of the 1960s and 1970s and calling for new interdisciplinary programs (e.g., women's and gender studies, Asian American studies, and queer studies; Arthur, 2009, 2011) as well as diversity-course requirements in general education curricula (Yamane, 2011). Given the



diversity of students in the 1990s, it is not surprising that student activists would demand change in curricula as well as resources (e.g., cultural resource centers; Patton, 2005) on their campuses.

Much like how student activists in the 1960s challenged *in loco parentis* and how colleges and universities responded to increased student engagement through student governments, an increasingly diverse student body challenged college and university campus environments that had historically been created and expanded to serve white, dominant groups (Allen, 2008). Correspondingly, student activism of the 1990s was often linked to identity, wherein students from diverse backgrounds challenged higher education to become more inclusive of their experiences, “promoting diversity, group identity, and multiculturalism” (Broadhurst, 2014, p. 11). In turn, identity, as a developmental process, also influenced the extent to which individuals engaged in activism (Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Gupta, 1998; Hernandez, 2012; Sanchez & Welsh, 1999).

The diverse student populations of the 1990s brought to campuses a multitude of issues, largely focused on group identity and multiculturalism (Broadhurst, 2014; Rhoads, 1997; 1998b). While higher education would attempt to respond to these changing demographics with rhetoric that supported and included students of color and other marginalized communities (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), student activists found a need to advocate for themselves and for representation in campus communities, responding to and challenging racism and unwelcoming campus climates (Broadhurst, 2014; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In the new millennium, a new generation would contribute a chapter to the narrative on campus activism, but in ways not seen in previous decades.

### **Contemporary Activism in the New Millennium**

Student activism within the last 15 years has received little scholarly attention compared

to student activism of the three decades following the height of student protests in the 1960s. Perhaps the history is too recent. Perhaps the activism that did take place, has taken place, and continues to take place has not captured the attention of historians and higher-education researchers. Or, as Altbach and Klemencic (2014) observed, movements that may have originated on college and university campuses have quickly moved to other areas of society, drawing the attention, participation, and leadership of people beyond college and university student communities. More likely, however, the focus of studies that have examined student activism more recently have shifted from examining student characteristics or the issues that students address on campus to understanding the student learning and development outcomes associated with participation in student activism. For example, a growing body of research has focused on leadership development outcomes (Chambers & Phelps, 1993, 1994; Kezar, 2010; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Komives & Harris, 2005; Rhoads, 2005), as well as civic learning and democratic engagement outcomes (Biddix, 2014; Biddix, Sommers, & Polman, 2009; Hamrick, 1998; Kezar & Maxey, 2014). In addition, student activists have begun to engage in new forms of social activism and awareness-raising through social media (Biddix, 2010; Lopez, 2016), representing new ways of defining student activism that have not been traditionally considered by scholars. Despite limited research on contemporary student activists, student activism, in one form or another, continues to be a part of many college students' experiences, on campus and beyond.

**Student activists.** Student populations have continued to diversify in higher education, not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but also in terms of age, socio-economic status, full-time versus part-time enrollment, and employment status. While Altbach and Klemencic (2014) argued that contemporary student activists are “more likely to take part in online petitions, join

boycotts, express views in online forums, involve themselves in advocacy social networks, and participate in demonstrations and protest movements” (p. 3), Broadhurst (2014) expanded the notion that today’s student activists are relying on these and other tactics, including marches, sit-ins, and teach-ins. In other words, the issues of concern during the previous four decades have endured, but the ways in which students have engaged in activism have expanded to include new tactics, particularly with the rise of social media as a mechanism for mobilizing student activists (Biddix, 2010; LaRiviere, Snider, Stromberg, & O’Meara, 2012; Lopez, 2016), highlighting new ways in which student activism can be defined and studied.

**Goals of student activism.** The issues on which contemporary student activists have focused are similar to the issues with which student activists of the past have engaged (Broadhurst, 2014). Barnhardt (2015) noted that contemporary campus activism has mirrored larger social movements taking place off campus. These have included cuts in public funding of higher education and tuition increases (indicative of the impact of neoliberalism in higher education; Altbach & Klemencic, 2014; Dominguez, 2009); as well as social justice issues including higher-education access for undocumented students (Galindo, 2012); and workers’ rights and fair treatment of campus employees (Barnhardt, 2015). In addition, racially- and ethnically-diverse student communities have continued to direct their activism toward effecting change in campus environments to be more inclusive (Rhoads, 2005, 2016). More recent movements that have had a presence on college campuses include the Occupy movement (McCarthy, 2012), global environmentalism and climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the DREAMers movement (Anderson, 2015; Wong, 2015). Research, however, on these movements and how students have enacted contemporary campus activism is limited, suggesting that understanding contemporary student activism, particularly how and through what

tactics student activists have raised awareness on these issues, warrants further investigation.

### **Limitations**

This section of the literature review presented the historical development of student activism using decades (i.e., 1970s, 1980s, 1990s) as markers for generalizing activism that occurred on college campuses since the 1960s. However, as mentioned, framing a historical overview in this manner is arbitrary. Despite these demarcations, this review organized the history of post-1960s activism in this manner because scholars of the extant literature presented their findings as representative of student activism of specific decades (Altbach, 1979b; Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Beeler, 1985; Hernandez, 2012; Levine & Wilson, 1979).

In addition to the limitation on how scholars have historically framed student activism by decades, research on student activism has varied in terms of focus, supporting the notion that there is no overarching theory of student activism (Altbach, 1979b). While early studies of U.S. student activism focused on student activists' characteristics, later studies examined the issues that students targeted or the ways in which students engaged in activism or attempted to effect change on campus and beyond. Such studies aimed to understand and predict student activism, not only to advise college and university administrators on how to prepare for or respond to campus activism (Miser, 1988a), but also to challenge past researchers' understandings of who engages in activism and what student activism looks like (Levine & Hirsch, 1991).

Meanwhile, in reviewing the past research on student activism, patterns indicate that scholars examined student activism in times when there was a perceived increase in activity on college campuses (Martin, 2014). While some scholars have argued that perceived lulls in activism simply indicated that activism took on different forms (e.g., volunteerism) and targeted different goals (Levine & Hirsch, 1991; Levine & Wilson, 1979), this ebb and flow of research

on activism may be more indicative of changes in how scholars have defined and conceptualized student activism.

How student activism has been defined is a significant challenge in the extant literature on student activism. While some studies defined student activism through familiar or conventional notions of what student activism is, others (e.g., Levine & Wilson, 1979) challenged past researchers to broaden their understandings of student activism. Regardless of how researchers have conceptualized activism, what is consistent is that there is a lack of research that has engaged student activists themselves in defining activism, whether by goals, actions and behaviors, or through the development of a critical consciousness or awareness of systems and social structures.

Few studies have explored how students' critical consciousness affects their engagement in activism. An examination of the historical overview of student activism and its development over the last several decades reveals a gap in understanding this aspect of student activism. Not only should student activism be conceptualized by how it is enacted and the goals toward which student activists have targeted their activism, but it must also be identified by the reflection and awareness that student activists bring to their roles as activists. Recognizing such reflection and awareness as a component of student activism demonstrates how the development of a critical consciousness informs student activists' goals. The following section of this literature review explores studies that have examined student activism from this perspective.

### **Beyond Strategies and Goals: Consciousness, Awareness, and Social Identities**

Much of the historical analyses of student activism focused on student activists' characteristics and the goals toward which students directed their attention. Another aspect of understanding student activism is recognizing student activists' awareness of systemic and social

structures (Manzano, Poon, & Na, 2017). For scholars who have explored this area of student activism, this awareness comes in the form of perceptions of campus environments and of those who hold power in them; the development of a political or social justice consciousness; and an awareness of their own social identities and how these identities inform their activism.

Correspondingly, a branch of literature has explored aspects of student activism related to developing a critical consciousness and activism's relationship with social identities. These studies represent another aspect of how scholars have conceptualized student activism, examining the critical consciousness and awareness that student activists have when effecting change within social systems and power structures.

### **Perceptions of Campus Cultures and Environments**

Ropers-Huilman et al. (2003) investigated the ways in which student activists' perceptions of campus culture affected their engagement with campus activism. Having conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 26 student activists (both researcher-identified and student self-identified) at a large public institution, they framed their findings using Kuh's (1989) four conventional models for understanding organizations: rational, bureaucratic, collegial, and political. In the study, student activists who perceived the campus culture as *political* recognized and challenged structures of power and utilized their understandings of who has power within a system to effect change. Students who perceived the culture as *bureaucratic* tried to work within the system, attempting to understand how changes are made within established, institutionalized processes. Students who perceived a *rational* culture tended to use strategies of gathering information to support an argument and to present a compelling case to decision-makers. Few student activists in Ropers-Huilman et al.'s (2003) study described their campus cultures as *collegial*, which would indicate that open dialogue and

the sharing of ideas were supported and valued. It is important to note that, in general, the student activists in this study demonstrated an awareness of multiple and sometimes overlapping cultures within a single university, and those perceptions were likely to shape the strategies and tactics they used to advocate for changes on campus (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003). Thus, student activists' perceptions of a campus culture (or cultures) and of how the system works at some campuses may have an impact on whether they engage in direct action or work within institutionalized, accepted means of advocating for change. Although the study provided insight into students' perceptions of multiple organizational cultures (often within the same environment) at one institution, further investigation of organizational cultures and student activists' perceptions of these cultures at different types of institutions would have strengthened this study's ability to foster naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995).

In addition to their recognition of campus cultures and power structures, students' propensity to engage in activism is also greater within campus cultures where students feel supported academically and personally by their institutions. Broadhurst and Martin (2014) explored how students' perceptions of their campus climate influenced their level of social and political activism and whether their activities were influenced by cocurricular involvement. Their findings were based on survey data from over 2,000 students, collected through the Wabash National Study (WNS) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), representing 17 four-year institutions, including research universities, regional universities, and liberal arts colleges. Countering earlier studies that found students were more likely to engage in activism as a response to negative campus climates (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Rhoads, 1998b, 2005), Broadhurst and Martin (2014) argued that campus cultures in which students perceived student-affairs practitioners and other administrative leadership to be supportive of students

increased the likelihood that students would engage in activities that advocated for social change.

A strength of Broadhurst and Martin's (2014) quantitative study was its use of a large sample of participants from which generalizations could be made across four-year institutions. However, the study's measure of social and political activism was defined by the WNS survey's political/social activism scale; the nine-item scale questioned participants about the level of importance they placed on activities such as "volunteering in one's community, influencing political values, promoting racial understanding, improving understanding of other countries and cultures" (p. 79). Although these items may have represented an orientation toward social and political engagement, none of the items questioned respondents' actual participation in student-defined activism, thus weakening the argument that students' perceptions of supportive campus environments influenced levels of activism *per se*. It is not clear whether the participants in this study defined these activities (e.g., volunteering in one's community, influencing political values, etc.) as activism. Thus, while the scale may have measured participants' interests in social and political concerns, whether participants considered these activities to be activism or whether they identified as activists was absent from the study.

### **Recognition of Systems and Power Structures**

College and university administrators, including student-affairs practitioners, are part of a larger power system (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005) within institutions of higher education. Student activists often direct their demands for change toward these administrative leaders whom activists perceive to have the most authority within college and university power structures (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003). Extending their study of campus environments and student activists' perceptions of campus *cultures* (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003), Ropers-Huilman et al. (2005) conducted a qualitative study to investigate student activists' perceptions of college



and university *administrators*.

Ropers-Huilman et al. (2005) explored how student activists understood their relationships with and how they characterized college and university administrators. Student activists' characterizations of administrators were categorized into four types of administrative leaders: (a) gatekeepers in the system; (b) antagonists and enemies; (c) supporters; and (d) absentee leaders. Their analysis indicated that one characterization that students did not identify was that of a fifth category: collaborator. Although these types of administrative leaders were visible within campus environments, none of the student activists in Ropers-Huilman et al.'s (2005) study identified administrators as collaborative partners to effect change on campus. This finding could be the result of the limitations in the selection of participants in the study. It is possible that the activists whom Ropers-Huilman et al. (2005) interviewed did not indicate any administrators to be collaborators because, if the would-be activists perceived a collaborative relationship, they might not have presented a need for direct action or other forms of activism. If an environment included administrators who collaborated with students to effect change on campus, student activists may have felt they had allies in the administration (as Hernandez [2012] also noted in her study) rather than having an administration toward which to direct protests. It is also possible that students who may have collaborated with administrators may not have identified themselves as activists, highlighting another limitation in the study; participants were selected based on their self-identification as student activists or through a snowball sampling process in which participants identified other student activists. It is not clear within Roper-Huilman et al.'s (2005) study how student activism was defined for prospective participants. While the student activists who participated in the study may not have perceived administrators as collaborators, those students who would have identified administrators as

collaborators may not have considered their approach to effecting change as being outside institutional channels (Kezar, 2010), thus excluding themselves from the study because they may not have identified as activists.

### **Development of a Political Consciousness**

Recognition of such campus environments and the power structures within those environments demonstrates a critical consciousness that informs how student activists work toward effecting change. Scholars found that social identities interacting with student activism evidences a political consciousness that influences a student's approach to engaging in activism. For example, Hernandez (2012) applied self-authorship theory (Baxter Magolda, 2001) to her narrative inquiry of the developmental consequences of student activism enacted by Mexican American women at Indiana University in the 1990s. Her study involved interviews with seven alumnae who self-identified as being "politically active" (p. 685) as undergraduate students. Hernandez (2012) defined *political consciousness* as "the process in which an individual gains an increasingly complex understanding of politics, how one's identities influence life experiences, and how one's awareness of politics and identity influence actions taken to challenge social norms by participating in activism" (p. 682). She posited that this type of process leads to student activism, noting that the study participants' awareness of racism, oppression, and privilege grew out of their experiences in college.

In parallel with Baxter Magolda's (2001) three dimensions of self-authorship (i.e., cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal), Hernandez (2012) uncovered three themes that represented a political consciousness that not only led to but also was enhanced by engagement in student activism: (a) developing social knowledge (i.e., understanding the social world, including racism, oppression, privilege; cognitive dimension); (b) developing a life calling to

advocate for Latinos (intrapersonal dimension); and (c) developing a political acuity (i.e., understanding the needs and goals of others for the purpose of building effective working relationships and understanding the effectiveness of political strategies based on context, needs, and others involved; interpersonal dimension). Hernandez's (2012) use of narrative inquiry as her approach to understanding how the study's participants made meaning of their experiences as politically active undergraduate students provided deep insight into the lived experiences of a specific set of students. This study would have been strengthened by including a longitudinal component to perhaps examine how the alumnae made meaning of their experiences while they were undergraduate students, given that undergraduate students tend to develop then maintain political attitudes over time (Fendrich & Lovoy, 1988; Fendrich & Tarleau, 1973; Nassi & Abramowitz, 1979; Sherkat & Blocker, 1997). In addition, although most of the participants described their own involvement with student activism, the study's definition of student activism was not well defined; participants were recruited if they self-identified as being "politically active in Latino issues" (p. 685). Thus, participants' understanding of student-activists activities likely varied. Despite these limitations, Hernandez's (2012) study advanced the concept of political consciousness as a significant component of student activism. She found that, although the motivation to participate in activism initially grew out of peer expectations and socialization within activist communities, the students' motivation to engage in activism later developed into an internalized life-calling to advocate for their communities.

### **Connections Between Social Identities and Student Activism**

Many scholars have made connections between social identities and student activism. Identity consciousness and development not only has been viewed as an outcome of engagement in activism (DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016; Renn, 2007), but it also has been observed

to be a catalyst for activism (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), wherein a social identity might inform the goals and targets of student activism (Manzano et al., 2017). For example, Renn (2007) explored the intersection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identities and leader identity, investigating how LGBT student leaders identify as leaders, as LGBT, and as LGBT leaders. Her exploratory qualitative study comprised interviews with 15 students across institutions representing three institutional types: research university; regional, commuter university; and liberal arts college. She identified differences in identities between participants who sought campus-based administrative change through accepted institutionalized procedures by working within systems (i.e., student leaders) and those who wanted to transform and challenge systems (i.e., student activists). She also differentiated between those who accepted LGBT identities (i.e., LGBT students) and those who challenged normative sexual and gender identities (i.e., Queer students). The combination of these two sets of rubrics resulted in four patterns of LGBT/Queer leaders and activists (i.e., LGBT leaders, Queer leaders, LGBT activists, and Queer activists).

These patterns represented the ways in which students engaged not only with their social identities—as LGBT or Queer—but also with their behavior and approach to advocating for change on campus—either as student leaders or as student activists. Furthermore, these patterns represented different stages of leadership identity development (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Renn (2007) considered LGBT and Queer *leaders* to approach social change by working with and within systems through “positional” leadership roles, whereas she considered LGBT and Queer *activists* to be “transformational leaders ... because this term captures both their sense of leadership as transformed beyond role-based activities and the degree of social change (transformation) sought by students who displayed this identity” (p.

320). This concept of developmental change from positional leader to transformational activist indicated that those who identified as activists were at a different developmental stage of leadership development and identity. In other words, LGBT and Queer *activists* appeared to have moved from viewing leadership as simply a positional role to a transformational leadership approach independent of positional leadership.

Renn (2007) also argued that social identity development affected student's involvement with leadership activities and activism, referring to an identity–involvement cycle that characterized many of the participants' experiences in which they developed from being a leader to being an activist, or they identified more openly with their LGBT or Queer identity. In other words, the more the student identified with being LGBT, Queer, a leader, or an activist, the more involved a student was with an LGBT or Queer student organization or the more involved a student was with student leadership activities or activism. In addition, the experiences and involvement in student organizations and other leadership activities led LGBT student leaders and activists to view leadership or activism as inseparable from LGBT or Queer identities, and their identity to be inseparable from the need to create change through leadership and activism. This connection between the development of a stronger social identity and activism would echo in Linder and Rodriguez's (2012) study of Mexican American women activists.

Linder and Rodriguez (2012) utilized theoretical frameworks for multiple identity development and intersectionality to study women-of-color activists' identities and meaning-making. In their qualitative study, Linder and Rodriguez (2012) interviewed seven self-identified women-of-color activists and conducted a follow-up focus group session to explore the women's experiences related to the intersection of identity and activism. They found that students' multiple identities and their understandings of their marginalized identities led them to

engage in activism. Furthermore, they found students experienced marginalization within larger student movements (and campus in general) and also within social justice and activist communities, depending on their identity within the context of those communities. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) noted that, for some of the participants in the study, “becoming an activist was not a choice for them—it was a responsibility and form of survival” (p. 390). While students’ multiple identities and experiences with marginalization may have compelled them to participate in activism with and on behalf of their communities, students’ participation in activism also afforded them opportunities for “being informed and raising awareness in various places about issues of oppression” (p. 389). In other words, social identities led participants to activism that created awareness and change within their communities (Rhoads et al., 2004), and, more important, participation in activism contributed to the participants’ development of a life-long commitment to serving and advocating for their communities.

These studies revealed a connection between social identities and student activism. Given that identity is developmental in nature, one drawback of these qualitative studies was that data collection occurred at one point in time. Findings regarding participants’ social identities and connections with student activism and leadership could have been strengthened by incorporating a longitudinal component to the studies of the participants’ lived experiences or by including an exploration of life history experiences and their effects on identity and activism. Despite these concerns, these findings suggest implications for higher-education research related to motivations of students to engage in activism as well as to how students conceptualize activism connected to and influenced by their social identities (DeAngelo et al., 2016). There are multiple identities that may inform a student’s pathway to involvement in student activism (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), which may, in turn, lead to a greater awareness of social issues.

## **Limitations**

A review of the literature on the critical consciousness and social identities related to student activism reveals a diversity of research approaches to understanding their roles in students' processes of defining and engaging in activism. While some studies highlighted students' perceptions of campus environments and of the actors within those environments, others focused on students' approaches to creating transformative change as characteristic of student activism. The different approaches to understanding student activists and their activism amplify the multitude of internal processes that may influence the ways in which students engage with and define their activism, including how social identities influence and are influenced by such participation.

Methodological approaches have been varied in understanding student activists' perceptions, consciousness, and social identities related to student activism. Quantitative studies that aimed to explain or predict student activism based on campus environments and cultures of activism often focused on a few characteristics such as curricular offerings (Barnhardt, 2015) or the historical presence of specific student organizations (Van Dyke, 2003). Meanwhile, qualitative studies, while providing rich insight into students' perceptions of campus environments (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003), demonstrated the inherent inability to generalize to larger populations and across institutions. In most cases, student activism was conceptualized by the researcher, leaving absent student activists' own understandings of what activism is from the perspective of developing a critical consciousness and an awareness of systemic and social structures.

Nevertheless, the studies suggest that understanding the critical consciousness of systems and social structures as well as how social identities affect and are affected by participation in

activism is complex. Perspectives on how student activism is conceptualized through consciousness and social identities extend beyond the goals and strategies that have historically been the focuses of research on student activism, yet they are intertwined. While activism of the 1960s may have focused on ideological concerns, more recent activism of the 1990s and new millennium have shifted toward identity-based concerns (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Rhoads, 1997, 1998a, 2016), which evidences a growing awareness of the connections among the development of a critical or political consciousness, the influence of social identities, and defining and engaging in student activism. Germane to the current study, few studies have explored how an Asian American identity and consciousness, in particular, has influenced not only involvement in student activism but how that activism is defined.

### **Asian American College-Student Activism**

Given the scope of this study, this final section of the literature review focuses on Asian American college-student activism. It adds the layer of Asian American identity to the previous sections of this chapter that provided an overview of historical developments in student activism and the role of consciousness, awareness, and social identities in students' engagement in activism. Indeed, according to researchers, college students engage in activism in different ways than community members at large, due to the different life circumstances that students have, including the privilege of time and proximity to others who also engage in student activism (Altbach, 1989; Broadhurst, 2014; Crosby, 2004; Van Dyke, 2012) and access to new academic knowledge and information (Arthur, 2009, 2011; Banning & McKinley, 1988; Rogers, 2012; Yamane, 2001). Although literature exists on Asian American activism outside of higher-education studies (including studies on the Asian American Movement; Omatsu, 1994; Wei, 1993), as well as the development of Asian American panethnicity as both an identity



development process (Ryoo & Ho, 2013; Umemoto, 1989; Wei, 1993) and a political process (Espiritu, 1992; Rhoads, Lee, & Yamada, 2002; Umemoto, 1989), this section of the literature review places focus on student activism enacted by Asian American college students.

The body of literature that describes the Asian American Movement and related activism that began in the U.S. during the 1960s (Omatsu, 1994; Wei, 1993) has paid little attention to the study of Asian American college-student activists in particular. This is surprising, given the origins of the Asian American Movement which developed in the 1960s when there was an “emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and ... public protests surrounding the Vietnam War” (Wei, 1993, p. 1). In addition, Asian American college students were heavily involved with the 1968 student strike at San Francisco State College, the longest student-led strike in U.S. recorded history (Omatsu, 1994; Umemoto, 1989), and later formed their own Yellow Power Movement following the example of the Black Power Movement at the time (Espiritu, 1992; Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Indeed, the Asian American Movement partly grew out of, but also influenced, Asian American college-student experiences and their development of a panethnic identity (Espiritu, 1992).

While scholars have examined college-student activism from a variety of perspectives, few have explored the specific experiences of Asian American college-student activists. This final section examines the literature on Asian American college-student activism, beginning with its origins—the legacy of the Asian American Movement and its influence on Asian American college-student activism. It then highlights the literature that has addressed the role of panethnicity in collective action among Asian American activists. Finally, it presents the few studies that have sought to explain the development of a critical consciousness among Asian American college-student activists and what has informed Asian American college students’

engagement in student activism.

### **Asian American Movement and its Influence on College-Student Activists**

During the late 1960s and through the 1980s, the Asian American Movement engaged Asian Americans in addressing a variety of issues ranging from community advocacy and poverty to healthcare and youth programs (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015) from a panethnic perspective and through coalition-building among ethnic groups within the Asian American community. The development of a panethnic identity and collective action among Asian Americans were hallmarks of the movement. While the issues and goals of the movement existed well beyond the boundaries of college and university campuses, the movement influenced Asian American college students to recognize their potential to effect change on their respective campuses and beyond. In particular, Nguyen and Gasman (2015) argued that the Asian American Movement influenced higher education in two ways: The movement

encourage[ed] students to broaden the discourse on race and ethnic relations by redefining categories and challenging prevalent stereotypes, ...[and it fostered] the emergence of Asian American Studies, a field that centralises the histories, literature and political underpinnings of Asian Americans..., which equipped students to engage in and bridge the discourse between school and community. (p. 340)

Nguyen and Gasman's (2015) study was based on analyses of documented oral histories and student publications—primarily *Gidra*, a student-run publication that ran from 1969 to 1974 and which identified itself as “the voice of the Asian American Movement” (Kawashima, 2012, para. 2). Focusing on the influence of the Asian American Movement on college and university campuses and on Asian American students, Nguyen and Gasman argued for inclusion of Asian Americans students in the broader historical narratives of campus activism and student unrest. Noting that Asian American students often worked alongside and in solidarity with other communities of color, their analysis revealed how “student groups and individuals reached

across racial and ethnic lines to make positive change on their campuses” (p. 353). Indeed, the Black Power Movement served as a model for other communities of color, including Asian Americans, to develop racial pride and a panethnic identity (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). Furthermore, campus environments provided the spaces and opportunities for Asian American students to not only come together across ethnic lines, but to also take part in other movements (Aguirre & Lio, 2008). As a result, Asian American college students joined Third World Liberation Front’s strike at San Francisco State College and other protests at the University of California, Berkley, advocating for the establishment of ethnic studies, changes in admission practices, and greater engagement between the academy and communities in need of social services (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Omatsu, 1994; Umemoto, 1989).

Nguyen and Gasman’s (2015) historical analysis also revealed the influence of the Asian American Movement on the establishing of Asian American Studies programs. These academic programs would serve to not only provide a curriculum that included Asian American histories, but also engage colleges and universities with local communities to enact social change. Student activism has often played a significant role in effecting curricular change in higher education (Arthur, 2009; 2011; Yamane, 2001). Influenced by the movement’s focus on racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment (Wei, 1993), Asian American college students advocated for curricula that included their histories, as well as programs through which students would engage with communities external to the college or university and work toward social change. As Nguyen and Gasman (2015) noted, “Asian American Studies was about improving communities by helping students understand their role as resources without reinforcing similar relations of power between the oppressor and the oppressed” (p. 351).

Although the movement involved individuals from across a spectrum of Asian Americans

in the U.S., a majority of those involved with the movement were college-age students (Wei, 1993). The Asian American Movement raised awareness among Asian American college students of the potential for a collective identity as *Asian Americans* for social and political purposes (Rhoads et al., 2002). It is important to note that one approach scholars have used to investigate Asian American activism (whether by students in particular or broadly across all Asian Americans) has been through the exploration of panethnicity and its connection to collective action.

### **Asian American Panethnicity and Activism**

While some studies have examined Asian American panethnic identity development and its connection with Asian American college-student organizations and student involvement (Inkelas, 2004; Rhoads et al., 2002), a different branch of the literature has drawn connections between Asian American panethnicity and *activism* in particular. Espiritu (1992) defined panethnicity as “a politico-cultural collectivity made up of peoples of several, hitherto distinct, tribal or national origins” (p. 2). Panethnic groups, like Asian Americans, unite “to protect and promote their collective interests” (pp. 2–3). Seen through examples of Asian American collective action (Rhoads et al., 2002) on college campuses and the development of an Asian American political consciousness as witnessed during the San Francisco State College student strike (Umemoto, 1989), Asian American-specific activism has been inextricably tied to the concept of panethnicity. More important, the development of a panethnicity has often been viewed as a precursor to Asian American activism, a notion similar to that purported by higher-education scholars who viewed social identity as informing student activism (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012).

Although some scholars viewed the development of “pan-Asianism” (Wei, 1993, p. 43)

as being focused on creating an identity, it is important to recognize that another aspect of pan-Asian identity is recognizing systems and social structures in an effort to transform hegemonic structures of power and oppression (Manzano et al., 2017). For example, Umemoto (1989) analyzed the growth of Asian American consciousness during the San Francisco State College student strike. The development of an Asian American panethnicity (and subsequent involvement in the student strike in solidarity with other students of color) was a response to the recognition of larger societal inequities and, for college-student activists, recognition of those inequities existing within higher-education environments. However, as Umemoto points out, it is unclear whether a political consciousness predisposed Asian American students to engage with the strike or whether involvement in the strike resulted in a greater awareness of issues of racism and inequities in higher education. Similarly, while a panethnic identity may be viewed as a requisite for engagement in collective action, such engagement in activist activities may also lead to a greater panethnic identity or political consciousness (Hernandez, 2012; Rhoads et al., 2002). For some student activists, the engagement in activism and the development of a panethnic identity or Asian American consciousness may be cyclical in nature (Rhoads et al., 2002).

Although the naming of an Asian American panethnicity may have had a *political* purpose (Rhoads et al., 2002) as part of the Asian American Movement and in 1960s activism, there are other aspects of panethnicity that Rhoads et al. (2002) referred to as *social* and *cultural* “dimensions” (p. 977) of panethnicity. In their study on Asian American college-student organizations, they examined how panethnicity and its political, cultural, and social dimensions manifested in a pan-Asian student organization’s activities and collective actions. Their qualitative case study included interviews with 16 students of a panethnic Asian American student organization at a Midwestern university, participant-observations of the organization’s

activities, and document analyses. Interested in exploring how Asian American students challenged marginalization and discrimination, they found that members of the pan-Asian student organization engaged in collective activities that demonstrated political, social, and cultural dimensions of panethnicity. While they found the political dimension of panethnicity to be the most salient for members of the particular panethnic student organization under study, they also found evidence of the social dimension and cultural dimension in the organization's activities. In the cultural dimension, student members forged common connections across the Asian ethnic groups represented within the organization. In the social dimension, student members provided social support that would lead to the development of interpersonal relationships and a common identity as Asian Americans. Most important, however, were the opportunities that the panethnic organization provided for raising Asian American *consciousness*. This idea of an Asian American consciousness may be one key to understanding Asian American college students' participation in social activism related to their Asian American identity as would be found in later studies conducted by Osajima (2007) and by Ryoo and Ho (2013).

### **Asian American Consciousness and Motivation to Engage in Student Activism**

Asian American panethnicity and Asian American activism are intertwined and cyclical; one may influence the other while reinforcing each other at the same time. Panethnicity is inextricably tied to an Asian American consciousness that often drives Asian American activism. In Wei's (1993) analysis of the Asian American Movement, he argued that

the concept *Asian American* implies that there can be a communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change. (p. 1)

This communal consciousness was at the center of two studies that focused on Asian American college-student activists specifically.

Osajima (2007) analyzed data collected from 30 interviews with Asian Americans who “professed a pan-Asian American critical consciousness and commitment to social action” (p. 82). His study was a follow-up to an earlier project, conducted from 1988 to 1992, in which he interviewed 53 Asian Americans to explore Asian American experiences with identity and racism. Twelve of the participants of the earlier study had demonstrated a pan-Asian identity and Asian American consciousness that led to activism, and this finding served as the catalyst for Osajima’s subsequent study. Between 1998 and 2002, he conducted additional interviews with 18 Asian American college students in Southern California and combined these data with the data from the 12 interviews of the earlier study. While the degree of activism that the study’s participants engaged in varied, the purpose of the study was to understand how participants had developed their interests in Asian American-related activities. Thus, Osajima defined activism broadly, placing emphasis on the development of a critical consciousness rather than on the level of activity or types of activism. The activities included not only participation in student activism, but also in Asian American Studies programs, Asian American student organizations, and Asian American community engagement activities and service.

Although Osajima (2007) refrained from defining Asian American *activism*, his study revealed several themes related to Asian American college students’ development of an “Asian American critical consciousness” (p. 64). First, he described the development of an Asian American critical consciousness as “transformative” (p. 63), indicating that students’ awareness of Asian American concerns demonstrated a significant change characterized by having different views than ones previously held. Second, he found that students were able to identify significant

moments in their lives when they began to understand how larger “historical and social forces” (p. 65) shaped their lives. Third, he found that the development of an Asian American critical consciousness was a social process, meaning that the development occurred not in isolation, but in community with other Asian American students. Finally, Osajima found that the development of an Asian American critical consciousness was further facilitated by the supportive relationships with friends and mentors.

Ultimately, what Osajima (2007) found as the overarching pattern for students who developed an Asian American critical consciousness was an interaction or interplay between (1) knowledge gained about oppression and inequities experienced by Asian Americans and (2) social experiences and support networks that encouraged interest in Asian American issues. In other words, it was not one factor, incident, or experience that catalyzed students’ development of Asian American critical consciousness and subsequent interest in Asian American issues and activism; rather, it was a combination of factors, both cognitive and social, that contributed to the development of an Asian American critical consciousness that, in turn, fostered an interest in Asian American issues, activities, and activism.

Similar to Osajima’s (2007) study, Ryoo and Ho’s (2013) more recent study examined the motivation of Asian American college students to engage in student activism. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Transformational Resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) as theoretical perspectives, Ryoo and Ho conducted a qualitative study to explore the motivations of Asian American student activists at UCLA to engage in political and social activism and how Asian American students were affected by their activist experiences. In terms of methods, Ryoo and Ho utilized narrative inquiry, recruiting and interviewing 10 Asian American student activists at UCLA “where Asian American students made up 42% of all enrolled freshmen in



2007 and 40% of the entire undergraduate student population in 2008” (p. 217).

Although their intent was to understand the reasons why Asian American college students chose to engage in student activism, whereas Osajima (2007) focused on the cognitive and social factors that contributed to the development of an Asian American consciousness and subsequent activism, Ryoo and Ho’s (2013) findings indicated two common themes across their interviews of Asian American students who engaged in social activism: “(1) feelings of privilege, difference, and responsibility seemed to motivate students’ political activism for Asian American rights; and (2) students experienced personal growth and new identity formation through political activism” (pp. 217–218). They discovered that Asian American students recognized a sense of privilege—based on socio-economic status or other factors—related to being a college student; this sense of privilege served as a motivator for engaging in social action. In addition, Ryoo and Ho noted that identity development was an outcome of participation in activism. That is, students’ activism influenced identity development, countering what Osajima (2007) found and what other scholars have argued about the role of a panethnic identity in motivating Asian American activism (Rhoads et al., 2002; Umemoto, 1989, Wei, 1993). Furthermore, Ryoo and Ho argued that Asian American Studies courses expanded students’ knowledge about Asian American issues. Unlike Osajima’s (2007) study, Ryoo and Ho (2013) highlighted what appear to be outcomes of participation in student activism. However, their findings supported the idea that an Asian American consciousness or identity and engagement in Asian American-related activism are intertwined and, to an extent, interdependent.

### **Limitations**

Much of the research on identity-related student activism has shown the inextricable link between identity (or, in the case of Asian American activism, panethnicity) and the drive to

participate in activism, which, in turn, influences the extent to which individuals engage in activism (Duncan & Stewart, 2007; Gupta, 1998; Hernandez, 2012; Sanchez & Welsh, 1999). The role of panethnicity has been critical to the study of Asian American activism, not only for its political dimension, but also for its social and cultural dimensions (Rhoads et al., 2002). However, greater attention can be afforded to the study of the connections between panethnicity and Asian American college-student activism in particular. Although Rhoads et al. (2002) addressed the role of panethnicity on the collective actions of Asian American college students, the focus of their study was primarily on the role of pan-Asian student organizations, and not specifically on activism.

Studies such as Osajima's (2007) and Ryoo and Ho's (2013) offered perspectives on the motivation for Asian American college students to engage in activism. These studies provided significant insights into the various influences of student-activism engagement and also added context to these students' experiences. However, each of their studies was limited to the specific contexts of students and institutions in Southern California. For example, in Osajima's (2007) study, all but four of the participants who were interviewed and whose data were included in the study were raised in California or Hawai'i, leading to questions of whether institutional contexts and specific campus environments contribute to the influences that lead to Asian American students' engagement in student activism.

In addition, studies have mainly focused on current-student experiences and their meaning-making regarding Asian American student activism and critical consciousness. However, it is not clear whether prior experiences and life histories as Asian Americans also contribute to a disposition that leads to an Asian American critical consciousness and to Asian American student activism. Furthermore, as in previous studies, each of the studies on Asian

American student activism conceptualized student activism from the researchers' perspectives, rather than exploring how Asian American student activists defined their activism. Thus, there are potential opportunities to explore not only the motivations and goals of Asian American student activists, but also their critical consciousness and social identities and how these factors interrelate in defining student activism.

### **Conclusion and Findings from the Literature Review**

A review of the literature on student activism reveals variations in how scholars have studied the topic. The narrative on student activism has largely been one in which researchers and administrators have sought to understand what causes student activism, the characteristics of those who participate in student activism, and how to manage or create policies to mitigate student activism (Miser, 1988a, 2005). However, more recent research has linked participation in student activism with learning and developmental outcomes (Biddix et al., 2009; Chambers & Phelps, 1993, 1994; Hunter, 1988). Yet, at the same time, how student activism has been defined or operationalized has varied across studies with a lack of studies focusing on how students themselves come to understand and define what activism is.

Much of the work that analyzed student activism from a historical perspective focused on the goals of activism using a conventional definition of student activism (e.g., protest demonstrations). The issues that have been the targets of student activism have not changed significantly since the 1960s, although researchers' attention to student activism has ebbed and flowed with researchers' interests or with variations in coverage by the media (Altbach, 1979; Rhoads, 1997). Meanwhile, the growth in the diversity of students in higher education has led to a greater number of issues around which students engage in activism (Beeler, 1985; Broadhurst, 2014; Vallela, 1988). So long as there has been a lack of student decision-making influence

within the power structures of colleges and universities, there has been and will continue to be students who seek to create change, fighting for inclusion and representation within their communities. This desire for inclusion and recognition of systemic and social structures evidences a political consciousness and awareness, the development of which is another aspect of activism and an area in which scholars have focused their studies on student activism.

Beyond a critical consciousness of systems and social structures, and given that much of the student activism at the turn of the millennium has focused on identity politics (Rhoads, 2016), studies have begun to explore how students' salient social identities may inform their engagement with student activism. Racial identity may have an impact both on the goals toward which a student targets activism, but also on their critical consciousness/awareness of systems and social structures that bring about their desire to engage in activism.

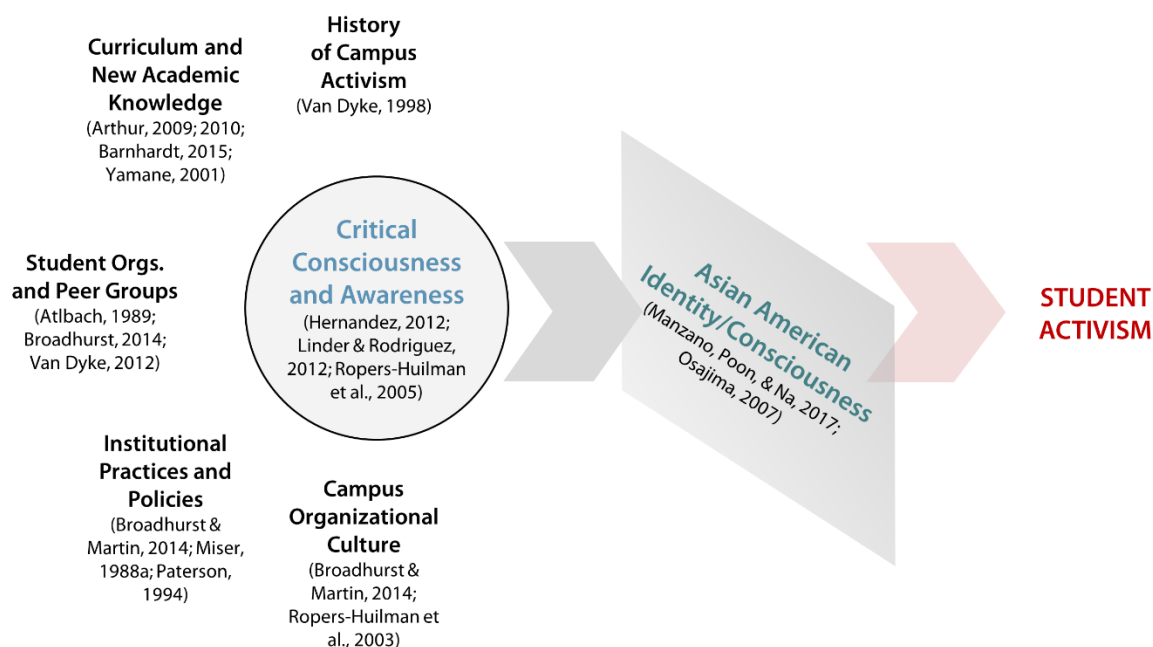
An examination of the literature also indicates there is a lack of studies that explore how student activists themselves define their activism and make meaning of it. In addition, despite the long history of Asian American activism and community organizing, and although much of the activism of the last few decades has focused on identity, there is a dearth of scholarly work that examines how Asian American college students, in particular, define and engage with activism. A review of the literature on Asian American student activism amplifies the paucity of research on Asian American-related student activism in general and, in particular, how Asian American students define activism. Little research has described the role that Asian American students play in social activism and what motivates their engagement. Where do Asian American college students fit into this narrative in which social activists come from all backgrounds working toward addressing a multitude of social issues? Of those who are engaged in student activism, how are they engaged and how are they defining that activism? In what

ways do their Asian American identities inform both the targets of their activism as well as their critical consciousness or awareness of systems and social structures? Despite a long history of Asian American activism toward a variety of social issues, misperceptions of Asian Americans render this history invisible (Ryoo & Ho, 2013). This invisibility must be challenged; thus, the current study illuminates the experiences of Asian American college-student activists and, specifically, how they define student activism.

### Conceptual Framework

Drawing from the review of the literature, the conceptual framework for the study is composed of multiple aspects of how college students engage in student activism and how Asian American college-student activists, in particular, may come to define that activism. These areas include: campus contextual influences; critical consciousness and awareness; Asian American identity/consciousness; and the object of this study, which is how Asian American college-student activists define activism. Figure 1 represents the relationships among these concepts.

Figure 1. Conceptual Diagram



The first component of the conceptual framework draws on the literature review, demonstrating how various aspects of college and university environments affect student activism. Some colleges and universities are arguably more “activist” than others (Van Dyke 1998), meaning that such schools are prone to experiencing frequent occurrences of student protests or other forms of campus activism. Colleges and universities have varied histories and organizational cultures (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003), and at campuses where activism has been historically part of the culture, the emergence of student protests and other forms of activism are more likely to be part of the norm (Norr, 1977). Van Dyke (1998), for example, found that a history of campus activism served as a predictor of student activism in subsequent decades. In addition to campus history and organizational culture, curricula and the emergence of academic knowledge areas such as ethnic studies (Arthur, 2009, 2010; Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Yamane 2001) have offered a means for students to connect their social identities to student activism, while administrative policies and practices have attempted to mitigate or respond to that activism (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Brown, Miser, & Emmanuel, 1988; Miser, 1988a, 1988b, 2005; Paterson, 1994). Finally, the influence of peer groups as part of the campus context demonstrates how college students, compared to community members at large, are able to engage in activism due to the different life circumstances that students have, including the privilege of time and proximity to others who also engage in student activism (Altbach, 1989; Broadhurst, 2014; Van Dyke, 2012).

The second component of the conceptual framework presents an aspect of student activism that is internal to the student, namely the development of a critical consciousness that brings about an awareness of the need to effect change. This critical consciousness evidences a student activist’s recognition of systemic and social structures (Manzano et al., 2017) or college

and university power systems (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005) that serve as barriers to effecting change. The development of critical consciousness incorporates an understanding of how a person's social identities influence life experiences (Hernandez, 2012) with an awareness of systemic and social structures, leading student activists to work toward social change (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012).

The third component of the conceptual framework introduces the lens of an Asian American identity to student activists' processes of engaging in activism. Asian American students' development of an Asian American critical consciousness evidences an understanding of how historical and social forces may have shaped their lives (Osajima, 2007). Thus, a salient Asian American identity may inform the goals and types of activism in which students engage (Manzano et al., 2017).

Finally, the object of the study was how Asian American college-student activists define student activism. As seen in the review of literature, much of the research on student activism has defined activism from researchers' perspectives, rather than from student activists' own understandings of what activism is, given their contexts and social identities. For Asian American student activists, in particular, there is a lack of research on how this population defines student activism that may be informed by their Asian American identity and consciousness, if at all.

This conceptual framework informed the study. By recognizing the effects of campus context and in conceptualizing students' internal critical consciousness and awareness of systems and power structures, the framework incorporates student activists' Asian American identity consciousness as a lens for defining activism. Thus, the study aimed to learn how Asian American student activists defined student activism. The following chapter presents the research

questions as well as the research design and methods that were employed to explore this aspect of Asian American student activism.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

This chapter describes the methodology that I used in conducting this qualitative study on Asian American college-student activists. It begins with a brief explanation of the study's purpose, followed by a presentation of the research questions as well as the epistemological approach. Next, this chapter presents the plan of inquiry that I employed, including data collection and analysis processes. References are made to documents related to data collection, including participant consent forms, a demographic questionnaire, and data-collection protocols, all of which are included as appendices.

Although a few studies have explored the development of an Asian American identity and critical consciousness and motivating factors of engagement in activism (Osajima, 2007; Ryoo & Ho, 2013), there is a lack of research on how Asian American student activists define, in their own terms, what student activism for social justice is. Adding to the limited research on Asian American college students, this study sought to explore how Asian American student activists come to engage in social justice concerns and how they define contemporary student activism. Understanding the ways in which Asian American student activists define activism may have implications for how higher-education and student-affairs practitioners work with contemporary student activists and for how student peers and fellow student activists might come to understand the many ways in which students effect positive social change.

#### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand how self-identified Asian American college-

student activists come to understand and define student activism for social justice. Thus, the research question and sub-questions that guided this study were:

How do contemporary Asian American college-student activists define activism?

1. What experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists' journeys toward social justice activism?
2. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of consciousness and awareness of social issues?
3. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of actions and behaviors?

### **Methodology and Research Design**

According to Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014), methodology guides research design, while methods are the ways in which data are collected. Because this study sought to understand how Asian American college-student activists come to define student activism, the study employed a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009) that incorporated life history (Diniz-Pereira, 2008) and narrative inquiry methods (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Tierney, 1999) as data-collection strategies; specifically, I utilized semi-structured individual interviews as a method of data collection. Before I explain the use of a qualitative approach to the study, I describe my paradigmatic stance and epistemological approach to this research.

### **Paradigmatic Stance and Epistemology**

My educational experiences, assumptions, and experiences in student-affairs practice shaped my approach to exploring the experiences of Asian American college-student activists. I was keenly aware of my desire to understand experiences from the perspectives of students who participate or engage in a phenomenon such as student activism, to hear Asian American student activists' voices, and to understand how they make meaning of these experiences and define

what student activism is. In exploring this phenomenon, my mental model (Greene, 2007) was shaped by research literature grounded in the history of student activism in higher education, the contextual influences of student activism, and the internal influences of identity and critical consciousness among Asian American student activists.

My approach to studying Asian American activists was framed by my desire to better understand how they came to construct notions of student activism. I was interested in student activism in particular because of my interest in how students might consider activism to be forms of engagement that involve risk (Cabrera et al., 2017) or are outside of institutionally-sanctioned channels (Kezar, 2010). Students' engagement in activism is also often one that takes place within a social context. Correspondingly, for the current study, my epistemological approach was grounded in social constructivism (Merriam, 2009). Social constructivism supports "multiple realities, or interpretations" within a social context, rather than a "single, observable reality" (Merriam 2009, p. 8). This epistemological approach was relevant to the current study of Asian American student activists because the critical consciousness and saliency of an Asian American identity, situated within a higher-education context, informed the ways in which Asian American students socially constructed notions of social justice activism. Correspondingly, I employed a constructivist approach to understanding Asian American students' ways of knowing and meaning-making, believing that their experiences are their own, and that these experiences, in connection with others and within a higher-education context, led to their defining student activism.

### **Theoretical Perspective and Freirian Praxis**

While social constructivism served as an epistemological approach to studying the ways Asian American student activists construct definitions of activism, selected tenets of an Asian

Critical framework (AsianCrit; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Museus, 2014) served as a theoretical perspective for the study. According to Jones et al. (2014), theoretical perspectives reflect an individual standpoint that influences the way data are interpreted. Utilizing AsianCrit as a lens, I sought to understand how contemporary Asian American student activists define activism. By incorporating this theoretical perspective, I maintained participants' social identities as Asian Americans in the foreground as I interpreted and analyzed their stories (Jones et al., 2014).

AsianCrit is considered a descendant theory of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Liu, 2009; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Yosso, 2005). According to McCoy and Rodricks (2015), CRT as a theoretical framework emerged from critical legal studies as “a means for challenging dominant systems of racial oppression” (p. 5). When applied to the field of education, there are five tenets of CRT that are useful to “inform theory, research, pedagogy, curriculum and policy: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism; (2) the challenge to dominant ideology; (3) the commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches” (Yosso, 2005, p. 73). While higher-education studies have utilized these tenets to analyze the experiences of students of color in education, AsianCrit has emerged as an additional lens through which researchers can examine experiences specific to Asian Americans (Museus & Iftikar, 2013). Tenets of AsianCrit build upon CRT principles while integrating knowledge about Asian Americans' racialized experiences (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Three AsianCrit tenets were particularly useful and together, served as a lens for the study's focus on Asian American student activists and how they came to engage in social justice and define activism. These are *(re)constructive history*; *strategic (anti)essentialism*; and *story, theory, and praxis*.

*(Re)constructive history* emphasizes that “Asian Americans have been racially excluded

from American history and advocate[s] for transcending this invisibility and silence to construct a collective Asian American historical narrative that includes the voices and contributions of Asian Americans in the United States” (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 25). As seen from the literature review, research on the contributions of Asian American student activists has been limited, despite Asian Americans’ history of organizing for social change and engaging in student activism (Ryoo & Ho, 2013; Umemoto, 1989). The limited scholarly work on student activism of the more recent decades reflects themes of identity and representation (Rhoads, 1997), which are often viewed as having historical connections with activist issues of much earlier decades (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988). Thus, incorporating a lens of (re)constructive history in the study on Asian American student activists provided a means of including contemporary Asian American student activists’ voices and contributions to the history of student activism, especially when participants shared stories of past Asian American activists who influenced their own engagement in student activism.

*Strategic (anti)essentialism* “recognizes that complete rejection of racial categorization and uncritical reification of racial categories can both yield undesirable outcomes” (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 27). Notions of rejecting or reifying racial categorizations can surface when examining the effects of engaging in various types of Asian American-related activism which can “simultaneously advance the well-being of Asian American communities and reinforce racial categorizations and constructions of this population” (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 27). In other words, a tension exists between considering the Asian American racial category as a means for creating unity and collective influence and considering the Asian American racial category as masking the differences that exist within such a socially constructed racial classification. Thus, it is important to recognize the ways in which some activists’ and researchers’ efforts to reject an

Asian American racial category or, on the other hand, reify the Asian American category may be problematic in different ways. The study's initial conceptual framework, as presented in Chapter Two, recognized Asian American identity as a lens that affects the ways in which Asian American student activists perceive student activism. As a researcher, my being attuned to the concept of strategic (anti)essentialism informed the ways in which I interpreted participants' experiences with student activism and how that activism was defined in relation to their Asian American or other identities.

Finally, the AsianCrit tenet of *story, theory, and praxis* mirrors CRT's principle of the centrality of experiential knowledge. Story, theory, and praxis "assert that stories inform theory and practice, theory guides practice, and practice can excavate stories and utilize theory for positive transformative purposes" (Museus & Iftikar, 2013, p. 27), and, in doing so, they center the voices of Asian Americans. Important in this study was a focus on exploring the narratives of Asian American student activists and how they came to define activism. The lens of story, theory, and praxis informed the ways in which data were interpreted and how participants' stories were represented, all with an aim toward goals of informing theory or guiding practice.

Jones et al. (2014) emphasize that a theoretical perspective is "a useful approach to help in the analysis of data and to convey findings through different lenses" (p. 55). Utilizing AsianCrit as a theoretical perspective fostered an ability to consider the research process as a "transformative process that considers social issues of privilege and oppression in the analysis of data" (Jones et al., 2014). Thus, the use of a theoretical perspective, such as AsianCrit, led to a more complex understanding (Jones et al., 2014) of the ways Asian American student activists come to define student activism. This study reveals how Asian American student activists viewed, re(constructed), and contributed to the history of Asian American student activism;

examines how they connected their activism to not only their Asian American identity, but also, in some cases, their ethnic identity; and centralizes stories of how they journeyed toward social justice and became engaged in various forms of student activism.

In addition to incorporating AsianCrit as a theoretical perspective, the presentation of findings was framed through the concept of *praxis*, as drawn from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2014). Freire (1970/2014) defined praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126). In understanding the ways that Asian American college students defined activism for social justice as a means to transform their worlds, I explored issues of reflection and awareness of social issues as well as actions employed to effect change. The ways in which participants named both reflection and action as components of how they defined activism for social justice mirrored Freire's notion of praxis.

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach**

The nature of the study's research questions called for a qualitative approach to inquiry. Qualitative approaches to research are characterized by a focus on meaning and understanding (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative studies, the focus is on "how people interpret their experience, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Thus, a qualitative design was appropriate for this study because it sought to understand how Asian American college-student activists define student activism for social justice.

Qualitative approaches to research are also characterized by the use of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I, as the researcher, collected data through semi-structured individual interviews with Asian American college-student activists. Because the goal of this study was to understand how Asian American

student activists construct notions of and define student activism, a qualitative approach using myself, the researcher, as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis was ideal. This approach had several advantages for me as a researcher, including being able to “expand [my] understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, [and] check with respondents for accuracy and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). In addition, my identity as an Asian American allowed me to connect with the participants through a shared understanding of our experiences as Asian Americans. As a result, I was able to establish a rapport with participants that elicited rich stories of growing up Asian American and engaging in activism on their college campuses and beyond.

Finally, the inductive nature of the study lent itself to utilizing a qualitative approach. As Merriam (2009) notes, in qualitative studies, “researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories” (p. 15). In other words, findings are inductively derived from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam, 2009). In this study of Asian American student activists, findings took on the forms of themes, categories, or concepts presented through excerpts of narratives that represent the student activists’ understandings of what contemporary student activism is.

**Critical life history.** Because this study sought to understand how Asian American college-student activists define student activism, the study incorporated a strategy known as critical life history (Diniz-Pereira, 2008), a form of narrative inquiry. The purpose of critical life history inquiry is to construct “critical knowledge *with* socially and culturally oppressed people, joining them in order to attempt to promote social change” (Diniz-Pereira, 2008, p. 382). This study explored the experiences of Asian American student activists as lived and told as stories,



with the aim of understanding how Asian American student activists come to define student activism. As a researcher who identifies as Asian American, I shared similar experiences of being Asian American with the participants, and this connection allowed me to gather quality data through in-depth interviews and shared experiences (Diniz-Pereira, 2008). A critical life history approach centered and brought visibility to voices not often heard in the extant research on student activists and activism in higher education. In addition, by giving voice to those who have been silenced or absent in the extant research, this approach to studying participants' stories and illuminating their perspectives on what student activism is "challenge[d] the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing" (Tierney, 1998, p. 55). This particular approach not only worked well with understanding how Asian American students define student activism, but also allowed me, as a researcher, to engage with Asian American student activists in a way that potentially empowered them to further their own activism. Although this was not an explicit goal for the study, I welcomed it as a by-product of the participants' engagement in this project.

### **Plan of Inquiry**

Qualitative research approaches are iterative in nature (Maxwell, 2013), thus throughout the process of engaging in the study, I approached the project with an openness to adapting the plan as I engaged with the data collection and analysis processes. The following section describes the plan of inquiry that I employed for this study.

### **Participants**

**Selection.** The criteria for selecting participants for this study included: (a) identify as Asian American; (b) be currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a college/university or community college in the U.S.; (c) be at least 18 years of age. I used the criterion "currently

enrolled college student” rather than opening up the study to recent alums or individuals who are no longer enrolled in college because those who are not currently enrolled in college may have a relationship with activism that is different from that of enrolled students (due to time available to engage in activities and a network of other student activists in proximity). In addition, in the recruitment e-mail that I sent to potential participants, I stated, “I am seeking Asian American undergraduate students who have engaged in any form of student activism related to social justice.” I intentionally did not define “activism” because I wanted to remain open to the various ways that potential participants may have defined activism. I did, however, narrow the focus of activism to issues of social justice. Researchers of past activism—of the 1960s and 1990s in particular—have demonstrated connections to civil rights and identity-based activism (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 1988; Rhoads, 1997, 2016). In light of more recent surges in campus activism and focuses on notions of social justice, and in thinking about Asian Americans’ roles, sometimes questioned (Cheng, 2015), in addressing issues of social justice or participating in campus protests, I chose to focus this study on student activism related to social justice. Thus, in inviting participants to this study, I asked whether they have had experiences engaging in social change projects or social justice activism, however they defined it.

Given these criteria for selecting participants, the study employed purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009) to identify “information-rich cases” (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). As Merriam (2009) noted, purposeful sampling is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77). To generate a sample of participants, I utilized a nomination process in which I asked colleagues within my professional network, including student-affairs practitioners and faculty, to nominate current undergraduate students for the study. By utilizing nominators,

this study employed a variation of intensity sampling in order to identify cases of Asian American students who are engaged in student activism. This sampling process aimed to create variation within the sample based on gender identity, year in school, ethnicity, immigrant-generation status (e.g., first-generation American, 1.5-generation American, second-generation American, etc.). Despite there being some variation in these categories, the sample lacked variation in U.S. geographic representation because students who were nominated for the study included only those whom nominators identified within their immediate campus communities, and my network of professional colleagues was limited to only a few regions of the U.S. In addition, while I did not define “activist” when soliciting nominations for the study, the potential participants whose names were forwarded to me for possible selection for the study and their forms of activism were likely influenced by the nominators’ own conceptualizations of what activism is and who activists are. Despite these limitations, participants who were nominated were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study if they self-identified as Asian American college students engaged in any form of activism.

**Recruitment.** As mentioned, I recruited potential participants through the use of nominators within my professional network. These networks included student-affairs and higher-education professionals and faculty who, at the time of the study, were members of the Asian/Pacific Islander Knowledge Community (APIKC) within NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education; the Asian Pacific American Network (APAN) within ACPA–College Student Educators International; advisors to intercollegiate student organizations such as the Midwest Asian American Students Union (MAASU); and directors of Asian American resource and cultural centers at various colleges and universities. I sent an e-mail (See Appendix A) to nominators, including 12 student-affairs practitioners and faculty members,

asking them to identify current Asian American college students who were engaged in activism and social change projects and to provide me with an e-mail address of the potential participant. In addition, the call for nominations was shared on two listservs, one for professionals working in college and university cultural centers in California and the other for professionals who participated in the national Social Justice Training Institutes (SJTI). From across the 12 nominators and from the call for potential participants on the two listservs, I received 47 nominations of Asian American undergraduate students whom nominators perceived to be involved in student activism. (Of the 47 nominations, 10 were from one individual at one institution, and she indicated three of the 10 as being the best prospects for participation in the study.) In addition, nine potential participants contacted me directly expressing an interest in participating in the study. These nine potential participants were likely informed about the study by individuals who read the call for nominations on either of the two listservs.

I contacted 49 potential participants via e-mail (See Appendix B) and invited each individual to complete the initial demographic survey online (See Appendix C) so that I could determine if the potential participant met the selection criteria. Of the 49 potential participants whom I contacted, 19 completed the online survey. All 19 met the criteria for participation in the study. I then invited each of those who completed the online survey to participate in the study's two individual interviews. Of the 19 who completed the online demographic survey, nine agreed to participate in the interviews, two declined to participate in the interviews (due to their own time constraints), and the remaining eight did not respond to initial and follow-up invitations to participate in the study. In total, the study included nine participants, each of whom participated in two individual interviews.

## **Data Collection**

In order to explore how Asian American student activists define student activism, I conducted multiple semi-structured individual interviews (Merriam, 2009) with each participant. Merriam (2009) described semi-structured and unstructured interviews as those that “assume that individual respondents define the world in unique ways” (p. 90). Utilizing life history and narrative inquiry methods to elicit participants’ stories and perspectives on student activism, I conducted two interviews with each participant; the initial interview was conducted to learn about the participant’s experiences leading up to their engagement in student activism; the follow-up interview was conducted to explore the participant’s conceptualizations and definitions of student activism. Each semi-structured individual interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, allowing time to establish rapport and to engage participants in in-depth discussions about their experiences as student activists (Seidman, 2006). I conducted initial interviews with each participant over the course of seven weeks (mid-August 2017 through early-October 2017). I conducted follow-up interviews with each participant during a two-week period in mid- to late-October 2017. One participant’s interviews were conducted face-to-face in a location of their choosing; all other eight participants’ interviews were conducted online with both video and audio connections via Zoom (online video conferencing). Each interview was audio-recorded. The use of face-to-face interviews or online interviews was selected by the participant based on location and availability. After each interview, I generated an analytic memo (Maxwell, 2013) to record initial thoughts about the information shared during the interview. Interview data were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service provider, and I assigned or asked the participant to select a pseudonym.

**Informed consent and demographic information.** As mentioned, potential participants

were directed to complete an online form to communicate their interest in participating in the study, to review the participant consent form, and to complete a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire assisted me as the researcher in determining whether the student was eligible to participate in the study. The demographic questionnaire asked about some of the participant's identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.) and their campus and community activities; participants were invited to complete the form to the extent to which they are comfortable. The online form also invited participants to review the participant consent form before indicating their interest in participating in the interview phase of the study. In addition, prior to each interview, I provided each participant with a copy of the participant consent form, either in person or via e-mail, to allow them to review the form and ask questions about the study before beginning the interview (See Appendix D). I asked participants to complete the consent form and submit the form to me via e-mail or in person prior to the initial interview.

**Interview protocol.** The interview protocols (See Appendix E) for the initial and follow-up interviews included questions related to student experiences with activism and served as a frame to discuss participants' experiences as Asian American student activists, how they came to define activism, and how they defined activism in terms of actions as well as consciousness and awareness of social issues. Utilizing semi-structured interview protocols allowed me as the researcher to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). In addition to the questions included in the interview protocols, I utilized probing questions to elicit more information, details, clarification, or examples (e.g., “What do you mean?”; “Tell me more about that.”; “Give me an example.”; Merriam, 2009).

## Data Analysis

I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. As such, the process for analyzing the interview data was inductive in nature, and, as written in Chapters Four and Five, findings are presented to be richly descriptive (Merriam, 2009), sharing as much of each participant's own stories to demonstrate the findings. Using semi-structured individual interviews as the method of data collection, data collected during this study consisted of interview transcripts. I initially engaged with the data through a narrative inquiry analysis process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Diniz-Pereira, 2006; Tierney, 1999); I analyzed data paying specific attention to the themes that surfaced from the stories that each participant shared about their journeys toward social justice and their participation in various forms of student activism. While I employed narrative inquiry and life history inquiry methods in the data collection process, the resulting data gathered throughout the interviews did not lend themselves to *narrative analysis* that would be true to the methodological tradition. However, as I analyzed initial transcripts and engaged with analysis during the data collection process, I observed common themes across the interviews and proceeded with a *thematic analysis* (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012) of the participants' interview transcripts as my main form of analysis.

During the data collection and analysis processes, I remained cognizant of the research questions guiding the study, specifically the three sub-questions regarding experiences that contributed to participants' journeys toward social justice activism, the ways in which they conceptualized activism in terms of thoughts and awareness of social issues, and the ways in which they defined activism in terms of actions and behaviors. My analysis process first organized interview data into four main areas of inquiry akin to a structural coding process

(Guest et al., 2012): experiences leading up to engaging in activism; Asian American identity and activism; definitions of activism as a thought/reflection process; and definitions of activism as an action process. I conducted initial inductive coding (Boyatzis, 1998), identifying themes and concepts within each of these four areas and within each participant's interview transcripts. Through thematic analysis of the participants' narratives, common themes emerged across participants' stories that not only connected with and supported the original conceptual framework diagram, but also added to the existing concepts. While I discuss findings from the analysis in Chapters Four and Five, I present the modified conceptual diagram in Chapter Six.

### **Trustworthiness**

The concept of trustworthiness refers to a study's quality (Jones et al., 2014) and, more important, the strategies used to conduct a rigorous study in which "the account can be deemed plausible by readers based on the descriptions developed by the writer" (Tierney & Clemens, 2011, p. 64). In qualitative research, a study employs strategies to promote credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Tierney & Clemens, 2011). To these ends, strategies I utilized in carrying out this study included: employing *member checks* (or *respondent validation*); utilizing *peer examinations*; engaging in *reflexivity*; presenting findings as *rich, thick descriptions*; and maintaining an *audit trail* (Merriam, 2009; Shenton, 2004).

To promote credibility, I employed member checks, peer examinations, and reflexivity. As part of the member-checking process, each participant received a transcript of their interviews to review for accuracy and to provide additional comments, if any. After conducting the thematic analysis process, I sent each participant my initial interpretations and findings demonstrated by excerpts from their individual interviews. Each participant was afforded the opportunity to verify my initial interpretations or provide clarity for my findings (Merriam,



2009).

Peer examinations or peer reviews involve asking colleagues to review data that are collected during the study and “assess whether the findings are plausible based on the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). For this study, I asked two colleagues—one familiar with Asian American student concerns and research and one unfamiliar with this particular area of study—to review my initial findings and provide feedback on whether the findings made sense.

Engaging in reflexivity calls for the researcher to critically reflect on their biases and assumptions regarding the research (Merriam, 2009), allowing readers to “better understand how the individual researcher might have arrived at the particular interpretation of the data” (p. 219). In qualitative research, one purpose of this approach in a study is to acknowledge how a particular researcher’s values and expectations influence the methods and findings in the study (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Through analytic memos and regular engagement in reflexivity, I remained conscious of my own positionality throughout the study, during data collection and analysis. For example, during interviews, I was aware that my identity as an Asian American was beneficial in establishing rapport with the participants, yet I refrained from sharing my own conceptualizations of Asian American student activism because I wanted to ensure participants were sharing their own understandings of student activism from their lenses and not mine.

To promote transferability, I have incorporated rich, thick descriptions in the presentation of findings. Rich, thick descriptions require researchers to provide a “highly descriptive, detailed presentation of ... the findings of the study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 227), including quotes from participants’ interviews. The goal is to afford readers information that would foster the possibility to transfer the findings to another setting. Throughout Chapters Four and Five, I

employ the use of substantial excerpts from participants' narratives to demonstrate the findings of this study. Although this study is not meant to be generalizable, my hope is that the findings afford readers opportunities to create naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1996) to other college or university settings or to their work with undergraduate students engaged in social justice activism.

Finally, to promote dependability and confirmability, I maintained an audit trail. An audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) can take the form of a process log that "describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam, 2009, p. 223). Since the launch of this study, I maintained a research log, jotting memos and logging thoughts and questions related to the study. As I carried out this study, I continued to jot memos and maintained an audit trail of decisions related to the data-collection process, as well as analytic memos that documented my analyses and interpretations.

Together, these strategies strengthened the trustworthiness of this study and contributed to the study's overall rigor. The use of rich, thick descriptions are intended to foster transferability, while having maintained an audit trail strengthens the study's dependability and confirmability. Member checks, peer examinations, and reflexivity were employed to promote credibility. The process of reflexivity and presenting personal biases and assumptions is also known as a researcher's *positionality* (Bourke, 2014), and I briefly describe my positionality and subjectivities (Peshkin, 1988) in the following section.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Positionality refers to "the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic" (Jones et al., 2014, p. 26). My experiences as an Asian American college student, higher-education administrator, and researcher who is interested in

Asian American student experiences certainly influenced how I engaged with the research participants. As a researcher, I was aware that my identities played a role in my approach to understanding and conducting research on Asian American student activists and activism in higher education. As a student-affairs practitioner, I have always been interested in students' experiences broadly, but, in particular, how some Asian American students engage in activism on campus or beyond. As a second-generation Asian American, I was conscious of the ways that I identified with some of the participants in the study as they described their experiences growing up as Asian Americans, as students in college, and particularly as students engaged in social justice and student activism.

This has been something that I have sought to understand in my work with advising and mentoring undergraduate students who identify with social justice values and would consider themselves to be student activists. Consequently, my personal and professional experiences fostered a theoretical sensitivity (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) or cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) that I believe promoted better “understanding of the subtle meanings of data” (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 563). At the same time, it was important for me to uphold the concept of “fairness” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 20) in learning and interpreting potentially diverse perspectives on what activism is, withholding my own conventional notions of how activism is defined. I was certainly conscious of my own leanings toward various definitions of student activism, but, as I continued to maintain self-reflection during the study, I remained ever open to the stories and perspectives that participants shared through the interview processes.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter described the methods I used in conducting this qualitative study on Asian American college-student activists, focusing on how Asian American students define

contemporary student activism. Given my social constructivist perspective in understanding Asian American student activists and how they come to define activism, I employed a qualitative approach to the plan of inquiry, utilizing narrative inquiry and life history strategies to collect data and thematic analyses of participants' interview transcripts to answer the research questions. The following chapters, Four and Five, present the findings from the thematic analysis of the data.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SEEDS OF ACTIVISM: ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS' JOURNEYS TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

*“When I interact with people in the [Pilipinx American student] organization, I feel like it’s very much for social reasons. And I ask them, ‘What are you involved in?’ I don’t really hear them mentioning the [city’s Pilipinx American community] center or things like that. But not to say that there aren’t students like that because it’s like the seeds are starting to be planted, which is really good. I know some folks that are starting the conversations and engaging with the community. But what the newest members have done a really good job is meeting students where they’re at, and I think that’s one of the unconscious things that they’re doing in terms of activism. Every now and then, you have little seeds that are being planted or getting sparks. I’m thinking of my own mentors who started as being my professors or being the co-directors of the cultural centers. Those are my seed planters. I think a big part of it too was hearing who planted seeds before them, realizing it’s just been a continuation.” —Rowena*

The purpose of this study was to understand how self-identified Asian American college-student activists define activism. The questions that guided this study were: (a) What experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists’ journeys toward social justice activism? (b) How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of consciousness and awareness of social issues? and (c) How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of actions and behaviors?

This and the following chapter present thematic findings from interviews with the nine participants. (See Table 1 for descriptions of each participant.) As I described in Chapter Three, the study utilized a nomination process by which I asked individuals in my professional networks to identify and nominate Asian American college-student activists for this study. The student-affairs and faculty nominators were located at colleges and universities in California, Colorado,

Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Washington, and the District of Columbia; none of the nominators were located in the southern U.S., Hawai'i, or Alaska. As a result, the potential participants for the study were located only in regions represented by the nominators' places of work. The resulting nine participants who agreed to participate in the study represented colleges and universities in California, Washington, Colorado, Illinois, and Ohio; as a result, stories of Asian American experiences with activism are missing voices from students from the East Coast, the South, Hawai'i, and Alaska. This is important to note because the experience of being Asian American varies across the U.S., and racial identity can be influenced by geographic location (Chan, 2017). In terms of immigrant-generation status, four participants identified as second-generation Asian American, two identified as fourth-generation, one identified as 1.5-generation, and two identified as transracial adoptees. The representation of immigrant-generation statuses provided variation in participants' stories and how family histories may have affected life experiences. In terms of gender identity, six participants identified as women, two participants identified as men, and one participant identified as non-binary. While this variation might reflect the college-going population in general, it may have also been a reflection of who is currently engaged in activism and whom administrators and faculty perceived to be activists. Finally, in terms of ethnicity, the nine participants identified as Chinese, Indian, Japanese, P/Filipino/a/x, or multi-ethnic; this small variation in ethnic groups limited access to the narratives of diverse ethnic groups with potentially different immigration histories and stories of growing up Asian American. Although findings from this qualitative study are not intended to be generalizable, the common themes that surfaced throughout the interviews presented concepts and narratives that may be applicable to different settings and to potentially students with different social identities.

Table 1. Participants

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Self-reported Ethnic Identities; Immigrant-Generation Status</b>  | <b>Self-reported Gender Identity; Sexual Orientation; Personal Pronouns</b> | <b>Home State</b> | <b>College/ University Type and Location</b> | <b>Class Year; Major(s); Minor(s)</b>  |
|------------------|--|---|-------------------|--|--|
| <b>Caroline</b>  | Japanese, European; “Fourth generation Japanese American (Yonsei) on my mom’s side, not sure what generation on my dad’s side” | Cisgender Woman; Heterosexual; She/her/hers                                 | CA                | 4-year Public in California                  | Senior; Sustainability; <i>Cultural Proficiency</i>                              |
| <b>Christine</b> | Chinese American; Adopted  | Woman; Questioning; She/her/hers  | CO                | 4-year Public in Colorado                    | Senior; Graphic Design and Electronic Art; <i>Ethnic Studies</i>                 |
| <b>Daniel</b>    | Chinese American; 1.5 Generation   | Male; Straight; He/him/his  | CA                | 4-year Private in California                 | Senior; Computer Science and Philosophy  |
| <b>Jamie</b>     | Chinese; “Born in China, then adopted by White Americans and raised in the US”   | Non-binary; Queer or Bisexual; They/them/theirs                             | IL                | 4-year Private in Illinois                   | Senior; Cultural Studies; <i>Women and Gender Studies</i>                        |
| <b>Kay</b>       | Filipina, Chinese; Second Generation   | Female; Straight; She/her/hers  | WA                | 4-year Private in Washington                 | Senior; Criminal Justice and Psychology  |
| <b>Marites</b>   | Filipina American; Second Generation   | Cisgender Woman; Heterosexual; She/her/hers                                 | IL                | 4-year Private in Illinois                   | Senior; Sociology; <i>Music</i>  |
| <b>Mikaela</b>   | Japanese American, Chinese American; Fourth Generation   | Female; Straight; She/her/hers  | WA                | 4-year Private in Ohio                       | Junior; History and Comparative American Studies                                 |
| <b>Rowena</b>    | Filipina/Pinay; Second Generation  | Female; Heterosexual, Aromatic; She/her/hers                                | CA                | 4-year Private in California                 | Senior; Communication; <i>Philippine Studies, Asian Pacific American Studies</i> |
| <b>Samir</b>     | Indian American; Second Generation   | Male; Heterosexual; He/him/his  | IL                | 4-year Public in Illinois                    | Senior; Biochemistry; <i>Philosophy</i>  |

In seeking to understand Asian American college students' conceptualizations of social justice activism, I first sought to explore their experiences as Asian Americans leading up to the present day. I employed a constructivist lens to understand how the nine participants, as self-identified student activists, viewed their experiences growing up as Asian Americans and how they would ultimately define contemporary student activism. Participants framed much of their experience in terms of family life, interactions with grade-school and high-school peers, and descriptions of their home communities. In addition to these early-life experiences, participants shared their experiences as college students, focusing on both their academic and cocurricular experiences, interactions with their peers, and their engagement in community activities beyond campus.

Through excerpts from participants' interviews, in this chapter I share their stories of developing an interest in social justice and the experiences that informed their engagement in activism. I present findings that highlight the experiences they shared about their lives growing up Asian American as well as their experiences in college that contributed to their understandings of social justice issues and that have shaped their worldviews and participation in various forms of social justice activism.

### **Growing Up Asian American**

Utilizing life history (Diniz-Pereira, 2008) as an approach to eliciting stories, during the first interview with each participant, I invited them to share their experiences of growing up, focusing on their family histories, the communities where they lived, and their experiences in grade school and high school, prior to attending college. Knowing that this study was about student activism, early during each initial interview, many participants made immediate connections between their experiences as children with their present-day activism and



engagement in social justice issues. Participants' family contexts and histories; their grade-school or high-school experiences, including their interactions with peers; and their home community environments influenced the ways in which they developed their perspectives on social justice.

### **Family Contexts and Histories**

A common theme among participants was the influence of family histories on their understanding of social issues related to their ethnic or racial identities or on social issues in general. Caroline, a fourth-generation multi-racial Japanese American, shared a story of how her mother was, in her own way, an activist who sought to effect change in education about the Japanese incarceration during World War II. She shared how her mother's own engagement in a form of activism influenced who she would later become as a student activist:

My mom played a role in who I am. When she was my age, she got involved with the Japanese American Citizens League. Specifically, one of the things that she did with the Japanese American community was getting Executive Order 9066 and the concentration camps into textbooks that were taught in schools. That was one of her main focuses that she did back when she was my age. She was always very open about [sharing] those kinds of things with me.

Similarly, Mikaela, a fourth-generation, multi-ethnic Chinese and Japanese American, recalled her experiences growing up in Seattle among a large interconnected community of Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. Mikaela always had an interest in her family's histories, and, only later in college, upon reflection, did she realize that her activities as a child growing up in Seattle and in her community were strongly connected with her ethnic and racial identities. Even today, as she has explored Asian American history through her course work in college and has become motivated to engage in Asian American concerns, she made connections with her own family histories and the activities and events she participated in as a child. She shared:

My family has definitely influenced a lot of my extracurriculars and being interested in

Asian American history and the Asian American community. The more I find out about my family members and all the stuff that they've been involved in, it gets cooler and cooler. That's definitely where I get my motivation.... We went as a family to Angel Island because my aunt was involved. Now I realize I didn't know what she was doing or that there was a project to restore or make more exhibits there, but we went there.... We had ACRS in Seattle—the Asian Counseling Referral Service—and we'd gone to a few events. I remember going as a kid. We had our Walks for Rice and then we had our Chinatown Cleanup.... It was just small bits and pieces that I saw in Seattle; I got to see parts of the Asian American community.

Meanwhile, Daniel's personal experiences and the experiences of his parents and grandparents would inform his interest in issues that Asian American and other immigrants face in the United States. As a 1.5-generation Chinese American, Daniel described his story of immigrating to the U.S. as a child with his grandparents years after his parents had settled in the San Francisco Bay area:

There were hitches in my grandma's immigration permit when she was applying for a visa here that caused it to be delayed for years.... That was pretty unacceptable, the scenario: "Let's just wait while I stay in Canada while my parents [are] like still scraping by in college." So, I grew up in China, and I think a hitch in the immigration process in the U.S. defined six years of my life and completely changed my approach towards AAPI issues. Growing up in China I didn't really recognize that, but especially in high school and middle school and [through] talking to my grandparents, I really understood the impact of this idea of how the legality of someone's status had upon someone like me, and how some other people go through the same hitches and don't have that kind of family or that kind of resource to back them up.... Something that I really want to do fifteen years or ten years down the line is be a part of that conversation and find ways for people in my situation to have better ways to immigrate and better ways to move and unite with their families and have more options when it comes to moving to places where they can have a better future or places where they're guaranteed a certain quality of life. That's something that's really important to me because the way I grew up is defined by how a government determined their immigration policy.

Unlike Caroline, Mikaela, and Daniel, not all participants shared Asian American family experiences that informed their identities or awareness of social issues, yet they shared different family contexts and dynamics that shaped their views of social issues and that would later inform their engagement in activism. Jamie, a Chinese American transracial adoptee who was raised by white parents, shared how their mother influenced their view of social issues, including gender

norms, even at a young age. Jamie shared:

My mom was very much of a white feminist. She's like, "Vote for Hillary Clinton"—very liberal, very Democratic, but still very moderate. I think I knew about women's struggles specifically very young, and I understood like, "Okay, my [family's] dynamic, even the household dynamic—my mom working and my dad not—that's not the typical, or at least that's not seen as what should be the typical. So, I'm like, "Okay, that's interesting," and that was like very, very young. I remember third grade: It was like, "If I was president..."—like that was the prompt. And I was like—at the time I identified differently—so it was like, "Oh, if I was president, I would make sure that women could be president, and that men would understand that women could be president, and we would all have fish on Fridays.

Jamie attended a Catholic grade school, hence the declaration that everyone should have fish on Fridays. Like Jamie, Christine was a Chinese American adoptee, raised by white parents in Colorado. Her own experiences growing up in Colorado with her family shaped much of her perspectives on social inequalities in society. She shared:

My parents divorced when I was in second grade or so. I don't really remember it too much, but mostly that sort of impacts where I am because my parents are kind of from two different class[es], and they're both white.... My mom's pretty lower class—for the most part has been unemployed for most of my life—pretty much kind of low, poor working class. My dad is pretty upper-middle class. So going back and forth between two drastically different houses, different lifestyles, that kind of thing, especially different outlooks on life and success and money and all that, that was sort of something that I think also kind of impacts how I am now and how I think about things.... I spent a lot of my time with my mom. So that means I kind of spent most of my childhood in a kind of lower-class schools, poor schools, usually with more brown or black students, and they were my friends. I didn't really have very many Asian friends or even exposure to the culture until I came to college.

One of the more striking family histories shared by a participant was one in which the participant described how she discovered she was related to a past labor activists. Rowena, a second-generation Pilipina American, described how a Philippine Studies class introduced her to a relative she did not know about. During our first meeting, Rowena and I had been talking about her recent participation in a protest at San Francisco State University to support funding for ethnic studies. She described how activism is a long-term struggle, and this made her recall a

connection with past activism:

Have you heard of Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes? They were labor activists in the '60s that were fighting for workers' rights in Seattle and, unfortunately, were assassinated for their work. It was around sophomore year that I found out that Gene Viernes was actually my great uncle. Asking my mom, I was like, "Were you cousins with Gene Viernes?" "Yeah, we used to hang out all the time." And then I asked my mom, I was like, "Who's Tito Gene Viernes?" and it was like, "Oh, that was papa's brother," and things like that. And I was like, "Oh, wow!" Just hearing the history of all of it, and hearing my family's history, how like my great-grandfather was a *pensionado*,<sup>1</sup> just learning of all the histories and how it's my family's history.... The first time I saw his name was actually in my Intro to Philippine Studies class. There's a timeline our professor had us look at, and I recognized the name because the name was Gene Viernes. Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo. I was like, "Gene Viernes? That's my momma's maiden name." So I looked up and everything, and I Googled, and I ended up texting my grandma too. And I was like, "Who's Gene Viernes?" And she was like, "Oh, that's your great *tito*!" And I was like, "What?!" And she was like, "Yeah, but he passed away when he was in America." And then I told her, "Oh, I did my research. He was an activist. He fought for Filipino labor rights in Seattle, working with another Filipino, Silme Domingo, and unfortunately they were killed for the work they did." And for me, I was just kinda like, "Holy crap! My ancestors are talking to me."

Rowena's discovery of her relation to activists of the past strengthened her commitment to engaging in activism and developing a responsibility to continue a legacy left by her own relatives.

### **Community Environments**

The nine participants came from widely different community environments in terms of location and local demographics. These included the Los Angeles area (one participant), the San Francisco Bay area (two participants), the Chicago area (three participants), the Seattle area (two participants), and Colorado (one participant). The communities in which the participants grew up shaped their experiences as Asian Americans. Rowena grew up in the San Gabriel Valley in

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<sup>1</sup> Under the Pensionado Act of 1903, selected U.S. government-sponsored students from throughout the Philippines came to the United States to earn college degrees so that they could return to the Philippines, a U.S. colony at the time, to assume leadership in government and administration. They were known as *pensionados*. Between 1903 and 1914, there were 289 government-sponsored *pensionados* (Hsu, 2017).

the Los Angeles area and recognized how her largely Asian American community affected her own connection with her racial and ethnic identities. She noted that she did not experience the same racism or microaggressions that some of her peers experienced, sharing, “I think how students talk about the experiences that they had of either microaggressions or racist experiences, I don’t think I had that because ... [my community] was majority Asian. So, again I always felt comfortable in my identity.” For some participants, attending a college or university that had a different set of demographics than that of their home community affected their experiences and influenced their engagement with social issues or peer groups on campus. Daniel shared:

I identified with being Asian American in the Bay Area. I don’t think it meant as much as it did in college. It definitely just meant like being in a particular subgroup of kids who are labeled the same way. I didn’t really think about that. I didn’t accord any, I guess, thoughts about that. Especially because everybody around me at that time was also primarily East Asian. And especially also because we lived in a pretty comfortable environment, so those differences aren’t as accentuated.

For Christine, growing up in a largely conservative, segregated community had an impact on how she viewed herself, others, and social issues:

I was adopted when I was three months old. And then my parents— They originally lived in Virginia but then immediately moved to Colorado. I’ve spent a majority of my life in Colorado, specifically like the Springs area, which, I think, kind of just looking back on it, is definitely pretty key ... because Colorado Springs is really conservative, but then also very segregated in terms of people of color, class, all that kind of stuff. Growing up in that sort of area was mainly not a time I was realizing what was impacting, but just looking back now I’m realizing the different people that I met.

The participants’ descriptions their home community environments and experiences indicated that these contexts had an impact on not only how they viewed themselves in the world, but also how they viewed the experiences of others, especially their peer groups.

### **Peer Groups and School Experiences**

Participants often described how their peer groups in grade school and high school fostered their exposure to and influenced their engagement with social issues. During the

interviews, I asked participants how they came to understand and become interested in social justice issues. At times, participants shared how their peers challenged their social identities and experiences. Experiencing microaggressions and bullying as children often exposed participants to inequities and issues of difference. For many participants, these experiences would lay dormant, or internalized, until realized later in life, specifically during high school or college when participants became exposed to concepts and ways of naming their experiences. Jamie recalled a time when they were interacting with other students in grade school:

In primary school, in grade school, and it was Catholic school too so it was a private school, a lot of ethnic whites, white kids and a lot of people who were like definitely on the richer side of the spectrum too. So, it's like what they live in is very sheltered and they don't realize, like, "Oh, that person looks different from me." The kids would say shit all the time. Especially kindergarten. I remembered being bullied relentlessly on the bus actually. I had an illustrated diary, two through six, so it'd be like 8th grade girls, then me—kindergarten me—on the bus. I realized, going to China [last year], like things came back, like I *did* know Mandarin, not fluently, but I knew a good majority of it. And I feel like I lost it because people always wanted me to say shit in Mandarin, like, "Can you say green dog?" Like, you know, kids, they'd do stuff like that. Or they'd want me to say inappropriate things, and I'd get frustrated and mad because it's like, "Well, fuck. First of all, I don't know if I know that, and, second of all, why are you asking me to do this?" And they just relentlessly made fun of me, my physical appearance, the way I talked, etcetera. And I was, like, five. At the time, I didn't know it was racialized at all. But I just knew it wasn't good. Or they'd make fun of my sister. She was three at the time, and I brought a picture or something, and they're like—which was also like a racialized and a gender thing because her hair was short—they were like, "Oh, she looks like a boy." And I'm like, "No." So, it's like I'm defending her, but I'm also reifying hetero-patriarchal ideas of gender roles. So that's a double-edged sword—when I'm five. Very complex. And I realize I internalized all that shit when I was younger.

Peers, however, also provided support for or were reasons participants became interested in various social issues. Caroline, who grew up in a predominantly white community in the San Francisco Bay area that became increasingly diverse with the growth of an Asian American population, cited her diverse friend-group as one of the reasons she became interested in social issues. She shared:

I had a couple of friends who were either first- or second-generation Asian American, so

they would be talking about things like language barriers with their parents, or how their parents were so focused on them getting good grades.... I had a few friends that came out either as gay or trans, also, while I was in middle school or high school. And that was like my main friend-group, probably like eight people. And when you just have like this different variety of experiences—and then we also had pretty deep conversations, just even like in middle school and everything—I think when you have a group of friends that have so many different experiences, it kind of allows you to think more critically about the world and [ask], “How am I thinking about things? Who am I as a person?”

Christine had a similar experience. Although the community where she grew up in Colorado was made up of very few Asian Americans, she described her community as diverse. She shared:

Back to elementary, middle school, high school, like the people I was surrounded by, growing up most of my friends have been either white, black, or brown. Specifically, more of my closer friends and like my best friend identifies as black and my closer friends have been identifying as brown or Latinx. So I think, even though we ... weren't like activists back in the day, that kind of thing, it was still coming from ... their sharing their experiences with me and their kind of, I guess, their culture. And not even like, “Oh, here is my culture,” but just sort of like, “I'm showing up who I am, and we're just treating each other like humans with dignity.”

Within her diverse group of peers, Christine believed at a young age the importance of recognizing individuals' humanity. For some participants, early experiences of being around people different from themselves, an exposure to diverse communities and experiences, contributed to their development of empathy, which laid groundwork for developing interest in social justice issues.

While interactions with diverse peers may have led to interests in social justice issues, for some participants, peers took on a more active role in encouraging such engagement. Samir, a second-generation Indian American who attended a residential high school in Illinois, recalled how he became involved working with and across his high school's student communities to support multiculturalism. Having grown up in southern Illinois where there were very few Asian Americans, it was not until he transferred to a residential high school that he interacted with

students from diverse backgrounds and engaged in a variety of identity-based student organizations and activities:

The person that got me involved was actually my roommate. Because you know, boarding school. My roommate ... was a part of the African American cultural organization. For one of their shows, they needed more dancers. So, he went like, "Hey, you'd be a great dancer." I was like, "Why not? Yeah, let's go!" So, he took me and taught me Chicago two-step, and I think that was how I really got involved my junior year. I was like, "Huh, this was kind of fun. I wonder what other things I can do?" So, I did dancing with [the Indian Student Association], dancing with Lunar New Year, which is the Asian American show that they have that comes on once a year. Then Casa de Alma which is a Latino cultural organization, and dancing with them, getting involved with them, helping out with decorations, at one point helping to make a choreo with like ISA. And I guess that's when I got noticed by Dr. Angelica. She kind of took notice of me during the African American cultural showcase, and she recognized that I would be an asset for Peer Multicultural Educators. So, after that was when she approached me about that. Me being me, it was like, "Why not? Let's go for it. Let's give it a shot."

Samir was encouraged not only by his peers, but by staff at the high school, and these acts of encouragement led Samir to become engaged with diverse communities that would expand his interests in issues that affected his own and other communities.

While peer groups provided exposure to diverse experiences or encouraged participants to get involved, for other participants, interactions with peers, particularly in the context of having conversations and thinking about social issues, both challenged and supported their own developing understandings of social justice. Participants shared experiences of having challenging conversations with peers about issues in society and, in those conversations, deciding whether or not and how to address them. For example, Kay, a second-generation Pilipina American, recalled a moment when she felt a sense of conflict over how she and a friend thought about current-day issues, specifically the protests in Ferguson:

I remember calling her [my friend] up and talking about the Ferguson protests, and she identifies as Japanese American, and she is second-gen as well. I was talking to her, I'm like, "This is really terrible, what are we going to do? What are some tangible things that we can do to help what's going on? Because obviously this is a huge deal that's all over national news. Someone's life was lost, and they were our age." I just remember her



saying, “Yeah, it’s really sad, but I don’t really know what we can do, and it just brings me down, so I’m not gonna deal with it” kind of thing. Obviously, we’ve both grown and what we see now is, “What does it look like to be— What does allyship look like?” But at the time within my Asian American group [of friends], there was a lot of pushing away or like just recognizing that it happened but not really doing much about it because it just didn’t seem like it applied to us.

For Kay, peers had the opposite effect from encouraging engagement in social issues; having peers who were not interested in current events diminished her interest in social issues until she arrived at college, where she had a new set of peers with interests in social issues. Indeed for all of the participants, their experiences in college expanded their own worldviews and affected their journeys toward social justice activism.

### **College and University Experiences**

All participants recognized their experiences at their college or university as having a significant influence on how they came to engage with social justice issues and enact various forms of activism. These influences came in the form of peers and peer mentors, curricular experiences and relationships with faculty and faculty mentors, as well as cocurricular activities, student-affairs programs and services, and student-affairs staff who served as mentors. Not only did college experiences influence their understandings of social justice and student activism, but, for some, they influenced participants’ future goals. For example, Caroline shared, “As my different experiences at [my university] happened, I realized that I either want to go towards student affairs, counseling, Asian American studies, or ethnic studies.... I feel like they all kind of have this same social justice emphasis.”

During my interviews with the participants, I asked about their experiences with their college or university administrators, faculty, and staff, in relation to their activism work. As I expected, participants’ descriptions of their university administration varied, from describing administrators as “antagonistic” to providing an image of their institution as one that supported

student activists' concerns. Christine, as a student at a large state university in Colorado, shared her perceptions of university administrators, stating, "I think university administrators, from the get-go, are pretty antagonistic to the idea of student activism. I think to my university, it's just rooted in white supremacy." On the other end of this spectrum, Marites, a student at a small, private liberal-arts college in the Midwest described, in depth, her own position on college administrators and their support of student activists' concerns:

I have yet to run into a situation where I feel like the school doesn't support us. I don't know if that's necessarily because they're so supportive or because we haven't thought that far outside of the box or that radically that they've been like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I think a lot of the students here know that there's the resources on campus—we've got our bias incident report, we have the deans of students who are always willing to hear students out. We have multiple active multicultural organizations who do focus a lot of their energies on not only celebrating the cultural identities but "How do we make other people aware? How do we ensure that visibility?" And there's so much support in that. I think I've been lucky. I know there are horror stories of faculty being very insensitive towards students. We're certainly not strangers to that here at [my college]. But from an administrative standpoint, the administrators that I do know are so open to hearing about it. Like, "Oh, that professor said that to that student? That's not okay. We have to do a diversity training workshop." We had, for a while going, a collaborative effort of faculty, administration, staff, and students, called CODE, which was Coalition of Diversity Education. They were doing a lot of proposals. We wanted to hire a diversity officer because we don't have one. We wanted to propose a race and ethnic studies minor. How do we incorporate more information about social issues into the general education curriculum? After seeing all of those efforts, like I said earlier, I feel like there's more support for student activism from the administration than there are from the actual students.

Participants' perceptions of their college or university administration, faculty, and staff in relation to their activism work indeed varied from campus to campus and from participant to participant. Much of this could be attributed to campus cultures (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2003; Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005) and the ways that college and university administrators have responded to student activism on their respective campuses (Miser, 1988a, 2005). Yet, across participants' stories and individual experiences on their college and university campuses, common themes emerged, demonstrating how various aspects

of their college experiences influenced participants' engagement with social issues and activism.

### **Peer Groups and Peer Mentors**

College-student peers were a notable influence on participants' introduction to and engagement with social justice issues. While participants cited their diverse peer groups in grade school and high school as providing exposure to various social issues, it was college-student peers who influenced greater engagement with social justice-focused activities, campus involvement, and student activism. In some cases, relationships with college-student peers were characterized by informal connections that introduced participants to opportunities for involvement and engagement with social justice issues. Samir shared a story of how his peers, both his college-student peers and a high-school peer, influenced how he conceptualized activism:

There was another student who was president [of the Asian American Student Association] when I was [the Asian American dance troupe] coordinator sophomore year.... We would always hang out to talk and stuff, and every now and then topics [related to social issues] would come up ... because Arjun was very active. He was one of those people who, like, went out and marched for certain causes—was very vocal about what he believed in. We would always have conversations, and every now and then we'd have a conversation about activism or certain causes that he believes in and why he believes in them.... That perspective that he gave me was half of [defining activism]—half of what kind of brought me to that realization of my own definition. The other half would probably be my former roommate from [boarding high school]. I roomed with him for three years, and he really had a different way of thinking—not typical of most people. I remember once I came into the room; I was really upset. And he was like, "What's wrong?" When I told him what was wrong, most people would have been like, "That sucks. Like, that's horrible. That shouldn't happen to you." But his approach was, "Well, did you do anything to prevent it?" "No." "Was it preventable in the first place?" "No." "Because someone else caused it?" "Yes." "What did they do to cause it?" "Okay, well we identified what they did, now why does that specifically make you mad?" And he really broke it down. And that kind of rubbed off on me—being able to analyze myself specifically.... Because I had a way of thinking instilled upon me by [my high school roommate], I was able to pick apart what Arjun was saying and get what resonates with me and mush it together to form my own definition."

Through his informal peer relationships, Samir was exposed to different approaches to engaging

with social issues as well as to different ways of interrogating systems of oppression that may have affected him, and he felt that these experiences shaped how he would come to define activism. Meanwhile, formal peer mentorship programs through identity-based student organizations also served as a means for participants to develop their own understanding of social justice issues. Caroline cited a specific program coordinated by the Asian American student organization at her university:

[In the Asian Pacific Student Association], we have a mentorship program and then you get matched; you both fill out applications so you get matched based on more specifically academic, but it could go beyond academic.... So, my mentor, she picked me because I mentioned some stuff about social justice in my bio.... I was already kind of exploring what social justice meant, and I figured it was something that I'd be more interested in, so I casually mentioned it in my application for the mentorship [program], and our [student organization's] academic coordinator saw it—and she's very into social justice—and she was like, "Ooh, this is going to be my mentee." [In APSA], it was her and then one other person who was also on the executive board for APSA. We had an academic coordinator and an academic coordinator assistant, and them two were definitely more the, like, social justice people in APSA.... They just kind of helped me with everything at [my university] in terms of getting involved with other stuff, figuring out what I wanted to do.... Specifically, with one of my—we called each other femmetor and femmetee, instead of mentor and mentee—she worked as a diversity peer educator at our multicultural center which is our cross-cultural center, and we just definitely had a lot of conversations about things, and she introduced me to a lot of Asian American faculty and staff.

Caroline would later describe how this formal peer mentor program was critical to her development as a student activist. She described how her "femmetor" introduced her to learning about systems of oppression and the language to name their experiences. Caroline continued:

She was the one who I really talked about everything with because after I got more involved on campus, we were involved with the same things. So, now I work at the multicultural center, but we work together. We were both a part of APSA, and we were both a part of our student government. She was really the one who led me into social justice and activism. Thinking back on it, if she didn't attend [my university], I don't actually know if I would have gotten—I probably would have gotten into it, but I don't know how much. So, she was definitely one of the main people that kind of, you know, where she was always like, "Let's dive deeper into it. Let's think about the details. Let's question all these things."

Caroline's interactions with her femmetors through the APSA peer mentor program demonstrated a form of passing on knowledge and information on social justice issues that was reflected in some participants reflections on their college experiences and interactions with peers. She continued:

They were able to share with me their knowledge that they had and made me more conscious of different power systems and oppressive systems that exist in society. And then also giving me the language, because, to me, language is so huge because it validates a lot of things that are happening, and you're able to realize that, "This thing that happened to me? It doesn't just happen to me. It happens to tons of people, and it may happen to whole communities. And it's here, and it's systemic, and it's in our society." To me, that was so interesting to learn about because I always thought that whether it was my friends that couldn't come out to their parents or that were facing language barriers, or me being biracial, not fitting within a certain community, I never really thought about it in terms of the bigger picture and how it really affects all different communities, or historically underrepresented communities.

For participants who shared how their experiences with college-student peers and peer mentors influenced their engagement with and definition of student activism, they also believed that they would have developed an awareness and interest in social issues even if they had not met these specifically identified peers, as they would have been exposed to ideas about social justice and activism through other avenues, including academic experiences.

### **Curricular Experiences**

Academic experiences contributed to participants' understanding of social issues and engagement in various forms of activism. In particular, participants described how their academic fields of study, especially Asian American studies or ethnic studies programs, gave them knowledge of Asian American histories that validated their own experiences. Four of the nine participants, Mikaela, Rowena, Christine, and Jamie, had direct experiences with Asian American studies, ethnic studies, or cultural studies programs. Another participant, Marites, although not an ethnic studies student, indicated that she changed her major to sociology to align

with her interest in race and ethnic studies. Finally, a sixth participant, Caroline, also not an ethnic studies student, shared how she felt she was missing out on parts of her own education and development because her university did not offer Asian American studies or ethnic studies courses. Caroline noted that this was one of her areas of advocacy and activism, stating, “I’ve become an advocate for Asian American studies on our campus because if you don’t have the language to describe your experiences, it’s difficult to feel like your thoughts and experiences are valid. Language gives you access to that.” Jamie, a cultural studies major, echoed the importance of having access to a language to name social issues that they addressed as an activist:

As a cultural studies student, educating myself, educating other people, and having a tool, you know, being able to have the language and the jargon to talk about things in a certain way, and trying to like—especially if I want to engage other people who might not be on the same page with me—talking about racial relations with my mom, who is white, trying not to get mad or trying to focus the conversation, like dance around white fragility as well as my own kind of like place. I think definitely with activism, with cultural studies, with everything I’ve learned since college, it gives me this set of tools, a set of language, understanding, emotional skillset to engage with other people and the world around me in a very specific way.

Participants who had experience with Asian American studies courses cited the connections they were able to make with their own lived experiences and histories. Mikaela, who grew up in Seattle among her Chinese American and Japanese American communities, valued her Asian American studies courses because they provided not only context and history for activities she experienced growing up with her family, but also connections to larger issues that she would address through her involvement with Asian American concerns on campus:

Asian American history is where I learned a lot. It was nice because a lot of my family history connected to the material I learned in class. So I think it was hearing bits and pieces from my family growing up about different locations or— We went up to Angel Island when I was 10, and I didn’t really realize what it meant. Or, we walked by the I-Hotel [during a visit to San Francisco], and so seeing all these different pieces and then bringing it together within an actual class, seeing that these things are actually wider

experiences and not just random pieces that happened in my childhood. I think that's where I definitely learned that it's a real thing. That it's part of a wider experience. I think Asian American history [class] was the biggest, just that it kind of reaffirmed that these experiences are part of a bigger community.

Participants who had the opportunity to take Asian American and ethnic studies courses valued the experiences they had through the programs' curricula, often citing the validation they felt about their own experiences as Asian Americans. Beyond the course work, faculty members, particularly those within Asian American and ethnic studies programs, played a significant role in participants' development and engagement with student activism.

### **Faculty Mentors**

A common theme among the participants was the influence that faculty members had on their development as critical thinkers and students engaged in wanting to address social issues. For many of the participants, faculty members, especially those teaching Asian American studies or ethnic studies courses, served as mentors who validated their experiences as Asian American students and supported them in their engagement with activism on issues affecting Asian American communities and social justice issues more broadly. Christine, a senior who is about to graduate from her university, reflected on her past few years as a student and noted how important her ethnic studies faculty members were in her own development:

As I'm coming towards the end of my college career, I've been looking back a lot on how each place that I've worked at or each class I've taken has influenced all that [engagement in activism]. When I think of [my college career] as a whole, the biggest influence was ethnic studies teachers, specifically two or three of them who really were empowering and really there to inspire and educate. You could tell that they wanted to grow you into a better person and into a more educated person, into a better activist, that kind of thing. Those ethnic studies teachers were probably the biggest influence.

For Christine, faculty mentors empowered and inspired students to engage in their own activism. Other participants echoed this sentiment, but also described the important roles that faculty members played in their lives beyond their teaching and research. Samir, who was not an Asian

American studies student, but who was engaged with programs supported by his university's Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI) initiatives, described the role that faculty of his university's Asian American studies program played:

The faculty there, they're not so much the protest type, but they're the bring-awareness type of activists, very low-key because faculty, they don't want to cross any boundaries and stuff and get too involved. But they're involved enough to count in my opinion. One of them, I actually— Every month, every other month, I go across the street from my place to [the student center] because they have a coffee place there.... I go to [the café with the Asian American Studies faculty member], and we have coffee and we talk about current events. She's free, I'm free, why not? I don't have any classes with her unfortunately, but we get together, we talk.... I feel like faculty here are a pretty good support system for the students. They don't tell the students, "This is a bad thing." In my opinion, they actually kind of encourage students to be active about this kind of stuff. Again, kind of like what I was saying, "If you're not ready to go out and protest, don't go out and protest, but if you are ready to talk about it seriously, we're here to help you talk about it seriously because we've all been through that. But you, as students, may not have come to that self-realization yet, so we're willing to help you get to that self-realization, and then you can be on your merry way to being an activist however you see fit." They're very open about talking about that kind of stuff and know resources.

Participants also shared stories of how faculty members engaged with students and encouraged them to learn about important social issues beyond the classroom. For some participants, faculty members were the ones who would introduce students to opportunities to learn about social justice issues that would later influence their own activism. For example, Marites shared how important it was for a faculty member to have recommended that she take part in a Spring Break experiential-learning course about the Civil Rights Movement. During her first year of college, Marites had shared with a specific faculty member her frustrations with her experience at her college, disclosing experiences with racial microaggressions and feeling that her college peers were not invested in diversity and inclusion:

The spring break course that I told you about—about the Civil Rights Movement—I don't know if I would have gone on that had it not been for a professor telling me about it. And this professor had also known about my frustrations at [my college], and, just out



of the blue, one day I got an e-mail saying, “I remember something that you said when you were in my office hours the other day, and I think this opportunity might be really good for you to explore some of these things that you’re getting passionate about.” And I will always be thankful to her for that. I don’t know if she knows just how much of an impact that made, but it definitely did. That was also the same professor that, when I told her I wanted to transfer [out], I was prepared for her to come up with some sort of argument trying to convince me to stay. But the fact that she said, “Obviously I’d be biased towards you staying here, but if transferring is the thing that you need to do, then go ahead and do it.” I was just like, “Wow, people here really care.” And then a few weeks later when she had sent word about the Spring Break trip, that was a huge break for me. As much as I would like to say I would have gone and done it myself, it was definitely because I had really good mentors—very supportive faculty here.

In many cases, participants viewed faculty as not only mentors and resources, but also as individuals who have had experiences with engaging in the same issues in which participants were engaging today. Beyond serving as a resource within the institution, faculty were described as a source of inspiration and of ideas for students across different social issues. Marites’s college is a small liberal-arts college in Illinois. Because of this, the small community of student activists tends to engage across various social and identity groups within the student population, and there is a high level of interaction among students, faculty, and staff. Marites shared a story of how faculty often encourage student activists and student leaders on her campus:

In thinking about the event that we did with the DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] tables, that actually came out of a meeting of one of my friends in the Black Student Association with one of the Latino professors here. The professor was saying we needed to do something on campus to show our support for our students on DACA. The BSA student then came to all of us saying, “I just met with Dr. So and So. Let’s do something.” That came directly from an interaction with faculty. It’s really something that may be unique to [my college] or maybe something that I really enjoy about the campus and the culture that we strive to have, at least at [my college].

Indeed, faculty have played an important role in participants’ development as student activists by serving as role models, being knowledge resources within the institution, and as sources of inspiration to engage in various social justice issues. In parallel with curricular experiences and interactions with faculty mentors, participants’ stories of engaging in activism

and becoming aware of social justice issues also grew out of their cocurricular experiences and relationships with student-affairs professionals.

### **Cocurricular Experiences**

Student involvement plays a significant role in student development (Astin, 1984), and it was clear, across participants' interviews, that cocurricular experiences contributed to participants' development toward becoming aware of social justice issues and engaging in various forms of activism. Common themes included experiences with identity-based student organizations and conferences, whether they were pan-Asian American or ethnic-specific student organizations; participation in programs offered by multicultural or Asian American-specific cultural centers; and other student-affairs-sponsored programs.

**Identity-based student organizations.** During each interview with participants, I asked about their involvement on campus, including the student organizations they joined. I asked why they joined the organizations they did and how their involvement connected to the issues they were concerned about through their activism. Participants shared how Asian American or ethnic-specific student organizations served as venues for introducing them to social issues, provided a network and community of support, or contributed to their development as engaged student activists on their campuses and beyond. Daniel, a Chinese American student who grew up in a predominantly Asian American community described how his predominantly white university was different from the environment where he grew up and how an Asian American student organization not only provided him with a community to join, but also introduced him to issues in which he would later become involved:

I think something that really, really affected me when I came to [my university] or really acted as a strong support network was an organization called the Asian Pacific Empowerment Coalition (APEC), which was filled with a lot of really vocal, progressive

API students who were doing really cool work in their communities. They introduced me to really cool non-profits like Advancing Justice, the Chinatown Community for Equitable Development, and etcetera, where I was able to, I guess, make an impact on the community, or at least I'd go to volunteer events and really, I guess, experience the full breadth of people.

Daniel appreciated the connections he was able to make with Asian American community organizations through his involvement with APEC, citing how these student connections activated his desire to support and advocate for local Asian American communities.

Not only did Asian American student organizations provide a network of support and community, but, as participants noted, many Asian American student organizations also hosted events and programs that educated members on issues facing the Asian American community.

Caroline described how her involvement in her university's Asian Pacific Student Association and its programs exposed her to various social issues, particularly those affecting Asian

Americans:

I joined APSA, or the Asian Pacific Student Association, who is a cultural organization at [my university], and they had a couple workshops regarding different things that the Asian American community and Pacific Islander community has to face. I think it was in a couple of those workshops where I was like, "Okay, that's interesting."

Caroline had specifically researched identity-based student organizations prior to arriving at her university, and she had developed an interest in social justice while in high school. APSA provided opportunities for learning about Asian American issues and other social justice concerns through their educational workshops. Mikaela similarly noted how Asian American and ethnic-specific student organizations not only educated, but also motivated, students to become involved and engage with social issues:

We've got our identity-based orgs, and then we have Asian American Student Alliance which is the political org that's not ethnic-based. I think they motivate people more, like, "Oh, this is affecting me, or this is a cause that is similar to [or connected to] me."

Although identity-based student organizations introduced participants to social issues,

provided a community of support, or motivated participants to engage with social justice activism, they also challenged participants who recognized conflicts arising from defining their organizations' purposes or mission. Caroline analyzed the current state of her university's Asian American student organizations, indicating there are tensions among members of the various organizations who prioritize the social and cultural aspects over the political or advocacy aspects of the student organizations:

Our API organizations at [my university] all have gone through and are still going through what they call an identity crisis, and that goes through “What is our main purpose? Why are we here, and how are we balancing social, political, academic, and cultural?” And that’s a huge thing because at a lot of other schools—I didn’t realize—there will be an organization that’s an API organization that’s specifically a political API organization, and we don’t have that. Almost all of our API organizations here try to all balance all of it, and what ends up happening is it ends up being more social and not political.

As example of this tension, Mikaela shared a story of how her college’s Asian American student organization made a decision regarding an annual program they held:

My biggest project of the year was where we had Asian Night market, which is [when] all the student orgs have food. We had some performances. And they made it more political and not just where people could eat food and then leave. We had a policy that was made a few years ago that stayed: Having no white performers or servers for the food. That created a lot of discomfort for some orgs, ‘cause not everyone’s in agreement, and some of the Asian orgs have white people in them, because there are different missions.... For Asian Night Market, it was just me and two other planners or coordinators; we work with the orgs to bring all the food. Yeah, we had a food planner and then each org—there’s seven or eight—they would send in two representatives to each meeting. And so generally our meetings were fine; everyone was kind of on the same page and were fine with and supported having no white people participating in the performances or serving food. Our main arguments were just we don’t need to hire white people; we can just make this a space for ourselves and, you know, have an event where it’s not just come eat Asian food. There’s supposed to be a gathering of our communities, it’s supposed to strengthen our community and bring us together, which I don’t think has always happened.

Although Mikaela characterized the issue as a concern about strengthening the community, there was an element of making a political statement regarding representation and the purpose or

mission of their community event. Whether identity-based organizations motivated engagement in social issues or provided contexts in which participants recognized different social, cultural, and political purposes of them, participants noted that these experiences contributed to their development toward engagement with social justice issues. While participants often navigated identity-based student organizations as student-run resources, they also participated in institutionally structured programs and services including multicultural centers or Asian American-specific cultural centers.

**Multicultural and Asian American cultural centers.** “If I didn’t go into [the Asian American Cultural Center (AACC)] that one day I probably would just be a computer science student doing computer science things.” Daniel’s comment demonstrates the importance of a resource like an Asian American cultural center in providing an outlet for students to engage in community beyond their academic program. He described his experiences with his university’s cultural center and how its programs and resources helped him become a more engaged student when it came to Asian American issues:

I think the ways that [AACC] really helped me—there’s obviously like them holding the [educational workshops] program—but even after that, as a TA [teaching assistant for the program], I was able to walk into the director’s office and ask him for help with planning events, like ways that I can engage like [my university’s] community, because if there’s anything, like, that [center] knows, it’s trends amongst API students at [my university], because they have the whole history of how they’re working, and I didn’t, right? I had one or two years of that experience. So knowing, being in tune with issues that students are facing, knowing how to approach them was something I didn’t know until I went to [the AACC]. I think from just the mental health perspective, it was a place where I could just sit and feel safe and talk to people about struggles that were specific to my identity or be referred to the right resources. And [AACC] was definitely the home base during those moments.... During the election, I remember, like 2016, [AACC] held space for a lot of people who needed to talk about it or wanted to talk about it—people who wanted to be involved in politics after the election. I think [AACC] definitely helped them find a bridge to that, and I think that’s also something that’s really cool—taking kids who didn’t know anything about what they want to do but were interested in Asian-specific activism. [AACC] is a really good first step for them, and [was] for me.

Daniel's description of his university's Asian American cultural center highlighted the many roles a center plays in supporting students in their education about Asian American issues, but also in their development as engaged students developing as activists. The spaces also serve to recognize the challenges Asian American students face and provide a space to process those experiences. While Asian American-specific cultural centers offered these spaces for Asian American students, participants noted that multicultural centers also served an important role in their development as activists who engaged across social justice issues. For example, Caroline was encouraged by her peer mentor to engage in programs at her university's multicultural center. Caroline would later become employed at the center, and she noted that the center was a key resource in her development as a social justice activist:

A key place was the multicultural center. That's a center that we have on campus. It's our cross-cultural center. I started working there, and that was really when I was able to connect with people from all different communities and have these conversations, because I'd be talking to people who were Muslim, talking to people in the Black community, and especially other students on campus, and was able to hear about their own different experiences and narratives.

For Caroline, the experiences she had interacting with students through the multicultural center further exposed her to a multitude of issues that she would end up addressing in her own activism work. Participants noted that the existence of such centers contributed to their own development as student activists and provided access to the social issues that they would address as activists. All nine participants indicated having had experiences attending programs at or working in a multicultural center or an Asian American-specific cultural center. In reviewing the programs at each of the participants' colleges and universities, I learned that all nine institutions had multicultural centers; two institutions had Asian American-targeted services and programs housed with their multicultural centers, while another three institutions had stand-alone Asian American-specific cultural centers. While participants indicated that these centers and services

provided a venue for them to further develop their interests in social issues and engagement in activism, participants also noted that other student affairs-sponsored programs and events on campus contributed to their understandings of social justice and activism.

**Student-affairs programs.** Programs that are sponsored by a university, particularly those that aim to introduce issues of social justice or that are connected with students' marginalized or oppressed identities, as participants noted, contributed to an increasing awareness of social issues. For example, Marites shared a story of her experience participating in a Spring Break experiential-learning program on the Civil Rights Movement:

[The program] explore[d] the Civil Rights Movement and other various points in history. So, I did that Spring Break of my first year. It's called the Sankofa Civil Rights course, and Sankofa is a word from a language in Ghana meaning, "We must look back in order to know how to move forward." So, that was when I really started learning more about the history of civil rights in the United States. And then it was during that trip that I was also like, "Where's my place in this?" Because it's literally Black and white right now. Then I started learning more about Asian American involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and beyond that, like just the history of Asian Americans in America itself.

For Marites, the program not only exposed her to the history of the Civil Rights Movement, but it also provided her a space to explore the role of Asian Americans in the movement and then make connections with her own engagement with social justice activism. Participants noted how such programs can have an impact on their awareness of social issues. Kay, a student at a private, Catholic university in Washington, shared her experience with a specific new-student orientation program in which she elected to participate. As an incoming first-year student who would be commuting from her parents' home, Kay was intentional about making connections with other students and choosing this new-student orientation program:

I made choices to interact with people and socialize and tried my best to have the full college experience. So, before going into college, or before going into your first year, there are these immersion programs that you can do a week before school. And the one that I chose was the Connections Program. And that was specifically for students of color who are wanting to know or just wanting to advance in their leadership with a lot of

other folks of color.... In this program, we talked a lot about ableism, and that's when I started learning about [personal] pronouns and learning the importance of having—like when being split into basically racial caucuses—having an option for people who are mixed or biracial to also have a space, because that's actually something that's not really considered among many college programs or academic programs—of being biracial—and that really stuck to me. I met a lot of people there who I think I found my niche in college with.

The program not only allowed Kay to connect with other students of color, but it also provided a space for students to engage and learn about various social issues. For Kay, this experience expanded her own learning and development as a student who would later engage with social justice issues and activism.

### **Student Affairs Mentors**

It is important to note that, while some student-affairs programs and services provided participants with opportunities to learn about social issues and develop as engaged students, participants also mentioned the important role that student-affairs professionals played in their understandings of social justice issues and how they have engaged with various forms of activism. Like the faculty mentors mentioned earlier in this section, student-affairs professionals also served as mentors, role models, and sources of support in participants' development as activists. Rowena shared a story of how she first met a student-affairs staff member whom she would come to identify as an important mentor:

Coming into my first year, there was the cultural centers, and they had an open house, so I stopped by, and I was really shy at first and then I met my future mentor—first mentor—and she was actually a grad student within the higher education and student affairs program at [my university]. So, my first interaction with social justice was with her. And I remember the conversation of she asked me, “Oh, how do you like San Francisco?” And I was like, “I love it, it's great, it's like a melting pot.” And she was like, “Oh, I would agree with you, but I would say that it's more like a salad bowl, you know, because you still have our own identities and we're still able to coexist.” And that was a point where I was like, “I want to be in this space. I loved that conversation with her.”

Rowena would later describe how this same mentor encouraged her to get involved with other



identity-based programs on campus, including a living–learning program that focused on social justice. These programs served to introduce Rowena to various social issues, and she would describe the mentors she had as “seed planters”—individuals who gave her inspiration to become a student activist and engage in social justice issues important to her and the communities around her. Similarly, Mikaela recognized the importance of having mentors who supported students’ interest in Asian American issues:

The APIDA [Asian Pacific Islander Desi American] student coordinator still works there [at the multicultural center]; ...they are a big organizer; they also are just really involved with students, just eating meals with them and supporting them. And that just helps in knowing that you have a resource and just someone to lean on if you need it. They’ve started discussions about, I don’t know, problems with organizing, problems within triple-A [Asian American student association]. They’re helpful with thinking things through and helping us understand, like how to navigate through school systems. Yeah, mostly they’ve been viewed as role models and since they are [staff], kind of an authority, which people don’t all want to have but helpful in thinking through like, this person has more experience, understands how the school works better. So just having that knowledge is really helpful.

Overwhelmingly, participants highlighted the many ways in which their college and university experiences shaped their views of social justice and influenced the ways in which they would connect with the causes that became important to them. However, their development as activists and the ways in which they conceptualized what activism is would not be limited to their campus experiences. For a few of the participants, opportunities to engage with communities and organizations off campus also shaped their understandings of social justice and what activism is.

### **Community-Based Organizations**

Although not all participants were located in cities where they were able to engage with community-based organizations, a few participants found organizations that supported their concerns to create positive change for their communities. Daniel, who grew up in a

predominantly Asian American community in the San Francisco Bay area and who described his community as socially-mobile and privileged, attended a university in the Los Angeles area and, through peer interactions within his university's Asian American Cultural Center, learned about community-based organizations that supported his interests in giving back to his communities. Community-based organizations, for Daniel and for many participants, served two purposes: They introduced participants to social justice issues within their communities, and they provided opportunities to further learn about various forms of activism. Daniel's engagement with community-based organizations allowed him to feel that he was making a positive, direct impact, while also connecting his experiences with his academic experiences at his university:

Last week I went to this event. It's like a youth leadership summit that's sponsored by the Asian American Justice Center. It was really cool. You go to D.C., and we talked about issues that were important to us, and we got to meet the staffers of our local congressional districts and talk about issues that were really cool. I think that invigorated my interest in the community.... I went to this meeting two weeks ago that was like a student-faculty coalition where they worked on providing services or responding to the recent DACA repeal and providing resources to undocumented students.... I want to plug into that and try to find ways that I can maybe help in terms of finding people access to digital resources or working on getting resources for an undocumented student center. And then additionally, I've been looking at opportunities at local non-profits, like Advancing Justice for the city or the Chinatown Committee for Equitable Development.

While participants like Daniel found opportunities to engage with communities through these organizations, many participants found community-based and national organizations to be significant spaces for learning about activism. Marites shared a story of how she had an opportunity to get involved with Asian American community organizations during one of her summers spent in Chicago:

I had the opportunity to live in downtown Chicago for 10 weeks last year. Through that I got involved with Asian Americans Advancing Justice Chicago and AFIRE, the Alliance of Filipinos for Immigrants Rights and Empowerment, which was amazing and so refreshing to be out of [my college's suburban community] and that context. And it was very humbling, too. I just ranted all about how Asians are apathetic, but then you go to Advancing Justice, you go to AFIRE, and you see that we're not, which was so nice.

Being a part of these organizations, even if it was just for 10 weeks was hugely influential in my activism. It informed it. It contextualized it and introduced me to a lot more nuances in it. It was so valuable to connect with other Asian Americans, other Filipinos as well. It was very empowering.... There's so much strength and empowerment in connecting with your community.

Through these organizations, participants indicated that they not only found a space for community, but also a place to further their development as activists, especially in organizations that provided workshops and trainings on what activism is. These opportunities would further shape participants' understandings of what activism is or can be.

### **Current Events and Issues**

It is important to acknowledge that this study was conducted within a specific place in time. All participants were traditional-age college students in their senior year (with one participant being in her junior year), and interviews with participants were conducted from mid-August through early October of 2017. Some participants referenced events that made national news back when they were in high school, such as the Trayvon Martin murder in 2012, when all but one of the participants were sophomores in high school. While some participants often discussed social issues they were addressing on their individual campuses and local communities, many discussed their concern for and commitment to broader social justice concerns that have drawn national attention, including Black Lives Matter, Ferguson, DACA and immigration, and Charlottesville.

For many participants, these events and issues served as catalysts for their activism. Within their high school or college contexts, among their peers, these events contributed to their understandings of social justice and challenged their notions of activism. Christine shared a variety of concerns that she had and what drew her attention as a student activist:

I think a lot of the events in the world have really made—at least my role in student activism, again—a bit more urgent or immediate, or maybe feel a bit more immediate.

Just at this point—especially in the past couple of months—just the idea of now more than ever—I think it’s now more than ever, for everyone, not just necessarily Asian Americans activists.... I think [about] a lot of things going on in the Trump administration, so I think to things like Betsy DeVos and the Title IX, and then I think to Trump in general with this North Korea rhetoric and everything that’s going on there. I think to DACA and immigration as a whole with Trump, and to, specifically, I think of Charlottesville, and the white supremacists rallies, or just white supremacy as a whole kind of re-surfing, just becoming more obvious I guess.... It seems to be a lot of things based on Trump administration, just the events that keep going on there.

These concerns and events often provided participants with a point of transition where they became aware of social issues. Kay recalled back to her time in high school, learning about Trayvon Martin:

When it came to, you know, what was happening during that time—I think that’s when Trayvon Martin was shot, and I think that was a very profound point in my life of what it means to be an activist or an organizer just because I think that’s when I really started opening my eyes to police brutality.... That was during the time when there was a lot of protests going on, and I remember not being quite as involved in the forefront of going to protests but that’s when Black Lives Matter was really starting to roll, and I just remember being very curious about the movement.

Similarly, Marites shared how the Michael Brown murder in 2014 affected her and activated her desire to create change on her campus:

Right around the time that Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri. That just shocked my eyes open I guess to just social issues in general. I mean, I would say that I lived fairly sheltered or just ignorant and unaware of these things. But being on a predominantly white campus at the time when Mike Brown was shot and also the app Yik Yak was pretty popular..., it was just really shocking to read what people were writing anonymously and also not anonymously about people of color just in general. It was a very us-versus-them mentality that I was seeing. And I just didn’t like it, like being here on this campus, so I was going to transfer out because I just felt like I couldn’t talk to anyone about this rage. This rage I had about the issue of police brutality as well as this rage that was slowly building up in terms of the microaggressions that I was facing as well as my peers of color here at [my college] who were also planning on transferring out, who were experiencing worse than what I was experiencing—more explicit, more vulgar, more threatening.

Participants’ exposure to various issues through their lifetimes and while in college largely influenced their worldviews and would reflect the social issues with which they chose to engage

during their college years.

### **Summary of Findings**

Participants recognized, even in retrospect and recollected as memories, the multiple influences of their pre-college experiences on how they developed understandings of social issues that they would later address as activists. Their social identities intersecting with family, school, and community experiences influenced their worldviews that later informed their involvement with activism in college. Once in college, the influences on their engagement with activism and social justice were further expanded through their college-student peer networks, the learning and new knowledge they gained through their academic programs, the mentorship they received from faculty, their cocurricular experiences, and the support from student-affairs mentors. All of these experiences within the last few years occurred within a context where current-day social issues, incidents, and events gripped their attention, their hearts, and their minds.

From seeds of activism grew their awareness of social justice issues—developing a critical consciousness was, for all participants, the first step toward enacting their activism across issues, both related to their Asian American identities and beyond. The following chapter explores participants' understanding of and definition of student activism as rooted in reflection and awareness of social justice issues. It also explores participants' understanding of activism at the intersection of Asian American identity. Finally, it presents findings on how participants defined activism as action beyond traditional notions of student activism.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DEFINING ACTIVISM THROUGH REFLECTION, IDENTITY, AND ACTION

For this study, I interviewed each participant over the course of two meetings. Whereas the first interview focused on participants' life histories and experiences leading up to and including their time in college, the second interview focused on their personal perspectives on contemporary student activism. To answer the research questions, I engaged participants in discussions about how they understood student activism as both a thought process and an action process. This chapter presents thematic findings from these follow-up interviews. Findings highlight how they came to define activism in terms of reflection and having an awareness of social justice issues and larger structures of oppression, how their Asian American identity has informed their engagement with activism, and how they define contemporary activism in terms of actions.

#### **Defining Activism Through Reflection**

*“The idea of reflection and knowing more and all that stuff is really key for developing as student activists and as we get more involved and understand more of what we’re getting involved in. I think that’s probably one of the most key parts because you can do a lot of action and all that stuff, but unless you really know what the impact is, what you’re acting on and all that kind of stuff, I think reflection and building your understanding is so key.” —Christine*

The following section presents findings from these interviews, highlighting participants' perspectives on how they defined activism in terms of thought, reflection, and awareness of social justice issues or the purposes of their activism. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that the first step to engaging in any form of social justice activism was the development of an

awareness—a critical consciousness—or, as one participant labeled it, “agitation.” Participants’ stories demonstrated an awareness of systems of oppression, a self-awareness of their social locations, and the development of not only an awareness of these issues, but the development of empathy for those within and beyond their own communities, as well as a sense of responsibility to giving back to one’s communities.

### **Awareness of Systemic Oppression**

Participants’ awareness of social issues and a critical consciousness of systems of oppression often originated in early-life experiences within their home communities or in their school experiences. Such experiences informed their interest in social justice activism and engagement in other social concerns that they would enact while in college. For example, Kay reflected on the development of her own awareness that would prompt her later involvement in social justice activism:

[Thinking] back to high school, having that profound moment of understanding that—really explicitly understanding that—not everything is equal, I think that’s what started the wheels turning in my mind to do better.... Looking back, I remember making it a point to understand what does this mean and having it as a goal to become more aware of what does social justice mean and what does activism look like and why are we experiencing things the way that we do?

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of systemic oppression and issues of social justice that characterized and defined their engagement in activism. Caroline’s reflection on her activism, for example, represented many of the participants’ own conceptions of this aspect of critical consciousness as an important part of engaging in activism:

Activism ... revolves around being conscious of different oppressive systems and different power systems that exist in society, and then how those are all interconnected in the roles that they play. A lot of times—how I think about activism—you may notice specific things, like, if you are from a historically underrepresented community, you may see things in terms of how they have affected you—different experiences that you’ve

had.... If, then, you learn about how that experience may be part of a larger system in society, so like, if you have experienced a microaggression, let's say you don't have the knowledge to define it, so you think it's just your own specific experience and you aren't aware that this is part of a larger system that may affect multiple people.

For participants, awareness of inequities in society evolved into a more complex awareness of systemic oppression, especially because college experiences, both curricular and cocurricular, provided the knowledge and language to name these oppressions. Christine reflected on her own development of her awareness of systemic oppression and how it defined her thinking about activism:

I think where I am right now is just because I have, especially in my college years, gone down that road of becoming more aware.... I don't think becoming more aware is really quite the right word because I think it's more [about how] I have a lot of access to know these things. Like, I've had relationships with people who have also informed me of this. I think it's really my kind of network that I've probably somewhat happenstance got into, who have introduced me to this stuff and really brought that awareness to me where it's now a thing that I can't shut off, because it's like when you see oppression now you can't unsee it.

The perspective that awareness of systemic oppression is something that cannot be "unseen" was echoed in Jamie's reflection of how their awareness is part of their activism:

I think—I imagine other people too—we can't not think about these things. It's like these are active daily things that have impacted our lives, you know, and continue to do so. It's not like it just stops. And also, being an activist, you know, once you're aware of things, you don't stop being in the thing itself, you know what I mean? Like, just because you're aware society is formulated in a certain type of way, it doesn't mean you're out of society now. Now, you can step back and judge like, "Oh, this is how it is," and that's, you know—you can't be removed from it.... But it's like, "How am I actively participating in these things and reifying things in culture?"

In light of becoming aware of systemic oppression and larger societal issues, participants noted that they also recognized how their personal identities shaped their place within these systems.

### **Awareness of Social Location**

In asking participants about the ways in which activism is conceptualized as thought and reflection, participants not only identified their recognition of systemic oppression as



characteristic of their activism, but they also noted how their social identities played a role in their activism within and across communities. Participants demonstrated a self-awareness of their own privileges and advantages, which, to an extent, reflected an awareness of their social location, although none of them named this specific concept as such. Hulko (2009) defined social location as the “relative amount of privilege and oppression that individuals possess on the basis of specific identity constructs, such as race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and faith” (p. 48). As an example of this concept, Daniel emphasized the importance of recognizing one’s positionality while engaging in community organizing or activism:

A huge part of activism is the recognition of where you stand in that community. I think that’s really important because a lot of activists that I think are important are those who, I guess, recognize how they play as a part of it. Even though we have our own issues, the kind of pain that my group suffers is categorically different, and the recognition of that is what I think defines the causes of an activist movement from my community on that issue. I think an ... example would be like my position as someone who is like pretty socially mobile with an economically viable trade degree that I’m going to graduate from, like, trying to participate in anti-gentrification work that people are doing.

For Daniel, he was conscious of his own privileges as someone who would eventually earn a computer science degree and work as a software engineer who is able to afford living in gentrifying communities, the same communities in which he was organizing and advocating for responsible development. This awareness of privilege was, for many participants, a critical component in defining their activism.

### **Reflections on Empathy**

In addition to recognizing personal privileges in their activism, participants also indicated how their concern for others characterized their engagement in activism. Empathy toward people different from themselves often began with friend groups, as Christine reflected:

I think before college, pre-college, pre-all this sort of access to knowledge, it was just

being friends with people who are experiencing an oppression that's a bit more either overt or a bit more serious than my oppression at the moment—the idea of “These are my friends, these are people that I love, and I want to fight for them and stick up for them because I see their humanity and their dignity.”

While some participants would connect their activism to the empathy they developed through friend groups, others would make connections between their engagement in social justice activism and larger social issues to which they might have been exposed while in college. These issues would be reflected in how they defined their involvement in social justice activism.

Rowena shared her reflections on how deeply she connected with social justice issues and how her experiences would define her activism:

When the Black Lives Matters [Movement] started, and I participated in the die-in [on campus], that really helped me understand activism.... I was lucky to be in a space of the [multicultural center] with people that were involved with so many things, and that hit home to me because I— Even though my family's names aren't in the headlines, that doesn't mean it's not someone else's. I remember, I think it was the summer leading up to junior year, when it was just the multiple shootings and the dad being shot in front of his daughter.... I just remember there was a day when I couldn't stop crying, and I felt so emotionally overwhelmed and distraught. That is what helped me understand it, you're losing your family. We're not only losing a member of the nation, but someone just lost their dad, someone just lost an uncle. And to hear of my friends, of how they're hurting, to hear my Black and African American friends tell how militarization and policing have gone up and hear their experiences and encounters of being judged just because you're in a sweater, a hoodie, and how your hair is worn, just made me want to do something. When it becomes personal, it becomes personal.

Participants described how their activism has been characterized by their greater awareness of different social issues and a development of empathy toward others. Samir, for example, reflected on how his engagement in activism affected his own personal outlook and awareness, describing how he has become:

...less ignorant of the situation of both the Asian American community and more aware of the ignorance of some other demographics who may not be as active or may not even be affected by it at all. I think that's one of the biggest things of how [my involvement in activism] has affected me. I think it's kind of made me, I wouldn't want to say, a kinder person, but a more empathetic person. Because I'm going to be honest, I'm still pretty blunt with most people, but it's definitely made me a little bit more empathetic towards

people's individual situations. Especially knowing about undocumented statuses, how LGBTQ laws are affecting people, the trans community and how they're affected, so on and so forth with various issues. I'm less critical of those situations and more empathetic.

### **Reflections on Responsibility and Giving Back**

Beyond awareness of systemic oppression and their reflections on empathy, participants often defined their thought processes for activism by reflecting on their desire to give back to their communities and engaging in activism out of a sense of responsibility. For some participants, the idea of engaging in activism or social change on their campuses grew out of their campus contexts where they felt a responsibility to do so because they felt that someone on their campus had to "do the work." Marites, in talking about her engagement in activism at her small college, for example, stated, "I think, for a large part, I feel like I have to, especially at this school." Beyond campus communities in which some participants felt responsibility to engage in change on campus, others looked at larger communities where they wanted to create change. Daniel reflected on feeling accountable to communities with which he felt he shared some experiences and a sense of identity:

I hear a lot about AAPIs, even if I can't share the same experiences as even like other ethnicities. I don't know what it's like being a Hmong immigrant, or I don't know what it's like being a very low-income, first generation person, or like English-limited. I don't know any of that, but I think there's a certain set of shared experiences that makes you feel somewhat this sense of identity and also this other sense of accountability.

While many participants identified their activism as responsibility to their immediate communities, there was also a sense of responsibility to the histories of activists and giving back to them by continuing legacies of activism. Kay and Rowena, in particular, described these concepts of responsibility in their own thoughts about what activism is. Kay reflected:

It's very easy to forget the spirituality that can come out of organizing and activism that are rooted within our ancestors, because our ancestors have gone through a lot of oppression, and I think you can honor them by basically fighting as well with them. So, I

like to think about [activism] in that way too, in that, like, if my ancestors have gone through this and I am here and I am trying to thrive in this world, you know, I think I can do it for future generations too.

Similarly, Rowena connected her conceptualizations of activism with her family history and the legacies of those who have been activists before her. She described her growth as an activist and her pursuit of leadership roles within her student organization to oversee political affairs and community engagement:

I ran to be, like, the public relations [officer for] political affairs. Just to go from a person who's just a marching person to— It made me want to take it up a notch and continue it forward. Just because, again, like, how I think Filipinos value so much family and generations and for me it was like, damn, to be able-bodied and to march, like made me want to just give back to those generations because ... they literally fought for us.... I feel like there's just always moments of time where I find if it connects with my family's history, it hits me.

As these findings demonstrate, participants identified having an awareness of social justice issues as a first step in their engagement in student activism. However, beyond this awareness of social justice issues, participants' definitions of activism were characterized by an awareness of systems of oppression, a self-awareness of social locations, empathy for those within and beyond their own communities, and a sense of responsibility to giving back to one's communities or legacies of activism. To a great extent, these thought processes and reflections tied to their activism would also be informed by their social identities including that of being Asian American. The following section explores participants' understanding of student activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity.

### **Defining Activism at the Intersection of Asian American Identity**

*“We need to recognize that we have gone through nuances of oppression ... that has been hidden from us throughout history, and even sometimes by our parents. And it's important to recognize that these systems greatly affect us, and it's not all what the media perceives it to be—not even just the media, but just mainstream beliefs of social justice.... When people think of social justice and activism as of late, I think people think, “Oh, Black Lives Matter.” That was a movement within*

*my generation that has greatly shaped how we understand social justice.... And I think it's very easy for Asian Americans to separate themselves from that, but I think we need to understand that we can only find liberation if we—if everyone—finds liberation, and that includes Black Lives Matter and the things that are affecting Black Lives Matter. Like, there are differences in how we are oppressed, but it's there, and it has its foundation on white supremacy and that very much impacts us.... We also have a lot of work to do when it comes to showing up and unpacking our internalized racial inferiority and superiority and how that shows up in many of the spaces that we're in.” —Kay*

In light of its focus on Asian American college-student activists, this study found that participants' Asian American identity informed their thoughts, awareness, and reflections on student activism. While this study was not specifically about participants' Asian American identity *development* per se—all participants self-identified as Asian American as a criterion for participating in the study—I explored participants' understandings of Asian American identity and how this identity, perhaps in intersection with other social identities, contributed to how they defined activism. During my first meetings with participants, I asked them to share their life-history experiences, leading up to their current-day experiences as college and university students engaged with social justice activism. Their identities played an important role in how they conceptualized activism. For some, the focus of their activism was closely tied to addressing representation of Asian Americans or to addressing issues that affected Asian American communities specifically. For others, the focus of their activism was tied to the idea of building solidarity across communities in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities. The following section presents findings that demonstrate how participants described their activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity.

### **In Search of Representation: Asian American Identity and Community**

Participants conceptualized activism as being connected to their Asian American identity in several ways. While they recognized the need to address Asian American-specific concerns,

they also engaged in efforts to challenge perceptions of Asian Americans as activists and to influence other Asian Americans in their involvement with activism. Jamie reflected on their identity as an Asian American and its influence on their activism:

I feel like there's steps to the process of activism, definitely—realizing who you are or at least how people see you, and if how people see you is not the way you want to be seen, you want to try to fix that, and especially how the way other people share that identity as well. So, in this way you want to make that situation better for yourself and other people. There's specific causes definitely to like Asian Americans, as far as in that we also want to help our Asian American siblings, as far as immigration, as far as like various stereotypes.

In a similar way, as many participants experienced, Samir recognized how his Asian American identity has affected his life experiences and catalyzed his connections to various issues affecting Asian American communities. Like Jamie, Samir characterized his acknowledgment of his Asian American identity as a step in his process toward activism, but he also recognized that representation of Asian Americans matters, whether in activist spaces or in political leadership:

Once I was able to pin down my identity as an Asian American—or at least as a minority before we go into the Asian American, as a minority in general—I started narrowing it down to South Asian and how a lot of us have similar looks to Middle Eastern descendants and how [racial] profiling also affects us. I went to the San Juan airport on vacay, and I got TSA'ed twice on the way in and out. Like, it happens, yes. I couldn't help it, because I'm not going to say, "No, you can't TSA me; you're racist." I had to go with it, but that was one of the instances where I was like, "Yep, sounds about right." But that kind of looking into how the South Asian community is affected by the racial profiling of Middle Eastern folk and other South Asian folk kind of pushed me a little bit more towards hitting that solid activism.

In discussing their Asian American identity in relation to their activism, participants in this study often viewed their activism as a way to challenge societal norms or expectations as well as opportunities to influence other Asian American peers to engage in various causes. In doing so, participants recognized the importance of countering a perceived lack of involvement among Asian Americans in social justice activism.

**Challenging norms and influencing others.** Participants saw their own involvement in

various student organizations and activist circles as important efforts toward bringing representation of Asian Americans to these spaces, and they believed their presence in student-organization leadership roles and in social justice activism would have an impact on other Asian American students who might not necessarily see themselves in these roles or in these spaces.

Caroline, for example, reflected on the impact of challenging hegemonic notions of leadership:

If you're an Asian American woman and people don't see you as a leader, then your activism could be holding leadership roles in different places or different institutions. It could also have the opposite effect. Your activism could mean that you don't participate in those oppressive institutions.

The idea of representation as influencing others was echoed across participants' stories. Jamie, who identifies as non-binary femme and was involved in both their college's Asian American Student Association (AASA) and their college's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) student organization, reflected on their decision whether to pursue leadership roles in either organization:

I love being part of things, I love doing things. But I think a reason that I really wanted to be on the e-board, executive board, of [the LGBTQ organization] is that I wanted people who looked like me to show other students that people can look like me and still be in power. They don't have to look a certain way. You can be a person of color, you can be Asian American and queer and do all these things. It was actually really interesting because David, who used to be president of AASA asked me, "Do you want to be on the e-board [of AASA]?" And I'm like, "No, I kinda want to be on this [LGBTQ organization] e-board." I chose [the LGBTQ organization] at the time just because I felt like I wanted that representation for a future me, you know what I mean? And obviously I was still a member [of AASA], but it's a little different. I did eventually have other students come in and be like, "Yeah, we saw this Asian femme person on the [LGBTQ] e-board, the executive board. I was like, 'Gosh this place is a little bit more accepting than my hometown.... This place could be a place for me.'"

**Finding Asian Americans' place in activism.** Some participants conceptualized activism as efforts to find Asian Americans in existing or past movements. They wanted to make connections as Asian Americans to current-day activism and social change projects. This was closely related to their desire to increase representation of Asian Americans in discussions of

social issues or in activist spaces. Marites, for example, reflected on her participation in her Spring Break experiential-learning program's trip to Alabama to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery:

We were in Selma at the time, and we actually were able to be a part of the 50th anniversary re-enactment march. So, we marched the last three miles.... I had a sign, and I remember it being something about—I remember wanting it at least, wishing I did have a sign about the place of Asian Americans in the conversation, not in the sense that we need a place in the conversation, but acknowledging the place that we did have.

**Challenging the perceived lack of involvement of Asian Americans in activist spaces.**

Although some participants recognized privileges in their ability to engage in activism within and across communities, the concept of social location, referenced earlier, was further demonstrated by participants' critiques of how some Asian Americans do not engage in social justice activism or lack an awareness of systems of oppression or social issues that affect their communities. For these participants, this awareness of Asian Americans' place in social justice activism or other endeavors to effect social change was an important aspect of defining their activism, particularly with reference to their Asian American identity. Marites shared her perspectives on Asian Americans' engagement in activism:

From what I've seen and what I've observed personally, there is an apathy and an indifference on a broader scale—a lack of civic engagement and a lack of knowledge and awareness about our place in society. I think a lot of it is internalized whiteness, internalized colonization, enjoying the benefits of being perceived as the model minority and, thus, also just internalizing whiteness as the norm, not thinking critically about these issues and therefore not engaging in them. I see that in my family, I see that in the Asian Americans that are here [at my college].

In Marites's college's context, she reported that she was one of less than a handful of Asian Americans who were engaged in any form of activism on her campus. In general, participants in this study recognized and shared that some Asian Americans position themselves as separate from other communities of color or do not identify with social justice activist causes. For



example, Samir explained his own growth and development on this issue:

I definitely at one point or another fell under that category of the pseudo-white category that often falls on the Asian American community, where we think we're on par privilege-wise with the white community. But it wasn't until probably my senior year in high school where I saw a news report of an elderly Indian man who was visiting his son in Arizona, got pulled over by the police, didn't know English, and ended up getting shot and paralyzed. That hit me. I was like "Oh no, that's not us at all. We're here with the rest of people of color." That's where I realized we're not separate. People of color are all one and out here to support each other. We're not really supposed to be separated even though in some situations we are. But we really shouldn't be. And that's kind of where I had part of that realization.

Participants often shared frustration with this recognition of a tension among Asian Americans who are engaged and those who are not engaged in social justice activism. Caroline shared a memory of her first time engaging in activism on her university's campus. She was disappointed by the lack of Asian American students in attendance at an anti-Islamophobia demonstration:

There were not a lot of Asian Americans there. To me that was huge because I was like, "Well, all the other cultural organizations are here, like MEChA, AChA." So these are all like different cultural organizations, they were all there, but where was APSA? There was only about two people from APSA even though we have like hundreds of active members.

While participants recognized a need to engage in social justice activism as Asian Americans, they also recognized a greater need to work across communities in solidarity, and they identified this as an important aspect of defining their activism in relation to their Asian American identity. Christine articulated some of the Asian American-focused issues that she felt activism addressed, but she also recognized the importance of working in solidarity across communities. She shared:

I've been reflecting on Asian American activism and specifically what the platform is at the moment, who it includes, who it doesn't include, just in general, just sort of what the mainstream platform is and talking about that with people. Right now, our platform is pretty much just like representation of East Asian and usually, like, East Asian males. And [I question], "How can we like broaden up?" Because we have issues such as immigration. We have issues about imperialism and all these sort of more systemic and broader, I guess, more inclusive kind of issues that we can talk about. But right now, it's

just sort of relegated to representation, which is an issue but not quite an issue that's as heavily impacting as immigration is, where it is something that you can really talk about, you can try and solve, and that we can work with other groups as well to get that solidarity.

This recognition of the importance of working in solidarity was reflected in many participants' stories as they described how their Asian American identity informed their engagement in social justice activism.

### **In Solidarity: Asian Americans Engaging With and Across Communities**

Participants often described a connection between their Asian American identity and their conceptualization of activism that focused on Asian American issues, particularly related to representation in society in general or across industries. At times, participants' Asian American identity fully informed their involvement, such as presenting workshops on Asian American parental expectations, addressing mental health issues in Asian American communities, or supporting anti-gentrification efforts in predominantly Asian American communities. At times, however, the focus of participants' activism was tied to the idea of building solidarity across communities in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities. They defined their activism as getting involved with and working in solidarity across communities and identities for issues not necessarily Asian American-related, but seemingly interrelated with others' experiences, as Kay reflected, "We can only find liberation if we—if everyone—finds liberation." Participants' definitions of activism as working in solidarity across communities demonstrated their understanding of having power in numbers, the need to address larger systems of oppression, and the importance of recognizing one's positionality and privileges within activist spaces.

**Supporting power in numbers.** In defining activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity, participants recognized the idea of building power in numbers, so they

viewed activism from the perspective of joining efforts. Daniel shared:

I'm definitely really inspired by the sheer number of really active, progressive leaders who are AAPI that I've seen at [my university]. I guess a lot of my radical friends make this argument: A lot of civic action that you take doesn't really go anywhere, you know what I mean? In the end you're always going to have very similar policies. I guess this administration's a little bit of counterexample. But beyond that, having a massive voter bloc, getting that number of people to organize, especially with other communities of color, is something that would be— It could, like, really create valuable material change for all of us. That's something I want to work for, for the rest of my life.

**Recognizing interrelated systems of oppression and racial justice issues.**

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study recognized the value of building solidarity across communities to address racial justice issues. They would define their activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity, as Caroline shared, “to think about how oppressive systems not only affect you and your community, but other communities” and then work toward dismantling these systems in solidarity with other communities. Participants recognized that the many issues that they and other activists seek to address are interrelated and that one cannot address one issue without addressing many others. Jamie reflected on the importance of recognizing not only systemic oppression, but also how various social issues are interconnected:

It's understanding the system and about everything—race and gender and class—they're all tied together. And capitalism, white supremacy, like all of this, is a big mess that isn't separate. You can't take these issues separately, I don't think. They're all tied together, you can't have feminism without supporting Black people, without supporting the environment, without supporting queer people. So, if you have to tackle one issue, I feel like you have to tackle all of them to some degree, or at least understand— understand people that are like, “Oh, I only want to work on one thing for my time and energy,” and I get that, but also, it's important to really involve yourself with everything. Because I just don't see how you cannot.

Mikaela shared a similar sentiment after describing the lack of involvement or activism among some of her Asian American college-student peers. Like many participants, Mikaela felt that there were not any “big issues” that mobilized her Asian American peers, but that their focus has been on larger issues that affect many communities:

We haven't had as many big issues that are really the biggest focus for triple-A. I think we've also been trying to use our AAPI identity to mobilize ... to encourage people to see that it's not just isolated ... our activism shouldn't be isolated with just AAPI issues, that it should be in collaboration with other groups. I think challenging white supremacy—it can't just be from one AAPI position. It has to be aware of all the other communities.

Mikaela went on to describe how her college's Asian American student organization has made efforts to collaborate with other identity-based student organizations, including her college's Black student organization and Latinx student organization. She acknowledged that this was important not only for providing support across communities of color, but also to counter isolation that Asian Americans might experience in addressing Asian American-specific issues, stating, "I feel like if I'm just focusing on Asian American activism or stories, then I'm just isolating myself."

This concept of activism as solidarity in support of communities other than one's own was shared by many participants. Caroline, for example, reflected on the importance of solidarity and support as a means for not only effecting change, but also sustaining activism:

If you only have your own community going about something, then a lot of times that's not when change happens. You really need the support of different communities to go about making that change. I feel like that's also what sustains different communities ... when you are able to be united together in working towards dismantling different systems of oppression all together, and you know that somebody else has your back, even though they haven't experienced the same things that you have, but they're still going to be there, whether it be protesting with you, educating others, that's really important. I know that activism burnout is such a thing, and if you don't have the support of other people, then it can make it so much harsher and so much more— It takes up so much of your energy. That applies to any community, not just specifically Asian Americans.

Kay also reflected on activism as a collective effort:

I think for something to be considered activism one needs to have a perspective of the collective and the community. I think in its essence that's what activism is really all about. It's about the larger whole of the movement and not just how oppression and systemic inequality and inequity impacts you, but your entire community, and understanding that you may be a part of a label of being marginalized, whether it's with race or sexism or ableism even. Those are all interconnected. You can't find liberation

completely until all of those things are changed. Collective liberation is what activism is. It's about keeping in mind the intersectionality of everyone and not just one particular being and what identities they hold.

Overwhelmingly, participants' recognition of the importance of working in solidarity with various communities and as a collective was an important aspect of defining activism, particularly in relation to their Asian American identity.

**Understanding one's positionality in activist spaces.** In addition to recognizing solidarity as building power in numbers or joining efforts to address larger issues of systemic oppression, participants acknowledged the importance of recognizing one's position and privileges within activist spaces. For example, Jamie reflected:

Whatever identity you have as an activist, you don't want to co-opt other people's activism, so it's like you have to question if you're doing activism right to a certain degree, you know what I mean? As far as like, "Okay there's a lot of awesome amazing Black activists, but I don't want to co-opt whatever their speeches are, or like do something that mimics them, or takes away from whatever they're doing." You know what I mean?

Kay provided another perspective on working in solidarity and recognizing her privilege in her activism work:

I've gone through a lot of learning experiences. I think I could say, especially when trying to do anti-racist organizing, because it's trying to balance out like not trying to have white allies take so much of your space and time and, like, having to educate them, but then also realizing that as an Asian American, sometimes you do have to take up that role of educating that white person in order for someone else who holds other identities to not do all that work.

Participants also indicated that within activist spaces they acknowledged not only how their social identities interacted with the community in which they were enacting activism, but whether those for whom they were advocating were represented within the activist activities.

Daniel spoke of the importance of including community members in his activism work within his city's Chinatown community, acknowledging his relationship with the community as an outsider

who is a local college student. He shared, “People have to continuously keep the population in mind ... if your activist base doesn’t consist of people from that group. That means that people from an action perspective [need to] make sure that those spaces are comprised of people in the community.” Similarly, Christine shared her own recognitions of privilege in different activist spaces based on her Asian American identity:

I think in activist spaces, my identity as an Asian American—especially because a lot of the spaces that I tend to be in that are considered to be activist spaces are not about Asian American issues, or at least not directly related to Asian American issues—I think it’s pretty key in the sense that I’m aware of my identity. I’m aware of my privileges that I have in these spaces, and so I’m going into these spaces as support. Showing solidarity, showing that the Asian American voice or representative or a person who can be possibly a representative of the whole, is there to show solidarity as well. I think I kind of view my identity in these spaces as trying to break down a lot of the barriers and potential separate individualism that’s happening with all these different racial and marginalized groups in activism.

As these findings demonstrate, for some participants, student activism was about addressing representation of Asian Americans or addressing issues that affected Asian American communities. For others, student activism was about building solidarity across communities. While reflection and awareness of social justice issues as well as their Asian American identity informed participants’ conceptualizations of social justice activism, actions and behaviors that the participants engaged in would also define contemporary activism. The following final section explores participants’ understanding of student activism as actions and behaviors.

### **Defining Activism Through Action**

*“Activism is a lot of—I don’t want to say it’s a lot of yelling because that’s not necessary—but it’s a lot of communication. It’s a lot of intake of information and then using that—synthesizing that information—to produce something out of it to spread more information, whatever that information is, whether that is information about your cause.... And then spreading that information can look like yelling, or it can look like marches, can look like workshops, community events.” —Marites*

Participants’ perspectives on contemporary student activism included not only defining

activism by way of awareness of social justice issues or in relation to their Asian American identity, but also on the actions themselves. During the second set of interviews with participants, I engaged in discussions about how participants understood activism as an action process. I intentionally did not provide them with examples of what activism is or may be, because I wanted to explore how they, as self-identified activists, defined contemporary student activism.

As described earlier in this chapter, participants defined activism in terms of thoughts and ideas by recognizing critical consciousness and an awareness of systemic oppression as only a beginning to and part of their engagement in activism—“agitation,” as one participant stated. But, for all participants, activism is not simply thinking about a social justice issue; it is also acting on and engaging in efforts to effect social change or to actively support a cause. The previous section examined this notion of thinking about social justice issues and activism at the intersection of Asian American identity, given that this study is specifically about Asian American student activists. While the types of acts of activism may not necessarily be tied to their identities, the social issues in which the participants were, are, and continue to be engaged are inextricably connected to their many identities, including that of being Asian American. Activism, however, as many participants shared, involves taking action. The following section presents findings from these interviews, focusing on participants’ perspectives on how they defined activism in terms of actions and behaviors.

### **“Classic” Activism**

Participants largely recognized traditional forms of activism in their definitions of activism. These included references to protest demonstrations, marches, and boycotts, all forms of action traditionally associated with activism. Mikaela, who attends a college she described as

having a culture of student activism, reflected on her past experiences with activism:

We've had two protests this year. One was about a local grocery store and racial profiling. There was a boycott. And then the second one was for immigration. There wasn't anything— There wasn't like an event that kicked it off at [my college] specifically but more just asserting protection for undocumented students. Those are the classic ways of activism.

For the participants who engaged in “classic” forms for activism, taking part in these activities were action-oriented manifestations of the consciousness and awareness they developed about social justice issues that were important to them. For example, Rowena shared a story about participating in a protest at San Francisco State University to support funding for its ethnic studies programs. Student organizations from her own university travelled to San Francisco State University to support and participate in the protest demonstration. She shared:

To go to State when they had their march is really when I felt—physically felt—like what activism is. To see that it wasn't only my [student] organization, but it was like also MEChA and like the Japanese Club and the international students—to see everyone had their banners and everyone had their fists up, that is when it clicked with me, this is what it means. This is putting all the rhetoric, all the terms, all the stories into perspective. And it made me— It felt right. And that's what clicked with me.

In addition to acknowledging traditional forms of activism in their definitions, participants who shared stories of engagement in these forms of activism also noted the risk and discomfort often felt in such activities. Related to this, participants indicated there was a difference in taking part in student activism on their college or university campus—where they felt participating in a protest demonstration, for example, was “safer” within sanctioned demonstration areas—versus off campus within the larger community, where such protections were not in place. Kay, for example, shared a story of her first participation in a protest march off campus through her involvement in a community-based organization:

It was very anxiety-provoking because I didn't know what to do. Like, you would just chant and just follow this large group around.... We were about to go on the freeway to block it and to cause attention, and I was very fearful. Because I was like, “I don't want



to get arrested; my parents don't know I'm here, and none of my really close friends are here. I'm basically with a lot of just strangers and acquaintances going to this protest." A part of me questioned, "Am I being oppressive by not going on the freeway and standing with these people?" Like, "How am I being racist or just not showing up for the movement if I choose not to do something that makes me uncomfortable?"

Kay acknowledged her discomfort in taking part in a high-risk form of activism, but then shared a perspective that many participants discussed—that those who are not ready to engage in high-risk activism do not need to engage in specific forms of activism in order to support a cause and, more important, activism can take on different forms. She reflected, "I think people associate activism with protesting and, like, going in streets and shouting things, but I don't think that's necessarily the case. It can manifest in different ways." Similarly, Samir shared his thoughts on taking part in high-risk activism, commenting that student activists:

...don't need to go out picketing and stuff if they're scared of getting arrested or tear gas, pepper spray, all that stuff, riot police coming up. Protests, sometimes they get that way, and it's not for the faint of heart ... if they're going to go out there to be scared. Because the whole purpose of going out there is to be strong and is to remain strong in the face of adversity. So if you feel like you're not ready for it, don't do it. It doesn't mean you're not an activist, it just means you're taking a different road. Not necessarily the same road as the other people but the destination is the same. It's going to get you there either way.

Beyond the concerns of risk and discomfort, participants also argued that other forms of activism represented a need to change the ways in which students engaged in activism. As an example, Christine, while acknowledging activism defined by its traditional forms, discussed how her peers have attempted to challenge what activism is and how it may need to evolve:

[Activism] should always be open for change and open for innovation.... Especially right now. Like protests, maybe they're not the best form of activism anymore. What is the best form of activism? I think that's something— Maybe I guess, that's a component of activism ... that it should be always innovative, always reinventing itself to be more inclusive and effective and productive, all that stuff.... There was a conversation that we had—and again, it was after the DACA thing—a lot of students were just like disheartened that protesting is not seeming to be the best method anymore. It was also after another Black shooting, and it was just that thing of "How do we— Like, it keeps going on, it just keeps happening, and nothing we do seems to be helping." So, it was that conversation of "Well, we keep doing protests, we keep trying to march out in the

streets..., and it's still not changing anything." So our conversation was thinking of maybe protests are not the best form.

Participants overwhelmingly described student activism as taking on forms beyond the traditional, "classic" activism with which they were already familiar. While they acknowledged these traditional forms of activism, they described the many ways in which their concerns for social justice issues would translate into various activities that they included in defining their own forms of contemporary activism. These forms of activism—beyond "classic" activism—included various forms of educating oneself, educating one's community, and educating others.

### **Activism as Education of Self**

The idea of educating oneself is seen in participants' defining activism through awareness of and reflection on social justice issues. There is, however, also an action aspect in educating oneself. This notion of actively educating oneself about social justice issues—whether it was reading up on issues, becoming familiar with a topic through an activist blog site, or taking a course on Asian American studies—while described by many participants as a precursor to engaging in activism, extended into some participants' definition of activism itself. The act of becoming activists and educating themselves on issues was demonstrated by participants' comparison of themselves with other activists (as reference points for defining what activism is) and in their defining activism as a transformative process.

**Comparison of self with other activists.** The notion of educating oneself on activism and social justice issues was exhibited by participants as a process of comparing themselves with other activists, although this was not necessarily how they named this process. That is, in defining what activism is, participants often made references to individuals or actions that they considered to be activists or activism and compared themselves with those individuals. Marites, who identified as a student activist at a small Midwestern college, which she described as being

“predominately white and heterosexual, cisgender, all the dominant identities,” reflected on her experience with gaining exposure to other students and community organizations engaged in activism, all of which made her reflect on her own activism:

I have been really noticing lately that a lot of the activism that I’ve done, within the context of [my college], is still very entry-level in comparison to a lot of other good things that are going on at larger campuses with more diverse populations.... I mentioned how [my college’s diversity student organization] is a very, like, umbrella, like, we address a lot of issues. So, it’s like a lot of breadth, but not a lot of depth.... I started getting involved with Asian Americans Advancing Justice–Chicago. I had the opportunity to live and take classes in downtown Chicago earlier this year because that was something that [my college] offered. Being able to connect with other Asian American activists really threw me for a loop because I realized the things that were considered very innovative and revolutionary on my campus is things that have already been done in other contexts, in other organizations.... It was very humbling to go, for example, to the [Student] Social Justice Training Institute and realize that, like, I’m like—this is going to sound very self-degrading or self-deprecating—but I’m right here [she motioned her hand at one level], and then they’re like— Some of the other students on other campuses are like all the way over here [she motioned her hand at a higher level], concerned about like just way different things than— that we haven’t even gotten to here at [my college]. Like having everyone put their pronouns in their e-mail signatures is something that I’ve seen when I correspond with people from so many other different institutions, but that’s not something that people are even thinking of here at least. It was such a big deal when they finally unveiled the all-gender restrooms. But then realizing that’s been going on at other universities for some time now and not necessarily getting as much resistance either.

Exposure to peers who are engaged in various forms of activism broadened participants’ definitions of what student activism is. As participants discussed educating themselves on social justice issues and how to engage in activism, they indicated their own development as activists and understandings of activism grew out of these comparisons with other student activists.

Daniel, a student who became engaged with social justice and community issues when he became involved with his university’s Asian American cultural center, was initially reluctant to participate in this study; although he believed he was engaged in activism on his campus and in his community, his comparison of himself with other student activists gave him pause when self-identifying as a student activist. He reflected on his experiences engaging with other activists on

campus and in the community:

I never really felt like an activist.... Something that held me back was feeling like I was inadequate. Meeting a lot of people, I got imposter syndrome really hard, especially my sophomore and junior years because I always felt like, in these leadership situations, I didn't really know what the hell was going on.

Daniel would later reflect on this and share:

I think a big reason why I felt very insecure is because I had really strong role models my freshman and sophomore year, people who were really engaged with their communities. They went to rallies or planned a lot of work and worked at non-profits and were community organizers. I was like, "Damn, I don't have the social skills or the energy or the time to do that." I was definitely getting a lot of imposter syndrome about whether or not I was good enough to be an activist, or whether or not I was putting enough energy or time in.

Participants also noted a negative side to this notion of educating oneself as a form of activism while comparing oneself with other student activists. In some cases, participants felt educating oneself about activist issues led to a culture of competition. For example, Mikaela described her college's context in which student activism is part of the culture and where students are often engaging with each other to further their own education on social justice issues:

I always like to be right. I think, it's not the case that much anymore, but it's hard to know when you're always wanting to be right when you're involved in student activism, since I think a lot of people have this ultimate goal. Generally people agree, or it's also kind of a competition of what's "radical" enough.... I mean, I don't understand all of the theories, but I think it's kind of "dismantling the state" and being "anti-capitalist" and "anti-neoliberalist," which I still don't— That's just the language that I hear a lot that I don't completely understand. So I can't really always engage in those conversations. I just listen. Also, it can be who critiques a lot, which sometimes it's calling in, but I think a lot of people try to call out and show that they know the most.

In describing what activism looks like among some of her peers, she reflected on her own limited knowledge, compared with others, and highlighted the problematic culture of "competition of what's 'radical' enough." Still, while participants placed value in learning from other activists'

examples, whether good or bad, many described activism's education of self as an individual and self-transformative process.

**Activism as self-transformation.** While some participants engaged in comparing themselves with other student activists, others defined activism as an act of self-development and transformation. In other words, they indicated that self-transformation was an important action in activism. Daniel, for example, emphasized the importance of personal learning in activist spaces:

Oftentimes you don't know what you're doing, like sometimes I don't even know what I'm doing. I think understanding that, but also not being afraid to apologize or recognize where you are in terms of your consciousness is really important because it helps with one not being afraid of making mistakes. And I think people really get dragged for making mistakes in these spaces.... It's just really important to recognize that you shouldn't be afraid of making those mistakes. Recognizing and expressing that you're ready to learn is super great for, like, both for growth and to push back and help the community recognize where you are.

While most participants did not name their activism and education of self as transformative per se, some were able to share how the experiences of being an activist involved changes in their worldviews and behaviors. A few named this transformation as a critical component of defining their activism. For example, Christine described what she felt were important aspects of defining activism, sharing:

I want to include something about, like, development. Like this idea of somehow growing or developing. In a way that— maybe like, transformative. So, I think maybe like transformative thought or transformative sort of perspectives of the world, I guess. I think, at least for me, where I personally orient, I would [define activism as] going towards a more progressive or liberating sort of ideology, so combining that idea in I guess whatever form [of activism]—something that is developing your growth and understanding, building towards more of a transformative view of the world and with the goal of liberation.

At the same time, however, while some participants shared that self-transformation was an action-oriented aspect of their own activism, others felt that self-education was simply a

precursor to student activism. For example, Jamie shared:

Educating yourself first and foremost is a very important part of [activism], but I'm not sure if I would actually describe that as activism necessarily, because I feel like just because you read a book, that doesn't necessarily make you a radical.

Although Jamie's perspective challenged the notion of education of self as a form of activism, many participants recognized acts of educating oneself as an important component of their activism.

### **Activism as Education Within One's Community**

For all participants, activism was not only defined by educating oneself on social justice issues, but it was also defined by taking actions to educate one's own community. In other words, there was a focus on incorporating collective education on social issues. Participants enacted this form of activism in a variety of ways, including engaging with peers in student organizations or through coordinating programs and events to educate their peers. Mikaela, for example, shared her experience as a first-year student who became involved with planning an Asian American student conference on her campus. While she had not initially engaged with Asian American issues as an activist when she first arrived on her campus, her involvement in planning the Asian American student conference became her personal form of activism and, more important, a form of learning with and educating her Asian American community. She reflected on one aspect of planning the conference with other Asian American student leaders and activists:

It was all just writing a mission statement—realizing how much words mattered—and talking to other people, and then bringing in speakers. That was kind of the big introduction to what I felt was activism because you're learning about all these things that other people, that the speakers, are doing, and then you're talking to people in your own group of what you want and what you're hoping to achieve with the conference.... There was so much work involved I felt like, "This must be worth it. This must— It'd better be something. It'd better be for something important." I think that's why I'm thinking that it's activism.

During her interview, Mikaela would later declare, “For me, engaging, like, actual activism has just been through programming.” This sentiment—this idea that activism happens through educating peers through programming—was reflected in other participants’ stories. Rowena, a student activist who has been engaged with social justice issues throughout her college career, remarked that, as a senior, she felt a responsibility to pass on a legacy of engaging in social justice issues and found herself transitioning from being an activist in her student organization to being a mentor to students in her organization. As coordinator of an annual production that her Pilipinx American student organization hosted each year, she decided to incorporate ideas of social justice activism into the program in an effort to foster education and awareness among her peers. She shared:

I’m at that point now, too, thinking of students that don’t— that maybe are too shy to start it or don’t know where to start it. That’s why I did my best to incorporate it into [Pilipinx Culture Night], into the production, to just start like planting the seed. Hopefully people will have a better understanding of like, “Oh, so my experience of this— like my experience of X makes sense of Y, and now we can move forward and see everything.

For Rowena, “seeing everything” referred to the idea that her peers would become aware of social justice issues, and her form of activism as education of her community was realized through incorporating social justice issues into the content of the Pilipinx Culture Night at her university.

### **Activism as Education of Others**

While education of oneself and education of one’s community were important aspects of engaging in activism, overwhelmingly, participants defined activism as efforts to raise awareness of social justice issues by educating others. As one participant, Jamie, noted, “Once you’re affecting other people and changing other people’s mindsets and just actively doing things to make what you think should be happening, happen, that is activism.” The act of educating others

came in many different forms, and participants considered all ways of educating others and spreading awareness of social justice issues to be a form of activism. Marites, who self-identified as one of less than a handful of Asian American student activists on her college campus, described the various ways in which she engaged in raising awareness and educating others as forms of activism. Feeling like her college community did not provide her with a space to discuss social justice issues, Marites considered transferring to another university, but later decided to engage with her community to create the space she was looking for:

Somewhere between the fall and winter of my first year of college, I realized, “Okay, if I transfer out of [my college], and there’s only, what, like 60 Asian students to begin with, that’s 59, and it’s not going to get better.” So that’s when I decided, “Okay, instead of transferring out and going to a place that already has the space that I want, I’m going to create it here.” We already had an Office of Multicultural Affairs, but that was at the student-affairs level. A lot of people are sometimes like, “Oh, school-sponsored things, huh.” We didn’t have an active Asian student organization—still, arguably we don’t; it’s not very active. Even all of the cultural organizations that we have didn’t have that directed, like, intention of being about social issues. When I was starting the diversity club, one of my friends who was on the executive board of the International Club was like, “You know, we do already have a diversity club on campus where you can learn about different cultures.” And I was like, “Yeah, but it’s global. We need to talk about the things that are happening here, within the States. You don’t talk about that in the International Club, and it’s also very—it’s just aesthetic. It’s very like, “Oh, you get to try all this different food.” But you won’t get to talk about the times you were made fun of for having that food in your lunch box when you were growing up.

After deciding to stay at her college rather than transferring to what she perceived to be a more diverse university, Marites decided to become involved on campus and create change locally. She reflected on the various ways that she engaged in educating others through her diversity-related student organization as a form of activism:

Throughout that year, we had done a panel about political correctness; we unpacked the term. It was a really, really well-rounded diverse panel or diverse representation. We actually ended up organizing a march on campus after there were a lot of racially charged events occurring at Yale and Harvard and Mizzou, especially Mizzou around that time. We did the “Not at [my college]” march because there was some racial tensions on our campus, and so we decided, “Okay, we need to march, especially in this neighborhood.” [My college’s town] is notoriously homogenous and affluent and very toxic and



suffocating. That's one word that I would use a lot.... Like, right now, this whole week we're actually hosting informational tables about DACA. So we're handing out brochures, and we're actually doing a social media campaign, [College] Stands With DACA. We have students who are on DACA at the tables talking to other students informing them about what's happening about that.

Marites noted that activism as education of others takes on a countercultural aspect or a challenge to the status quo. For her, the act of sharing her or others' stories to educate others is a form of activism, because she identified her story and others' stories as a counternarrative and challenge to the status quo. She reflected:

There's a countercultural aspect to activism and challenging the status quo.... If we talk about [the diversity student organization] and that space, and when we're in a meeting and discussing all these important issues and what can we do about it, that's activism in its own right. If I think about a class that I have that has nothing even to do with activism or anything related to social issues, but I bring it in—I tie in that experience anyway—that is also activism because it engages a different audience; it informs a different audience. You've got the people who are going to show up to the rallies and the people who are not likely to, but you're still engaging with them anyway.

Common among the participants' descriptions of the various ways of educating others as a form of activism, acts of engaging with others and raising awareness involved active efforts. In reflecting on their past activism, participants often discussed experiences having personal conversations with others as a form of activism, providing educational programming on social issues as a form of activism, and, in some contexts, actively calling out (or calling in) incidents of injustice. All of these represented forms of activism as raising awareness and educating others.

**Personal conversations.** Several participants indicated that personal conversations with peers and others was one a form of engaging in activism. The goal of conversations that participants described as their activism was to raise awareness of social issues and to educate others about their causes. For many, having these conversations was sometimes described as a “baby step” in activism, but, in all cases, their intent was to have an impact on those with whom

they had these conversations. Caroline, for example, shared:

Another form of activism is conversations that you have with your friends and family. Another thing that I think about is ... in the API community, anti-blackness is very real. Being able to have those conversations with your friends and family about anti-blackness— Just because you understand it, you really need to take that step further into making a difference. And that means talking about this with family.

In thinking about past participation in activism, participants also shared how personal conversations were a different form of activism in comparison with action-oriented and traditional forms of activism. In recalling their earliest memory of engaging in activism to effect change, many participants identified early conversations with peers and family members as their first acts of activism. Christine, for example, differentiated between action-oriented activism and reflective, educational activism through conversations:

If I think of activism in terms of ... education and including those components in sort of a praxis sort of idea, then I would say [an example was] in high school, just in a conversation with my best friend who is half Black, and we were talking about— It was a really casual moment; we were just in student council, and we had free time. We were talking— We were talking together, and we were also talking to some of the students around us, our peers around us, and it was just about terminology, so like “people of color,” and why you shouldn’t say the n-word, or why you shouldn’t say “colored people,” that just sort of thing. And my friend and I were just talking about it in terms of like, “Oh yeah, yeah, that’s why you do that.” But we were also in a way educating other kinds of students because I think the students, as from my memory, who were talking with us were white students, and they had never heard this discussion before. So, it was that moment of—in terms of activism—that was an educating moment of activism.

**Educational programming.** While participants described their formal or informal conversations with peers or family members as a type of educational activism, many participants described formal educational programming on their college campuses as another form of activism. Examples that participants provided included facilitating educational workshops on Asian American issues, hosting panels on how to support undocumented students, setting up a table to pass out information on various social issues. These were structured educational events that participants included in their definitions of what activism looks like. For example, Kay,

who, at one point in her college career, was a resident advisor, reflected on her planning of a program for her residential community that, for her, was a form of educating others as activism.

She shared her perspectives on education as a critical part of what activism is:

So you educate yourself and then you do educational discussions to the collective, your organization, to a group of students, and this could even be within the higher education level, having programs on campus.... So, like, as an RA, one of the programs that I had was about Beyonce's *Lemonade* which was, for me personally, a ground breaking piece, because she touched upon femininity, but also just with Jay-Z and her husband and race, and violence against Black bodies, and folks who are being oppressed of all different kinds of identities, and I questioned, "Why did she do that? What purpose does this serve? What message does this bring out?" After doing my own research, I decided to share that with the community on my floor. So, there's that piece of education which I always think is imperative to this whole process of activism.

**Calling out/in.** While having personal conversations and hosting formal educational programs or events was a method of activism that delivered content to educate others on social justice issues, participants also noted that another active form of engaging others in education and what they considered activism was through calling out (or calling in) injustice or inequities when they witnessed incidents on their campus or in their classrooms. Participants who defined activism in this way argued that not calling out (or calling in) incidents of injustice or discrimination was considered passive. Caroline explained her defining activism as:

...not being silent because a lot of things happen because of the silent majority.... If you see some type of injustice, being able to actually call it out. If you're in a class and somebody says something that is wrong, bad, or oppressive, being able to actually talk about it with that person. Call them out or call them in or however it is that it looks like, it's being able to talk about it. Because it's not enough for a person to just not have—to not be oppressive in and of themselves. It really goes beyond that.

### **Reflections on Social Media**

Although some participants discussed social media as part of their engagement in activism, for the most part, social-media use was not included in their definitions. Participants who referenced social media described it as a platform, a means of communication. Marites

shared how she used this platform to connect with her real-life network. For her, posting on social-media sites was a form of engaging in an issue and sharing her views. Marites reflected on a time when she posted about a social justice issue, describing how this was a significant step for her in her own engagement in activism:

After Mike Brown was shot, I had posted something on Facebook about how enraged I was that— I'd drawn some comparison between like white football players still staying on the team after raping someone, but Mike Brown getting shot after allegedly, like, stealing a candy bar.... I noticed, at the time, I'd truly awakened a beast, like, onto my Facebook wall.... I had just made like a passive comment about double standards, and then that was when I realized this is huge, this is big, and I need to educate myself on it.... I was just angry. It was around that time that I think a local high-school or college team or something had gotten away with that, and I was just thinking to myself ... I think I had posted it on Facebook because I was already feeling alone here at [college], like in person. I didn't have much people to talk about it with, so I took the Internet and took to Facebook, which is by extension my social network that I already had here anyway.

While some participants viewed social media as a venue to express ideas and advocate for cause, others shared more critical perspectives on how social media has become an important tool in activism. Christine shared her perspectives on the potential power of social media:

We have social media; we have this kind of platform that's relatively open for most people and something that a lot of especially people of color are predominant in. So how do we take that platform that we have right now that is relatively accessible and use that for activism? I think that's still a conversation that's going on because it's that idea of how do we have power on social media..., especially power over government and state and these huge systemic kind of problems.

For Christine, forms of activism have to evolve and innovate because the same forms have not achieved their goals. Like other participants who referenced social media, while she recognized social media as a communication platform, she viewed it as a tool or strategy in activism work, but not activism itself.

### **Reflections on Accessibility**

Several participants included as part of their conceptualizations of social justice activism an awareness of how some forms of activism in and of themselves can sometimes be inaccessible

for those who seek to engage in activism. In light of the participants' understandings of social justice activism as composed of interrelated social issues being addressed by activists with multiple identities, it is not surprising that participants made note of how activism should be accessible, and they challenged traditional definitions of activism by questioning how some forms of activism are not accessible. For example, Kay noted:

When you're going to protest, how are you making it accessible for people who have disabilities or physically cannot show up? Activism can sometimes make people feel guilty if they believe in something but just can't go either because they're physically not able to or just don't have the mental and emotional capacity to. So how are you making it accessible to them?

Similarly, Jamie remarked, "I think activism shouldn't only be based in physical activity. I think it's very ableist to think that everyone should or can go to marches because not everyone can. And activism can look different, in a lot of different ways." This notion of accessible activism shaped some participants' definitions of what activism looks like as an action or behavior, thus expanding the notions of traditional activism to be inclusive, or at least being cognizant of the limitations that some forms of activism have for those who wish to engage.

### **Reflections on Sustaining Activism**

At times, participants made connections between their contemporary activism to earlier activism that they either witnessed or learned about in their Asian American or ethnic studies courses. In reflecting on their engagement in activism, participants often acknowledged a responsibility to continue a legacy and to think about the future of social justice activism. Kay reflected on activism as an action that is not a one-time activity and, instead, described activism as a commitment to engaging in social-change efforts in the long term:

I think—at least from what I've seen within the community here—some people might use like going to a rally or going to a march as a way to say either on social media or to their friends that like, "I believe in this, so I showed up to this thing." But it's not as straightforward and simple as showing up. Showing up— yes, that is a huge component of it,

but I think my question is for folks who believe that it's that straight-forward is, "How are you holding yourself accountable at the same time long-term too?" Because, I mean, I don't know what's going to happen 10, 20 years from now after this administration and all of this hyper-awareness. I just feel like maybe people are just waiting for this administration to ... just get over it, and everything else will be fine. But no, it's way more deeper than that. This has been functioning since the history of this country basically, and a lot of people just don't see that.

This idea of sustaining engagement in activism was also reflected in participants' notions of maintaining hope for future change, as Samir commented:

So, I'm part of a [science] research lab. The one thing I learned from research is if you're patient, you will reap the benefits. That kind of carried on into my activism a little bit of like, "If I'm patient with it, I will eventually reap the benefits of my patience. That something will eventually happen to help it." If I didn't have that under my belt, I probably couldn't be patient about it. I probably would have given up on a couple things here and there. But thankfully I have that mindset going in already of, "Okay, well not everything happens all at once. You have to wait a little bit for the results." Some patience will definitely be to my benefit.

As participants defined activism from an action-oriented perspective, they noted the importance of considering ways to sustain activism. In addition, in thinking about efforts to sustain social justice activism, their reflections on defining contemporary activism overwhelmingly included notions of sustaining oneself through self-care.

### **Activism as Self-Care and Community Care**

A significant theme that surfaced among all participants' interviews was the concept of self-care as a critical component of activism. Participants acknowledged the significant time and energy involved with participating in social justice activism. More important, they emphasized the emotional toll that such engagement can often take. Jamie reflected on this idea of self-care as a function of navigating the many issues they have faced as an activist:

I donate time and energy as far as like helping support other people, putting together projects, but also there has to be a time, I think, where you have to set aside and think about you, not in like a selfish way necessarily, but it is a self-care thing. Sometimes you're bombarded with so much bad news, and like—well, not bad news, but like news, I guess, things that are happening that are not great—and you just need to take a mental-

health day.... You can't spend a hundred percent of your time devoting, even though you might want to, to like causes, and, think about it, it does cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

For some participants, they recognized the importance of self-care as a strategy to sustain themselves in their activism work in light of their commitments as full-time students (which all participants in this study were). Daniel described a time in his college career where he felt the need to step back and re-assess his engagement with multiple activism and community engagement projects:

I think, especially like the last year, I tried to do everything with regard to like my community, and it really burned me out, and I didn't know— I think I was stretching myself out. I didn't really care about a lot of things at the end, and I was not performing. That's why this semester, or this year, I'm taking a lot of time off—really interrogate the things that I want to do. So, I think that kind of accountability, recognizing those limits and understanding when you have to just take a week off or stop talking to people or take a step back is really important.

Rowena shared Daniel's and others' sentiments of burnout and how, oftentimes, student activists forget to care for themselves while engaging in their activism:

I think the idea, too, of what activism is— Sometimes it's hard to carry that bucket because you can only do it so much, and you can only carry so much. And again, that's where burnout comes into play. Definitely care for mental health is one of the things that I as an activist overlook sometimes because I think, "I want to plant as many seeds as possible." But again, sometimes it's good to just hold your bucket.

While the concept of self-care was prevalent among the participants' stories of student activism, one participant expanded this notion to emphasizing *community care* as an important component of social justice activism. Caroline discussed self-care and community care as part of her definitions of activism:

Self-care and community care, I think that's also a form of activism. Because when you are allowing yourself and other communities who have less power to thrive and to flourish, that is also going against different systematic barriers that have been, you know, that have prevented you from being empowered.

This sense of thriving within a community was reflected in participants' descriptions of their

own community of activists. Thus, the ideas of self-care and community care were interrelated.

Christine shared:

It's kind of affirming to be around people who believe the same values and are ready to fight or be there with you. I think that's really— Especially when you're doing something that's fighting injustices or fighting really heavy topics, it's good to see that there's other people around you who are also on some level experiencing or feeling— or passionate about the same things. I think that's the good of activism— is those sides of things.... I think it's made me feel little senses of relief, just because these topics are so heavy, especially right now, especially with all the events going on, it's very easy to just feel heavy and that's kind of the bad of it, to feel very heavy.... It's good to see when you're with those communities and those activist circles, to really see that there are people who are experiencing and feeling those same emotions, but are still there and still ready to fight and kind of go in it for the long haul. And that you're there for each other, I think that's probably one of the most important parts of activist circles, is that you're really there to take care of each other and know when someone just needs to step out of it for a second, and to be there so that the platform is still there, that the people are still there and that we're still fighting. I think that's one of the best parts about activism as a whole.

For many of the participants, engagement in action-oriented activities that are not traditionally seen as activism (e.g., hosting information tables, conducting social media campaigns) are contemporary forms of activism that include educating oneself, one's community, and others. While participants acknowledged traditional forms of activism within their definitions, they challenged the notion of activism as solely engaging in activities that are outside institutional channels (Kezar, 2010) or are high-risk (Cabrera et al., 2017). Their intent as activists has been and continues to be to create awareness and effect change, whether through traditional forms of activism or through education of themselves, their communities, and others. Participants considered these expanded forms of activism to be “activism” because they viewed these activities as not only advocating for a cause, but also challenging the status quo or, as Caroline declared, “doing something that's against what society tells you.” Surprisingly, participants overwhelmingly emphasized the notion of self-care (and community care) as part of their definition of activism. Although some scholars would view some of these activities as



simple strategies that lead to or support traditional activism, they are, from the participants' perspectives, considered, no less, important forms of contemporary activism.

### **Summary of Findings**

The Asian American students in this study defined contemporary student activism for social justice in many different ways. Their notions of activism stemmed from their experiences growing up Asian American and as students in their college and university environments. While their experiences growing up as Asian Americans influenced their notions of social justice and planted seeds to engage in social change projects and student activism, their experiences with their peers, student-affairs professionals, faculty mentors, and their college environments exposed them to different ways of understanding what activism is. Although past research has not specifically defined what student activism is (Cabrera et al., 2017), the participants in this study overwhelming expanded and challenged notions of traditional student activism.

Participants declared that activism is, as Mikaela shared, “not just going out and protesting.” Participants' expansion of the concept of student activism challenged traditional definitions by incorporating practices beyond those that are, as some participants described, “aggressive,” “classic,” or what “society tells you” is activism. More important, an acknowledgment of their Asian American identity informed the way they thought about social justice issues; they believed they have a stake in broader social change that crosses social identities, while at the same time, recognized issues that affect their own communities.

The findings presented in this chapter highlight how Asian American students' experiences have informed their engagement in social justice activism, how they have defined activism in terms of awareness and reflection of social justice issues at the intersection of their Asian American identity, and how they have defined contemporary activism in terms of actions.

The following chapter provides a discussion of these findings, including implications for future research and higher-education practice.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION

*“You can be in the world, just exist in the world without caring, I guess. Without really giving your time or energy toward anyone else but you, it’s possible. But personally, activism is not that. It’s active. It’s not just being like, ‘Oh, I’m not racist,’ but actively trying to be anti-racist. It’s speaking up, saying what’s on your mind, and saying how you truly feel about things.... It’s understanding the issues involved that you care about and actively trying to solve some problems. Now, how you solve them can look very different. It could be looking like educating someone else, it could look like educating yourself, it could look like just reading up on some stuff, it could be marching, it could be trying to get petitions signed. It could look like going into legislation and fixing things, it could look like going to law school—various, various different things.” —Jamie*

When I interviewed Jamie for the first time, they were about to enter their senior year at a private university in Illinois. Identifying as a non-binary queer person who was “born in China, then adopted by White Americans” in Illinois, they had ventured to a university that they perceived as progressive and that had academic and cocurricular programs that would fuel their interests in the arts and culture. They had become significantly involved with both their university’s LGBTQ student organization and its Asian American student organization, and they considered themselves to be engaged with activism across a variety of social justice issues.

Like all participants in this study, Jamie demonstrated an openness to sharing their experiences as an Asian American growing up in the community where they did and their journey toward becoming engaged in activism as a college student. They also shared how they conceptualized activism. For Jamie, not only did they identify thoughts and actions associated with engaging in activism, but, for them, there was also an aesthetic—as they shared, “I’m a big, intersectional feminist as well as being into queer theory and anarchist punk scenes kind of, more

or less. As you can see my hair is very colorful, thus I'm very punk.”

Jamie also exhibited a critical thinking process that sometimes interrogated my line of questioning and also kept me on my toes. For example, when I asked them a question related to whether they viewed different forms of activism as “effective,” they questioned my use of the word “effective” and countered with, “Are we producing a kind of product or a mindset out of this, and should we be doing that? It makes me think about capitalism and how it's like, ‘Do we have to be “productive” in our work of activism?’” My interviews with Jamie were representative of the social constructivist perspective with which I engaged in this study. As Jamie and I engaged in conversations about what defines activism, there was a sense that there was not simply one definition, and across participants' interviews I would come to understand that notions of activism would vary across their experiences and across their conceptualizations of activism as *reflection* and *action*. Exploring these notions of activism among Asian American college students was at the heart of this study.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study, then discuss the findings presented in Chapters Four and Five as they relate to the research question and sub-questions that guided this study, while situating the findings within extant literature. Next, I discuss implications for higher-education practice and present suggestions for future research while discussing the limitations of this study. I conclude this chapter with personal reflections on my experience with the process of engaging in this project.

### **Review of the Study**

Given the scarcity of research on how Asian American students come to engage in activism, this study explored Asian American student activists' experiences and, specifically, how they come to understand and define activism. The research question for this study was:

How do contemporary Asian American college-student activists define activism? The three sub-questions that guided this study were:

1. What experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists' journeys toward social justice activism?
2. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of consciousness and awareness of social issues?
3. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of actions and behaviors?

Correspondingly, the study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing life history and narrative inquiry methods that centered Asian American college-student activists' stories—their own perspectives and voices—in understanding the ways in which they journeyed toward social justice activism and how they defined that activism.

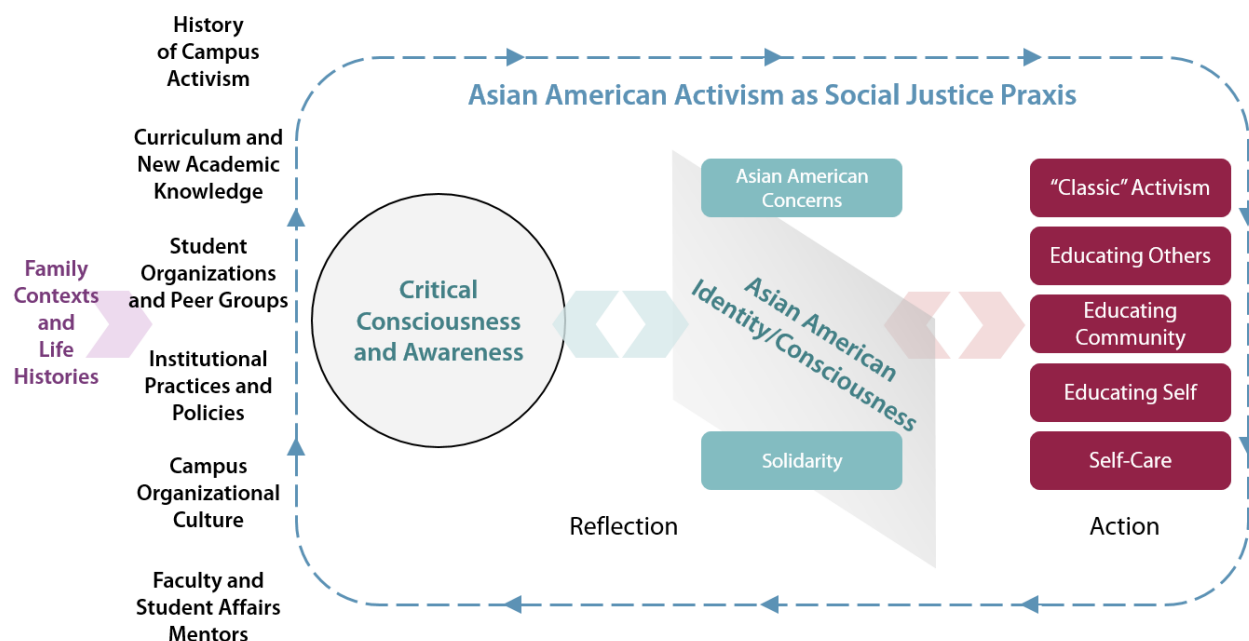
Through professional networks (including 12 student-affairs professionals and faculty members) and postings on two student-affairs and social-justice-related listservs, I solicited nominations for potential participants for the study and received 47 nominations (10 of whom, nominated by one individual, were attending the same institution). In addition, 9 potential participants contacted me directly, expressing an interest in participating in the study. I contacted potential participants via e-mail and invited each individual to complete a demographic survey online. Nineteen potential participants completed the online survey. I then invited each of those who completed the online survey to take part in the individual interviews for the study. Of the 19 who completed the online demographic survey, nine agreed to participate in the interviews for the study, two declined to participate in any interviews (due to their time constraints), and the remaining eight did not respond to initial and follow-up e-mail invitations to participate further with the study.

Utilizing life history and narrative inquiry methods to elicit participants' stories and perspectives on student activism, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each of the nine participants. I conducted initial interviews with all participants over the course of seven weeks (mid-August 2017 through early-October 2017). I conducted follow-up interviews with all participants during a two-week period in mid- to late-October 2017. During the data collection process, I engaged in data analysis, conducted initial open coding for themes, and jotted analytic memos after interviews and as I was identifying common themes across the interview transcripts. Throughout the process, I remained cognizant of the research questions guiding the study, specifically the three sub-questions regarding experiences that contributed to participants' journeys toward social justice activism, the ways in which they conceptualized activism in terms of thoughts, awareness, and reflections on social issues, and the ways in which they defined activism in terms of actions and behaviors. Through thematic analysis of the participants' narratives, common themes emerged across their stories that not only connected with and supported the original conceptual diagram, but also added to the existing concepts and literature on student activism.

### **Discussion**

The original conceptual framework diagram for this study organized concepts gleaned from the literature review and reflected the research questions that guided this study. (See Figure 1 in Chapter Two.) The conceptual diagram comprised campus contextual influences; critical consciousness and awareness; Asian American identity/consciousness; and the object of this study, which was how Asian American college-student activists define activism. Figure 2 represents the modified conceptual diagram based on the findings from the current study.

Figure 2. Modified Conceptual Diagram: Asian American Activism as Social Justice Praxis



The modified conceptual diagram incorporates concepts based on the findings from the study. First, family contexts and life experiences contributed to participants' journeys toward social justice activism. Family histories influenced participants' understandings of social issues related to their ethnic or racial identities or on social issues in general. In addition, participants indicated that community environments and interactions with peers influenced their connections with social justice issues. Second, as an addition to the group of campus contextual influences, participants highlighted the importance of faculty and student-affairs mentors who influenced their engagement with social justice issues. Third, in understanding the influence of an Asian American identity/consciousness, participants' perspectives on how their Asian American identity informed their engagement with activism are displayed with two descriptors, one representing activism related to Asian American concerns and representation and the other representing activism as working in solidarity with and for communities beyond Asian American communities. Fourth, the diagram incorporates the various ways in which participants defined

student activism in terms of actions. Finally, Asian American activism as social justice praxis is represented by the interaction of developing critical consciousness, incorporating an Asian American identity lens, and engaging in various forms of action for social justice.

In light of the modified conceptual diagram, the following section discusses these concepts in four sections, mirroring the findings in Chapters Four and Five. Here I discuss the findings related to (a) participants' journeys toward social justice activism; (b) how they defined activism in terms of reflection; (c) how they defined activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity; and (d) how they defined activism as action.

### **Journeys Toward Social Justice Activism**

To understand what experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists' journeys toward social justice activism, I invited participants to share their experiences as Asian Americans and as college-student activists interested in social justice issues. Participants framed their journeys toward social justice activism in terms of the multitude of experiences they have had as college students, most notably their academic and cocurricular experiences, interactions with their college-age and student-organization peers, and the mentorship they received from student-affairs practitioners and faculty. In addition, due to the life history approach employed in this study, participants also shared early life experiences and family contexts, as well as experiences in grade school and high school, which shaped their awareness of social justice issues. Together, these experiences formed their worldviews and contributed to their pathways to social justice activism.

**Student organizations, peer groups, and multicultural/Asian American cultural centers.** Not surprisingly, experiences with Asian American student organizations and interactions with peer mentors exposed participants to a variety of social justice issues that



informed their engagement in activism. Past research has indicated that college students are influenced by their proximity to others who also engage in student activism (Altbach, 1989; Broadhurst, 2014; Crosby, 2004; Van Dyke, 2012), and findings from this study supported this idea. In addition, Poon (2013) found that such “spaces of critical race pedagogy” (p. 295) contribute to Asian American students’ increased awareness of and commitment to social justice issues.

Indeed, in the current study, findings confirmed that Asian American student organizations and interactions with peer groups contributed to participants’ understandings of social issues that affect their communities. At the same time, participants recognized a tension that often results when diverse members of an Asian American student organization focus on different goals and missions. Participants noted the internal conflict that many Asian American student organizations have, including whether to focus on social/cultural aspects of the organization, or the political/advocacy aspects of the organization (Rhoads et al., 2002). Although Asian American student organizations may represent manifestations of the social, cultural, and political dimensions of panethnicity (Rhoads et al., 2002), for students, simply being involved with an Asian American student organization does not necessarily result in what Osajima (2007) described as the development a critical consciousness of Asian American issues. Thus, there exist opportunities within student organizations to foster the development of critical consciousness of Asian American issues through intentional programming and advising.

In addition to Asian American student organizations, multicultural and Asian American cultural centers serve as additional venues for students to engage in social issues reflected in their communities. While there have been studies on identity-based student organizations and their impact on students’ sense of belonging (Inkelas, 2004), little research has explored how

involvement and participation in multicultural or Asian American cultural centers influence students' understanding of social justice issues and their engagement in student activism. All nine participants in this study indicated that their involvement in their campuses' multicultural or Asian American cultural center served an important role in their development as activists who engaged across social justice issues. Although studies on student activism have included histories of how the establishment of identity-based cultural centers have been the result of long-fought activist efforts (Patton, 2005), the current study adds to the existing literature by highlighting how not only do such centers provide support and resources for the students they serve, but they also provide a venue and programs through which Asian American students learn about and engage in social justice issues that affect their Asian American communities and beyond.

**Curricula and academic knowledge.** For participants in this study who had the opportunity to participate in Asian American studies and ethnic studies programs, exposure to Asian American and ethnic studies curricula influenced their engagement in Asian American issues and activism. Four of the nine participants completed course work or had declared minor fields of study in Asian American studies, ethnic studies, or cultural studies. Research on Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and academic programs have acknowledged the activist efforts that were employed to establish such programs (Arthur, 2009, 2011) and the impact that they have on students in developing an awareness of social issues. In line with past research findings (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Ryoo & Ho, 2013; Yamane, 2001), participants noted that the presence of these academic programs on their campuses and their experiences in coursework in Asian American or ethnic studies courses gave them knowledge of Asian American and other histories that validated their own experiences. Indeed, ethnic studies programs have been found

to contribute to students' involvement in social change projects (Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006), students' development of a commitment to diversity and multiculturalism (Halagao, 2010), and the development of an Asian American critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007).

At the same time, the absence of such programs had an impact as well. One participant, Caroline, whose university did not have an Asian American studies program argued that she lacked opportunities to learn about her personal histories and see herself reflected in the curriculum. For students who desire to explore Asian American histories, issues, and contributions to society, they are left having to resort to learning from peers at other colleges and universities, or in Caroline's case, on their own.

**Campus cultures and perceptions of university administrators.** In many ways, student activists' perceptions of power structures within complex higher-education systems informed their approaches to engaging in efforts to effect change on their campuses, and this aligns with past research on student activists' perceptions of campus cultures and administrators. Ropers-Huilman et al.'s (2003) study indicated that student activists perceived campus cultures as rational, bureaucratic, collegial, and/or political, and these perceptions informed the ways in which students engaged in activism. The perceptions that participants in this study had of their campus environments, cultures, and of university administrators, including student-affairs practitioners, varied across the participants' different campuses. While some participants viewed their campuses as having administrators who were supportive of their social justice activism, others criticized their campuses' administrative leadership's responses to student concerns and described them as "antagonistic."

More important, perceptions of whether a campus was supportive or antagonistic varied across participants' experiences with front-line student-affairs practitioners and faculty members

as opposed to experiences with and perceptions of upper-administrative leadership or governing boards. For example, Marites's experiences at her college reflected a perception of supportive student-affairs administrators and faculty members that resulted in greater involvement by students engaged in efforts to effect change or to address social issues on her campus. Student activists' experiences with different levels of a college or university organization and perceptions of administrators within the organization influence their engagement with activism on their campuses. As well, these interactions have the potential to influence student activists' awareness of social justice issues through mentorship they may receive from administrators and faculty.

**Mentorship from student-affairs practitioners and faculty.** Interactions with mentors, both student-affairs practitioners and faculty members, were a significant influence on how participants in this study came to engage in social justice activism. Past research on student activism has made reference to other activists, mainly graduate-student teaching assistants (Banning & McKinley, 1988), as having an influence on engaging in activism. Additionally, among Asian American undergraduate students, Kim, Chang, and Park (2009) found that Asian American students who formed positive relationships with faculty improved their "college GPA; intellectual, social, and civic abilities; academic satisfaction with college; and engagement in political activities" (p. 213). Findings from the current study add to the extant research and highlight the significant role that student-affairs practitioners and faculty members play in fostering students' development in their engagement with activism for social justice. A common theme among the participants' interviews was the influence that faculty members and student-affairs practitioners had on their development as critical thinkers and students engaged in addressing social issues. Participants often acknowledged faculty members and student-affairs practitioners—whether or not they were Asian American—as mentors who validated their

experiences as Asian American students and supported them in their engagement with activism on issues affecting Asian American communities and on broader social justice issues.

Participants also viewed faculty and student-affairs practitioners as individuals who have had experiences with engaging in similar social justice issues or Asian American concerns in which they as current students were engaging today, and they described faculty and staff members' continued commitment to these concerns as inspiration to continue legacies of addressing social issues. Through interactions with faculty and staff mentors, participants learned about important social issues beyond the classroom or their cocurricular experiences, and this occurred when faculty members and student-affairs practitioners presented opportunities, whether formally through academic or cocurricular programs or informally through mentoring relationships and conversations, to learn about social justice issues. Clearly, faculty mentors and student-affairs mentors served as mentors, role models, and sources of support in participants' development as activists.

**Family contexts, histories, and parental influences.** Family contexts, family histories, and parental influences matter in Asian American students' engagement in activism. In general, research on student activism has not addressed the role of family and parental influences on students' engagement in activism, much less that of Asian American students' engagement in social justice activism. While two participants in the study identified as transracial adoptees and two identified as fourth-generation Americans, the remaining five participants identified as second-generation or 1.5-generation Americans who were raised by immigrant parents. In many participants' interviews, I observed a sense of responsibility to their parents and families within their narratives on engaging in activism. In some cases, engaging in activism, particularly high-risk activities, were discouraged by their parents, and some participants acknowledged a tension

between engaging in activism and respecting parents' concerns for their safety. One participant, Rowena, referred to her feelings as "*utang na loob*"—a deeply internal sense of debt and gratitude and a feeling of responsibility to give back to, in her case, her parents. For Rowena, this was reflected in not only her desire to respect her parents' concerns for her safety, but also her motivation to engage in activism that honored her immigrant parents' sacrifices and her family's history of activism.

Other participants, meanwhile, discussed connecting activism to their families' histories or stories of being Asian American. Thus, participating in activism was not simply something that participants engaged in while in college, but it was also something on which their family contexts and histories had influence. This is not to say that the transracial adoptees in this study did not express similar recollections of family influences; rather, family contexts varied, and they connected their experiences and journeys to becoming engaged with social justice activism with different experiences growing up, such as living in diverse communities, or viewing their family's interracial make-up as a counternarrative. Experiences of varied family contexts, coupled with college and university experiences, provided participants with opportunities to learn about social issues. As a result, they came to view their reflections on social justice as a critical component of their activism.

### **Defining Activism Through Reflection**

To understand how participants defined activism in terms of reflection and awareness of social justice issues, I asked participants how they conceptualized activism as a thought process. Overwhelmingly, participants acknowledged that the first step and a critical component of engaging in activism was having an awareness of not only systems of oppression and power structures, but also their social location within those systems. Participants described how this

reflection and awareness of social justice was not simply a precursor to engaging in activism, but it was also a component of that activism.

**Developing critical consciousness before and through activism.** Past research has found that the development of a critical consciousness or political consciousness (Hernandez, 2012) and understanding of one's marginalized identities (Linder & Rodriguez, 2007) are often intertwined with social and political activism. While Hernandez (2012) found that the development of a political consciousness grew out of participation in activism, Linder and Rodriguez (2012) argued that students travelled various pathways to activism through the lens of salient identities, such as race or gender. Findings from the current study reflect both of these past studies' findings. Participants acknowledged having an awareness of social justice issues and issues of systemic oppression as a critical component of defining their activism and largely designated this component of activism as a first step or the foundation for engagement with social justice activism. In addition, they named their engagement in self-education as a form of activism that was critical to their development as activists.

Unlike past research, this study expands on the origins of developing awareness of systemic oppression and social justice issues. Whereas Hernandez (2012) described college experiences as contributing to student activists' awareness of political issues, the findings from this study indicate that participants often became aware of social issues and their marginalized identities prior to entering college. In other words, for most participants, they recognized and shared experiences of social inequities, microaggressions, or racial bias early in their lives growing up Asian American, and these experiences, along with their college and university experiences, shaped their understanding of social issues and fueled their interests in social justice activism. Given the nature of the study, however, it is possible that participants were only able

to name their early-life experiences because of the language they developed and reflection they experienced through their college experiences, thus having a lens through which they recollected memories of early-life experiences.

**Acknowledging social location as part of activism.** Participants not only identified their recognition of systemic oppression as foundational to their social justice activism, but they also noted how their social identities played a role in their activism within and across communities. Participants demonstrated a self-awareness of their own privileges and advantages within and across communities, which reflected an awareness of their social location (Hulko, 2009). For example, Daniel recognized the relative privilege he had, describing himself as “socially mobile with an economically viable trade degree” while working with and alongside communities engaged in anti-gentrification efforts in his local Chinatown. He was aware of his position in relation to those with whom he worked and often reflected on how he entered activist spaces as someone with his privileges.

This notion of entering activist spaces while conscious of one’s own identities was prevalent among participants’ narratives and their notions of what activism is in terms of awareness and reflection, especially within activism that was not necessarily related to Asian American issues. Being aware of one’s privileges, being conscious of “taking space,” or recognizing opportunities to “do the work so that others do not have to” were all notions that participants shared while referencing their relative privilege in defining their activism. Coupled with a critical consciousness of systems of oppression, participants’ awareness of their social location evidenced an empathy toward not only their own but also beyond their Asian American community that characterized much of their motivation to engage in social justice activism.



## **Defining Activism at the Intersection of Asian American Identity**

Although this study was not specifically about participants' Asian American identity development, I explored participants' perspectives on how their Asian American identity contributed to how they defined activism. The original conceptual diagram introduced a lens of Asian American identity to student activists' processes of engaging in activism. Scholars have posited that Asian American students' development of an Asian American critical consciousness evidences an understanding of how historical and social forces have shaped their lives (Osajima, 2007) and encourages an interest in Asian American issues (Ryoo & Ho, 2013). Thus, a salient Asian American identity informs not only the goals of activism in which a student engages, but also the ways in which they may engage in social change, whether through transformational or incremental approaches (Manzano, Poon, & Na, 2017).

During my interviews, I asked participants to describe how their Asian American identity played a role in how they engaged in activism. Findings demonstrated how participants described their activism at the intersection of their Asian American identity. For some, the targets of their activism reflected Asian American-specific issues such as representation of Asian Americans in the media. For others, their activism reflected the desire to address broader social justice issues by building solidarity across communities in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and disabilities.

**Working toward Asian American representation in activism.** In some cases, participants conceptualized activism as advocating for issues connected to their Asian American identity. While they recognized the need to address Asian American-specific concerns, they also engaged in efforts to challenge perceptions of Asian Americans as activists and to influence other Asian Americans in their involvement with activism. Thus, while they were struggling to

have their Asian American voices heard and raise awareness on issues facing Asian Americans, they struggled with getting their Asian American peers to also engage with those issues. This was apparent in Caroline's and Christine's stories in which they raised concerns about the absence of Asian American peers in activists spaces, as well as in Mikaela's and others' reflections on the varied levels of Asian American consciousness among members of their Asian American student organizations. Countering a perceived lack of engagement among Asian American students across a variety of political or social justice issues (Cheng, 2015; Gonzales, 2016; Yeo, 2016), participants viewed their personal involvement in social justice activism as a way to challenge societal norms or expectations. In many ways, the participants' stories of activism brought to light not only representation of Asian Americans in activist spaces, but also the importance of Asian American issues that participants addressed.

Although some participants recognized privileges in their ability to engage in activism within and across communities, the concept of social location, referenced earlier, was further demonstrated by participants' critiques of how some Asian Americans do not engage in social justice activism or lack an awareness of systems of oppression or social issues that affect their communities. For these participants, this awareness of Asian Americans' place in social justice activism or other endeavors to effect social change was an important aspect of defining their activism, particularly with reference to their Asian American identity. Participants recognized and shared that some Asian Americans position themselves as separate from other communities of color or do not identify with social justice activist causes. In addition, they often shared frustration with perceived tensions among Asian Americans who are and those who are not engaged in social justice activism. This study brings to light participants' stories of the challenges related to building collective efforts to effect social change and advance social justice

across Asian American communities. The notion that some Asian Americans do not connect with social justice issues reflects a significant challenge in collective activist efforts and highlights a need to cultivate a culture of engaging in social change that reflects the diversity of Asian Americans' awareness of their social locations and connections with broader social justice issues.

**Engaging with and across communities in solidarity.** While participants in this study recognized a need to engage in activism for Asian American-related concerns, their narratives reflected a desire to work across various social issues, and they identified this as another important aspect of defining their activism for social justice. As they described how their Asian American identity informed their engagement in social justice activism, participants' stories reflected a recognition of the importance of working in solidarity across communities. As described in Chapter Five, participants in this study defined their activism as getting involved with and working in solidarity across communities and identities for issues not necessarily Asian American-related, but interrelated with others' experiences. In other words, participants recognized that the many issues that activists seek to address are interrelated and that one cannot address one issue without addressing many others. Participants' definitions of activism as working in solidarity across communities demonstrated their understanding of having power in numbers, the need to address larger systems of oppression, and the importance of recognizing one's positionality and privileges within activist spaces.

Although there has been research on the concept of coalition-building as a strategy employed in student activism (Kezar, 2010; Van Dyke, 2003), this study highlights how the Asian American student activists in this study valued solidarity, not only because they recognized building power in numbers, but also because they valued broader social justice

issues. Through their early-life experiences and interactions with peer groups, they developed empathy toward communities whose experiences were different from theirs. Through their college and university experiences, both cocurricular and academic, they became aware of larger systems of oppression and power structures and understood the value of working in solidarity with other identity groups. Participants' awareness of systems of oppression and power structures further evidenced a critical consciousness that manifested as efforts to work across social justice issues and not only those related to Asian American concerns. Much like their involvement in activism for Asian American issues challenge existing narratives of a perceived lack of engagement among Asian Americans, participants' engagement in broader social justice issues challenge existing societal norms or expectations and demonstrate Asian American student activists' commitment to effecting social change in solidarity with and across communities.

### **Defining Activism Through Action**

The object of the study was how Asian American college-student activists define student activism. As presented in Chapter Two, much of the research on student activism has defined activism from researchers' perspectives, rather than from student activists' own understandings of what activism is. For example, scholars have studied events and actions that they defined as activism and considered the students engaged in those activities to be activists, whether or not the individuals self-identified as activists (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014; Cabrera et al., 2017), or scholars have narrowly defined activism (e.g., participating in a protest demonstration; Green et al., 1984). While traditional notions of activism and how it has been defined may have been useful for past studies, the current study expands on the notion of what activism is by illuminating self-identified Asian American student activists' own perspectives and definitions of

contemporary activism.

During my interviews with participants, I observed multiple constructions of defining the actions of activism. On one hand, participants acknowledged traditional notions of activism that include protest demonstrations, rallies, and marches; for the participants who engaged in what one participant called “classic” activism that was aimed toward effecting social change, taking part in these forms of activism were action-oriented manifestations of the consciousness and awareness they developed about social justice issues. On the other hand, they were adamant about challenging such limited notions of what activism is and how it has been defined. Through their narratives on engaging in activism, they challenged societal norms for what activism is by providing alternatives to what activism can be. As Jamie summarized:

[Activism] could be looking like educating someone else, it could look like educating yourself, it could look like just reading up on some stuff, it could be marching, it could be trying to get petitions signed. It could look like going into legislation and fixing things, it could look like going to law school—various, various different things.

**Acts of transforming oneself and others through education.** For many participants, engagement in action-oriented activities that are not traditionally seen as activism (e.g., hosting information tables, conducting social-media campaigns) and are coordinated within university- or college-supported channels were viewed by the participants as forms of activism, especially because they involved educating oneself, one’s community, and others. While participants acknowledged traditional forms of activism within their definitions, they challenged definitions of activism that were limited to engaging in activities that are outside institutional channels (Kezar, 2010) or are high-risk (Cabrera et al., 2017). Their intent as activists has been and continues to be to create awareness and effect social change, whether through traditional forms of activism or through acts of educating themselves, their communities, and others. This study contributes to the extant research on activism that limits definitions of what activism is by

presenting broader notions of activism, particularly related to educational activism that is rooted in valuing social justice and reflecting on dismantling systems of oppression. In many ways, participants' narratives demonstrated how "critical reflection is action" (Freire 1970/2014, p. 128). Participants' stories also presented how activism is considered "activism" because they viewed their activities as not only advocating for a cause, but also critically reflecting on and analyzing systems of oppression and challenging the status quo or, as Caroline declared, "doing something that's against what society tells you."

The forms of education of oneself and others that the participants described in their narratives varied from personal conversations with peers to facilitating educational workshops. One of the ways that participants in this study engaged in activism as education of oneself and community was through different forms of peer education. Peer education has its strengths and limitations. While there is significant influence among peers in engaging in different forms of activism and learning about various social justice issues, peer influences can also result in negative cultures and counterproductive efforts to effect social change. Mikaela, who attends a Midwestern liberal arts college that she described as having a culture and history of student activism, shared how such a culture often manifested as a competitive environment where activists attempted to demonstrate being "more radical" than the next. This type of environment can lead to marginalization with activist spaces. Linder and Rodriguez (2012) found that activists experienced marginalization, based on race or sexual orientation, within activist communities that were predominantly white or within LGBTQ activist spaces, and these activists tended to leave those activist communities. Although not based on race or gender, Mikaela's description of a competitive environment for activists would be challenging for those who wish to engage in collective efforts to effect social change, but who may not come with a wide range

of knowledge on issues of social justice, thus feeling their own sense of marginalization within activist spaces.

While education of oneself and one's community were important aspects of engaging in activism, overwhelmingly, participants defined activism as efforts to raise awareness of social justice issues by educating others. Common among the participants' descriptions of the various ways of educating others as a form of activism, acts of engaging with others and raising awareness involved active efforts, as opposed to ones considered "passive" by participants. In reflecting on their past activism, participants discussed experiences having personal conversations with others and providing educational programming as forms of activism. Critical to participants' definitions of activism was an acknowledgment of the reflection and awareness of systems of oppression or visions of social justice that accompanied their educational efforts that they deemed to be activism. While past research has noted the development of a critical consciousness as a precursor to engaging in activism (Hernandez, 2012; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), participants in this study demonstrated that such reflection and awareness must be tied to their acts of education for self, community, and others in order to be defined as activism.

**Acts of self-care as a form of activism.** Surprisingly, participants emphasized the notion of self-care as part of their definition of activism. Some scholars would view self-care activities as simple strategies that lead to or support traditional activism, but they are, from the participants' perspectives, considered no less important forms of activism. Emerging research has explored ways in which individuals can incorporate self-care strategies to counter social justice fatigue (Furr, 2018), yet research on college-student activism specifically has not explored this concept. Overwhelmingly, participants in the current study made reference to self-care as a critical component of defining activism, as a way to avoid burn-out and sustain their

engagement in activism due to constant feelings of having to challenge systems of oppression, but also to balance their responsibilities as students. Unlike past studies that suggested students are more likely to engage in activism because of their access to free time and limited responsibilities beyond school (Levine & Cureton, 1998), all participants in this study were full-time, traditional-age college students who expressed having numerous commitments and engagements beyond academics. Thus, including self-care as a component of their activism was not simply a means to counter the emotional labor of engaging in social justice activism, but it addressed the pragmatic concerns of committing to their engagement in activism while being full-time students.

Asian American college students in this study defined activism as education of themselves, their communities, and others to advance their own critical reflection and analysis of systems they wanted to change while reflecting on the values of social justice. In addition, they identified self-care as a critical component of defining their activism. While they acknowledged classic forms of activism, they overwhelmingly argued for broadening narrow definitions of activism which, in doing so, challenges the status quo. They identified their activities, education of self, community, and others, as activism, not necessarily because of the forms of action or behavior, but because of the reflection and awareness that served as a foundation for their actions.

### **Implications for Higher-Education Practice**

Findings from this qualitative study, although not generalizable to all Asian American college-student activists, offer opportunities for naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995) and may be applicable to multiple settings and to student-affairs practitioners' and faculty members' work with Asian American student activists. This study adds to the literature on Asian American



student experiences and disrupts the narrative that Asian Americans are not engaged in social justice activism (Cheng, 2015). Indeed they are. In light of higher education's role in fostering civic learning and democratic engagement (Biddix, 2014; Biddix, Sommers, & Polman, 2009; Kezar & Maxey, 2014), as well as the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA–College Student Educators International) strategic imperative for racial justice and decolonization,<sup>2</sup> it is critical to support the experiences of Asian American student activists on college campuses and foster their engagement in projects that seek to effect positive social change. As such, Asian American student activists' journeys toward activism and the ways in which they conceptualize what activism is has implications for higher-education and student-affairs practice.

First, findings from this study further evidence the impact that participation in Asian American student organizations, cultural centers, and Asian American studies programs has on students' development of a critical consciousness. If higher education claims a role in developing students to fully participate in our democracy, then, for Asian American students and for students whose identities are not reflected in the higher-education landscape or in curricula, higher-education administrators must support and expand these spaces for critical race pedagogy (Poon, 2013) and foster critical consciousness development and reflection on social justice issues. Although such development may be fostered within cultural centers and through Asian American and ethnic studies programs, the same cannot always be said about Asian American student organizations, as revealed in this study's findings. Participants noted the challenges of

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<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA–College Student Educators International) initiated its Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, aimed at “reducing the oppression of communities of color at the intersections of their identities” and to “provide leading research and scholarship; tools for personal, professional, and career development; and innovative praxis opportunities for [its] members that will actively inform and reshape higher education” (ACPA, n.d., para. 5).

peer education within student organizations that had varied purposes ranging from social to political. While some student organizations evidenced a focus on addressing political concerns and advocating for social justice issues across communities, others focused solely on “own-group activism” (Tran & Curtin, 2017, p. 503) or on social and cultural issues alone.

In addition, the findings indicate that participants’ engagement in student activism and their definitions of activism are rooted in an awareness and critical analysis of systems of oppression and acknowledgment of power structures. These findings have implications for faculty and student-affairs advisors working with Asian American student organizations; advisors can offer thoughtful and intentional advising that advances students’ awareness of and engagement in issues that affect not only Asian American communities but also other communities in support of broader social justice issues.

Relevant to participants’ engagement in student organizations, it is important to note that part of the interview protocol included asking participants to discuss their *involvement* on campus or beyond; without prompting or follow-up questions, many participants discussed leadership roles they held within various student organizations, whether or not they were related to their activism. For some, engagement in structured programs as student leaders was part of their own activism, and this indicated to me that activism was more than simply taking action for a cause—it involved having a critical consciousness that was rooted in social justice. While activism can be viewed as a leadership process, not all leadership processes are activist in nature or intended to effect transformative change (Manzano et al., 2017). As such, this study is limited in addressing participants’ potential conceptualizations of how engagement in student activism may be different from engaging in leadership activities.

Second, findings from this study highlight the significant mentoring role that student-

affairs practitioners and faculty play in supporting Asian American college-students' engagement in activism. All participants acknowledged student-affairs practitioners and faculty who served as mentors and mentioned the influence they had on their developing an awareness of social justice issues and in engaging in activism. Participants viewed student-affairs practitioners and faculty as role models, sources of inspiration, and as individuals who had experience engaging in activism themselves. In most cases, these mentors were Asian American administrators or faculty. However, although participants valued the role of student-affairs practitioners and faculty in supporting their development as activists, they argued that simply having student-affairs professionals and faculty that reflected their identities in the university was not sufficient to support their activism. Critical to these mentoring experiences were the expectations that student activists had of student-affairs professionals and faculty, whether or not they were Asian American: They expected student-affairs practitioners and faculty to have developed their own critical consciousness on social justice issues.

This finding has implications for institutions that seek to support Asian American students on their campuses by not only increasing the representation of Asian American faculty and staff, but also fostering social justice education among existing faculty and staff mentors. Furthermore, it is important to note that past research has shown that Asian American students, compared to other racial groups, are the least likely to form positive relationships with faculty, relationships that have been shown to improve students' academic abilities, satisfaction, and engagement in political activities (Kim et al., 2009). Thus, it is critical not only to encourage the role of mentoring by student-affairs practitioners and faculty who have developed their own critical consciousness, but also to provide opportunities that promote the development of these mentoring relationships between Asian American students and faculty and staff.

Third, findings suggest that Asian American college students come to engage with student activism for social justice not only with an awareness of systems of oppression and power structures, but also with a strong connection to their family contexts and histories which may affect the ways in which they engage in various forms of activism. The current study explored Asian American student activists' life histories and revealed the important role that family played in their journeys toward social justice activism and how their early-life experiences contributed to their understandings of social justice issues. Thus, when working with and advising students engaged in social justice activism, being cognizant of how students negotiate their relationships with family and their involvement in college in general and in their activism in particular is critical.

Finally, as discovered through interviews with the participants in this study, while their engagement in social justice activism included a foundation of critical consciousness and demonstrated reflection on social justice issues, the actions in which they engaged and defined as activism challenged traditional notions of student activism that have included protest demonstrations, marches, and rallies. Beyond these familiar forms of activism, participants argued that activism includes the work of educating oneself, one's community, and others on issues of social justice, education (and action) that is rooted in having reflected on systems of oppression and issues of social justice. In light of this, it is important for student-affairs administrators to recognize and support the different forms of activism as defined by the participants and that such varied forms of activism may reflect higher-education values such as democratic engagement.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Scholars have studied various aspects of student activism on college and university

campuses. While past research has provided perspectives on how campus environments affect student activism and how participation in student activism leads to developmental outcomes, less attention has been directed toward how student activists engage in various forms of activism and conceptualize what activism is or how their life experiences and social identities affect their journeys toward engaging in social justice activism. Regarding Asian American activists, little research exists outside the larger studies and analyses of the Asian American Movement in the United States and even less so on Asian American college-student activists in particular (Chung, 2009; Nguyen & Gasman, 2015; Rhoads et al., 2002). However, there is emerging research on Asian American activism (Ryoo & Ho, 2013; Tran & Curtin, 2017). These and the current study advance a more complex picture of Asian American student experiences in general and contribute to the field of contemporary student activism among Asian American college students in particular. While the findings offer several implications for higher-education practice, the study also reveals opportunities for further research.

### **Methodological Implications and Limitations**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, findings from this qualitative study are not intended to be generalizable. However, the common themes that surfaced throughout the interviews with the nine participants presented concepts and experiences that may be applicable to different settings and to potentially students with different social identities. It is important to recognize the challenges of this study's selection process and what they mean for future studies in terms of geography, ethnic identity, and gender identity. The current study utilized a nomination method by which selected student-affairs practitioners and faculty were asked to identify Asian American college-student activists whom they would recommend for this study. Nominators were student-affairs practitioners and faculty members located at colleges and universities in California,

Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Washington, and the District of Columbia. Thus, while there was representation from most regions of the U.S., none of the nominators worked at colleges or universities located in the southern U.S., Hawai'i, or Alaska, and this had an impact on the geographic representation of the potential participants who were nominated for the study. As a result, the participants for the study were located only in the regions represented by the nominators' place of work. Emerging research has explored the impact of geography on Asian American identity development (Chan, 2017), and such regional variations in Asian American experiences may have an influence on student activists' own experiences and journeys toward engaging in social justice activism.

The selection process was also limited in representing Asian American student activists across ethnic identities and gender identities. Demographic data were collected as part of an online survey. Of 49 potential participants invited to the study, only 19 participants completed the initial survey. The 19 potential participants who completed the online survey self-identified as Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, P/Filipino/a/x, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, multi-ethnic, and bi-racial. More surprising was the representation of gender identities. Of the 19 potential participants who completed the online survey, more than two-thirds, or 13, identified as women, two identified as men, and four identified as non-binary. The nine participants who continued with full participation with the interviews included six women, two men, and one who identified as non-binary. It is important to recognize that student-affairs practitioners and faculty were asked to identify potential participants for a study on student activism; thus, the nominators' own conceptualizations of what activism would have influenced which students they nominated for the study. Although the administrators' and faculty members' own conceptualizations of what activism is may have influenced the students they nominated, the actual invitation to the study

that I sent to potential participants provided the criteria for participants, and the invited students either responded to the invitation or elected not to participate based on whether they met the criterion of being a student who has engaged in any form of activism. Thus, the study was limited in terms of ethnic identity and gender identity as a result of the use of a nomination process. A broader selection of participants across ethnic identities and gender identities may have revealed additional stories on how students engage in activism at the intersection of their social identities.

Beyond issues of selection and representation among the participants, the current study offers implications for utilizing various qualitative methodologies to illuminate the experiences of contemporary Asian American student activists. This study utilized aspects of life history methods and narrative inquiry to elicit stories of student activism among its nine Asian American participants. I conducted a thematic analysis to analyze the transcripts that resulted from the two interviews conducted with each of the participants. The initial interviews engaged participants in discussing their background experiences growing up as Asian Americans, while the follow-up interviews delved into discussions about how they conceptualized student activism. Due to time constraints for the current study and because participants were located across the country, only two interviews, mostly online, were conducted with each participant. More in-depth and longer-term engagement with participants, especially following participants as they take part in various forms of activism, may have resulted in opportunities to engage in deeper narrative analyses that examined their stories of activism within the three-dimensional inquiry space composed of time continuity, place, and a personal–social dimension of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although a longer-term, in-depth engagement with participants may have provided more data and rich stories to analyze, the thematic analysis employed in this initial study not only found

common themes that surfaced across participants' interviews and the stories they shared, but also revealed potential areas for further research.

### **Future Research**

The current study focused on Asian American student activists' journeys to social justice activism and how they defined activism in terms of awareness of social justice issues and action. Findings from this study illustrated the influence of college and university experiences, student-affairs and faculty mentors, and the family histories and contexts on participants' awareness and engagement in social justice issues. The study also highlighted how an Asian American identity informed an individual's focus of activism, whether related to Asian American concerns or to broader social justice issues. And, findings demonstrated how Asian American students defined activism beyond traditional forms of action to include actions taken to educate oneself, one's community, and others while being rooted in an awareness of systems of oppression and social justice concerns. Still, there are several areas of inquiry that would benefit from further research.

**Asian American and ethnic studies curricula.** As noted in the findings, some participants had the opportunity to participate in Asian American studies and ethnic studies programs, and this exposure to Asian American histories and experiences influenced their engagement in Asian American issues and activism. Past research on Asian American studies, ethnic studies, and new knowledge areas have acknowledged the activist efforts that were employed to establish such programs (Arthur, 2009, 2011). While studies have shown ethnic studies programs to contribute to students' development of a commitment to multiculturalism (Halagao, 2010) and the development of an Asian American critical consciousness (Osajima, 2007), little research has explored how such programs help students develop as civically engaged citizens, which can be a developmental outcome of engaging in student activism (Biddix, 2014;



Biddix et al., 2009). It was noted that, in at least one participant's case, the absence of an Asian American studies program had an impact on her college experience. Thus, further understanding the experiences of students whose colleges and universities do not have Asian American or other ethnic studies programs may lead to additional insights on how to advocate for new academic programs and best support students who seek a curriculum that reflects their lived experiences.

**Race, ethnicity, gender, and activism.** Do different social identities have an impact on the way students conceptualize what activism is? Does an Asian American identity or other racial identity influence one's approach to activism or the social justice causes on which they focus? How do gender identities affect engagement in activism? And, in racial justice activism, how do Asian American students journey toward expanding beyond own-group activism (Tran & Curtin, 2017) toward broader efforts to effect positive social change? There has been limited research on social identities' influences on students' engagement with activism. The current study provides insights into a diverse set of Asian American college students' experiences with social justice issues and how they define activism, yet also raises several questions and areas for further research. First, participants in this study represented only a few ethnic identities from across the Asian American racial category, and immigrant-generation status ranged from 1.5-generation to fourth-generation. In light of the findings related to early-life experiences that influenced participants' journeys toward social justice activism, further research could explore how ethnic identities, immigration histories, and racial identity may or may not influence students' engagement in social justice issues.

In addition, two of the nine participants identified as transracial adoptees who were raised by white parents. Although they identified as Asian Americans and engaged with Asian American-specific activism, their life histories and immigration stories differed from those of the

1.5- and second-generation Asian American participants. While they presented life experiences and family contexts that influenced their journeys toward social justice activism, further research could examine the unique experiences of transracial adoptees and their engagement with Asian American-related concerns and broader social justice activism.

Finally, as noted in Chapter Four, the participants in this study were mostly composed of students who identified as women. While past research has found that men-identified individuals were more likely to engage in student activism (Levine & Cureton, 1998), this study's selection process resulted in having more women (as opposed to others on the gender identity spectrum) being nominated by student-affairs practitioners and faculty to participate in the study. Additional research could examine the role that gender identities, perhaps in relation to other salient social identities, play in students' engagement in social justice activism.

**Activist identity development.** Does activism make an activist? Or, does an activist make activism? For participants in this study, their conceptualizations of what constitutes student activism for social justice provided new perspectives on what activism can look like. At the same time, their self-identification as activists, coupled with the process of defining their own activities as activism, raised the question of whether identifying as an activist and engaging in activism are one and the same. Few studies have explored the concept of activism as an identity development process (Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Holeman, 2007). For the current study, potential participants who answered the invitation to join the study responded to the criterion of having "engaged in any form of activism." All but one of the nine participants identified as activists; one participant was reticent about identifying as an activist, but felt that his engagement in various activities was considered activism. All participants identified their activities as activism, even though they recognized that others might not consider some forms of what they

considered activism to be activism. A few participants recognized this tension, as when Mikaela described her activism as programming and raising awareness through education and planning student conferences, but stated:

At [my college], we say like, you know, small acts can count as activism, because it's not just going out and protesting. But then, I don't know if— I don't want to count it that way just because I feel like— I feel like I'm giving myself a pass a little bit. Like it should be a little bit more.

The “little bit more” that Mikaela referenced was likely what she would have identified as traditional notions of activism, those characterized by greater levels of personal, physical involvement that are outside institutional channels (Kezar, 2010) or involve some degree of risk (Cabrera et al., 2017). Still, she self-identified as an activist, highlighting the need to understand more how activist identity development not only intersects with engagement in any form of activism, but also intersects with an individual's other salient identities (e.g., race and ethnicity) and life-history experiences.

**Student-affairs and faculty mentors in social justice activism.** Findings indicated that student-affairs practitioners and faculty members played a significant role as mentors. However, very little research has explored the role of mentoring in influencing college students' engagement in social justice activism. Past studies have explored student activists' perceptions of campus administrators (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005) and campus culture as a context for student activism (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014), and even more recent research has begun to examine the idea of activism as a partnership between students and faculty (Kezar, 2010). However, narratives from the current study's participants overwhelmingly included references to mentorship that they received from student-affairs practitioners and faculty members. Further research could explore the role of mentorship in promoting students' engagement in social justice activism while at the same time being cognizant of student-affairs professionals' social

justice fatigue (Furr, 2018) and the “invisible labor” that faculty (and staff) of color experience when they are expected to engage in mentoring students (June, 2015, para. 5).

### **Final Reflections: An Epilogue**

The origins of this study were connected to my experiences advising Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American (APIDA) student organizations at the various colleges and universities where I have worked. In my personal statement that accompanied my application for admission to Loyola’s doctoral program in higher education, I recalled and described a student organization meeting where I observed Asian American students discuss plans to coordinate programs for an upcoming Asian American heritage month:

The interaction among these student-organization members highlighted the diversity of experiences, self-perceptions, and identities. While some students were satisfied with just planning the next social event, others were determined to bring to light issues of social justice that affect the [APIDA] community.

One of the purposes of this study was to explore the experiences of Asian American college-student activists whom I considered to be part of the latter group, those who worked toward addressing issues of social justice affecting the APIDA community. In the field of research on Asian American college-student experiences, these stories are often left untold, particularly because of misperceptions that Asian Americans are not interested in engaging in social justice activism, whether related to Asian American concerns or broader notions of justice and cross-racial solidarity.

But another purpose of this study, albeit less explicit, was to explore and understand my own engagement in various forms of activism for social justice issues. And, although I was committed to exploring the participants’ stories as their own through a constructivist lens, I found myself experiencing a tension between my prior training and education as an undergraduate psychology major, wherein positivists approaches to studying cause and effect

were valued, and my later-in-life development as a qualitative researcher who values individuals' lived experiences and multiple truths. The former me—the recovering psychological sciences major—would have held in abeyance all consideration of my own development as an advocate for social justice. The current-day, subjective me—a graduate student and student-affairs practitioner exposed to various forms of qualitative approaches to studying lived experiences—acknowledged, throughout the study, my own thoughts about student activism, and I became attuned to my own self-exploration of Asian American activism for social justice.

During the development of the dissertation proposal, the focus of the study went through various iterations, from possibly examining Asian American students' development of a critical consciousness to the resulting study that focused on how Asian American student activists came to define what activism is. What I learned through this study is that Asian American student activists define activism for social justice in various ways, mainly through acts of educating themselves, their own communities, and others in hopes of changing hearts and minds, all the while rooted in a commitment to social justice values. While I learned much from the experiences that the nine participants shared with me during our multiple interviews, I refrained from defining activism for myself, largely due to wanting to withhold my own perceptions of what student activism is or can be and with an aim to not potentially influence or inform the participants' own conceptualizations of activism. In many ways, I aimed to honor their own voices and experiences. In the end, I found myself at many times personally connecting with their experiences growing up Asian American and, at the same time, realizing their journeys toward social justice activism differed from my own.

My interviews with the nine participants in this study often brought me back to those experiences I had had years prior advising diverse Asian American college students who

represented a range of critical consciousness and awareness of social justice issues, whether related to Asian American-specific concerns or to broader notions of justice. The participants in this study shared with me their stories of activism and how they came to the work of engaging in social justice issues, and I was inspired by their journeys. They shared stories of how they empathized with communities across social justice issues, and I was moved by their passion to effect change; some even brought me to tears because of the emotional labor they described in their activism. And, they shared stories of how they developed their own critical consciousness of systems of oppression and how they were committed to challenging those systems now and especially in the future, and I felt hope. It is with these feelings of being inspired, moved, and full of hope that I will continue to support students who seek to effect positive social change within and beyond their communities.

Indeed, my future work with Asian American students will be influenced by what I learned from the students who participated in this study, particularly when it comes to acknowledging the family and critical life history contexts that students bring with them not only to their college experiences but also to their engagement in student activism and other social change projects. At the same time, I am left wondering about Asian American students who do not engage in any form of activism to effect social change, particularly in the current socio-political climate where cross-racial solidarity may be more important than ever. I often ponder what I might be able to do to influence their engagement by, as Rowena shared, planting seeds.

It is my hope that the participants' stories shared through this study provide insights into not only the lived experiences of contemporary Asian American college-student activists, but also how today's student activists define activism for social justice. In the same way that the participants' stories of engaging in activism challenge the perceptions that Asian American

students generally do not engage with social activism, the participants' conceptualizations of activism challenge traditional notions of what activism is and demonstrate new understandings of what it means to engage in educational activism that is rooted in an awareness of systems of oppression and characterized by a vision for social justice. It is, at the same time, reflection and action for social justice.

APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT E-MAIL TO NOMINATORS



**To:** [Potential Nominator]

**From:** Lester Manzano

**Subject:** Seeking Asian American undergraduate students for a study about student activism

Hi, [Name],

I'm currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola. For my dissertation study, I am seeking Asian American undergraduate students who have engaged in any form of student activism related to social justice to participate in my research study. My study will explore the experiences of Asian American student activists involved in social justice and social change projects and how they come to understand and define contemporary *student activism*.

I'm now in the process of recruiting 8 to 10 participants for my qualitative study, and I'm seeing your help in identifying and nominating potential participants. To be eligible to participate, the student must meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Asian American
2. Be currently enrolled (upcoming fall semester/quarter) as an undergraduate student at a college/university or community college in the U.S.
3. Be at least 18 years of age

Given the evolution of how students have enacted campus activism for social justice, I'm interested in learning from *Asian American undergraduate students who have engaged in any form of student activism*.

I'm utilizing a nomination process whereby I contact professionals in higher education who work or may have worked closely with undergraduate Asian American student activists. Would you be willing to refer one or two students who meet the criteria listed above and who are engaged in any form of campus activism or social change projects related to social justice? If so, could you please send me the names and e-mail addresses of the student(s)? I will reach out to them to formally invite them to the study.

I appreciate your assistance in nominating potential participants for this study. I'm hoping the stories of Asian American undergraduate students who are engaged in social justice activism and social change projects will help contribute to our work with students in higher education.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Best regards,  
Lester

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT E-MAIL TO PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS

**To:** [Prospective Participant]

**From:** Lester Manzano

**Subject:** Seeking Asian American participants for a study about student activism

Dear [Name],

My name is Lester Manzano, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. For my dissertation study, I am seeking Asian American undergraduate students who have engaged in any form of student activism related to social justice to participate in my research study. This study will explore the experiences of student activists and others involved in social justice and social change projects and how they come to understand and define contemporary activism.

To be eligible to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Asian American
2. Be currently enrolled as an undergraduate student (for the upcoming Fall semester/quarter) at a college/university or community college in the U.S.
3. Be at least 18 years of age

If you are interested in participating in this research study, please review the informed consent information, complete the online questionnaire, and provide your contact information at the following website: [bit.ly/SocialJusticeActivism](http://bit.ly/SocialJusticeActivism). The online questionnaire should take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete and will ask you to define social justice and student activism.

By completing the questionnaire and providing your contact information, you are also communicating your interest in participating in one–two individual interviews to discuss your experiences with social justice activism. You will be providing basic demographic and contact information so that the researcher can contact you if you are selected to participate in the interview phase of the study.

This study has been approved the Loyola University Chicago's Institutional Review Board (IRB; Project No. 2306). If you have any questions about this dissertation research study, please contact me at [lmanzan@luc.edu](mailto:lmanzan@luc.edu).

Thank you,  
Lester

--

Lester Manzano  
Ph.D. Candidate, Higher Education Program  
Loyola University Chicago  
Pronouns: he/him/his

APPENDIX C  
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

## ASIAN AMERICAN COLLEGE-STUDENT ACTIVISM

### SECTION 1: Student Activism for Social Justice

This dissertation research study is being conducted by Lester Manzano, a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education program at Loyola University Chicago. The researcher is seeking Asian American undergraduate students who are engaged in activism or social change projects to participate in the study. This study will explore the experiences Asian Americans and how they come to understand and define activism.

To be eligible to participate, you must meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Asian American;
2. Be currently enrolled as undergraduate student at a college/university or community college in the U.S.; and
3. Be at least 18 years of age.

If you are interested in being considered for participation in this research study, please review the following information:

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

Project Title: An Exploration of Contemporary Asian American College-Student Activists' Definitions of Student Activism

Researcher: Lester Manzano, Doctoral Candidate, Loyola University Chicago (Principal Investigator)

Faculty Sponsor: OiYan Poon, Ph.D., member of the Graduate School and former Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Loyola University Chicago; current Assistant Professor of Higher Education Leadership, Colorado State University

#### Introduction:

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Lester Manzano for part of his dissertation study under the supervision of Dr. OiYan Poon.

You are being asked to participate because you are a current undergraduate college/university student who identifies as Asian American and is engaged or has been engaged in some form of social justice activism or social change project.

Please read this page carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to complete the online demographic questionnaire.

#### Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to understand how self-identified Asian American college students come to understand and define activism.

#### Procedures:

- If you agree to be considered for selection for this study, you will complete the online demographic questionnaire that follows this section. The demographic questionnaire will ask about some of your identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.). The demographic questionnaire should take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. You may complete the questionnaire to the extent to which you are comfortable.
- If you are selected for the second phase of the study, the researcher will invite you to participate in one–two individual face-to-face or online interviews to discuss your experiences with student activism or social change projects, how you came to understand what activism is, and how you currently define activism. Each interview will last approximately 60–90 minutes and will take place in a location of your choice. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed, then analyzed by the researcher.

#### Risks/Benefits:

There are minimal risks involved in participating in this research. For example, you may experience some discomfort responding to some of the items on the questionnaire related to racial and ethnic identity, or when describing the ways in which you may have engaged in activism on or off campus. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but data gathered from this study will help add the voices and experiences of Asian American college students to the research on student activism and social change in higher education.

#### Confidentiality:

- If selected to participate in the interview portion of this study, you will be encouraged to create a pseudonym. If you do not select a pseudonym, the principal investigator will create a pseudonym for you. After the interviews, a transcript will be e-mailed to you to confirm the accuracy of your statements.
- Face-to-face interviews will take place at a location that is convenient for you. Online interviews will take place via an Internet-connected computer with webcam at a location of your choice.
- Interviews will be transcribed by an individual who is not the principal investigator; that individual will not be affiliated with your college/university and will have no knowledge of your involvement in the study.
- All interview transcripts and audio recordings related to this study will be stored on a password-protected computer. Only the principal investigator will have access to these data (e-mail communications, pseudonym information, audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts).
- Upon conclusion of the study, all data and information related to the study will be destroyed (e-mail communications, pseudonym information, audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts).
- At no time will your participation in this research be revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

#### Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be considered for this study, you do

not have to complete the online questionnaire. Even if you decide to complete the questionnaire, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

#### Contacts and Questions:

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Lester Manzano at lmanzan@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor, Dr. OiYan Poon, at opoon@luc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at 773-508-2689.

### SECTION 2: Statement of Consent

Your answer below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study.

*I have read this informed consent page, have had the opportunity to ask questions, and my agreement to continue with the questionnaire signifies my consent. By completing this questionnaire and providing contact information, I am agreeing to potentially be selected to participate in the interview phase of this study.*

1. Do you consent to complete the demographic questionnaire for this study?  
 Yes            [“Yes” response navigates to Section 3.]  
 No             [“No” response navigates to Section 6.]

### SECTION 3: Contact Information

2. First Name: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Your Pronouns (e.g., they/them/theirs; she/her/hers; he/him/his; ze/hir/hirs): \_\_\_\_\_
5. E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Audio-recordings of Interviews

All interview transcripts and audio recordings related to this study will be stored on a password-protected computer. Only the principal investigator will have access to these data (e-mail communications, pseudonym information, audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts).

6. If selected to participate in the interview phase of this study, do you agree to be audio-recorded?  
 Yes            [“Yes” response navigates to Section 4.]

No      [“No” response navigates to Section 6.]

---

#### **SECTION 4: Academic Information**

7. Name of College/University (If you transferred to your college/university, please list previous colleges/universities that you attended.): \_\_\_\_\_
8. What will be your class level during the 2017–2018 academic year?:
- Second-year student (i.e., sophomore)
  - Third-year student (i.e., junior)
  - Fourth-year student (i.e., senior)
  - Fifth-year+ student
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
9. Academic Major(s)/Concentration(s): \_\_\_\_\_
10. Academic Minor(s), if any: \_\_\_\_\_
11. Expected Graduation Date (Month, Year): \_\_\_\_\_

[“NEXT” button navigates to Section 4.]

---

#### **SECTION 5: Demographic Information**

How would you describe your...

12. Gender Identity: \_\_\_\_\_
13. Sexual Orientation: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Religious/Faith Tradition(s): \_\_\_\_\_
15. Racial Identity/Identities: \_\_\_\_\_
16. Ethnic Identity/Identities: \_\_\_\_\_
17. Other identities you would like to share: \_\_\_\_\_

Tell us more about yourself...

18. Immigrant-generation status in the U.S.:
- First Generation: I immigrated to the U.S. at age 13 or older.
  - 1.5 Generation: I immigrated to the U.S. before the age of 13.



- Second Generation: One or both of my parents immigrated to the U.S., and I was born in the U.S.
- Third Generation or beyond: One or more of my grandparents were born in the U.S., my parents were born in the U.S., and I was born in the U.S.
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

19. Hometown or place(s) where you grew up: \_\_\_\_\_

List your involvement in...

20. College student organizations/activities (indicate leadership roles, if any): \_\_\_\_\_

21. Community (non-university) organizations/activities (indicate leadership roles, if any): \_\_\_\_\_

In your own words...

22. What does “activism” mean to you? \_\_\_\_\_

23. What does “social justice” mean to you? \_\_\_\_\_

[“SUBMIT” button navigates to confirmation page.]

**SECTION 6: I do not wish to participate in this study, or I do not wish to be audio-recorded.**

Thank you for your interest in this study. If you know any current Asian American college/university students who are or have been engaged with activism, please e-mail their name and e-mail address to Lester Manzano at lmanzan@luc.edu.

**SUBMISSION CONFIRMATION PAGE**

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study on student activism! If selected for the study, the researcher will contact you via e-mail to schedule individual interviews.

APPENDIX D  
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: INTERVIEW

**Project Title:** Activism and Identity: How Asian American College Students Define Activism for Social Justice

**Researcher:** Lester Manzano, Doctoral Candidate, Loyola University Chicago (Principal Investigator)

**Faculty Sponsor:** OiYan Poon, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Higher Education Leadership, Colorado State University; faculty member of The Graduate School and former Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Loyola University Chicago

### **Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Lester Manzano for part of his dissertation study under the supervision of Dr. OiYan Poon.

You are being asked to participate because you are a current undergraduate college/university student who identifies as Asian American and is engaged in some form of social justice activism or social change project.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

### **Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to understand how self-identified Asian American college students come to understand and define *activism*.

### **Procedures:**

- You will participate in one–two individual online interviews to discuss your experiences as a student activist, how you came to understand what student activism is, and how you currently define activism. Each interview will last approximately 60–90 minutes and will take place online, via Skype or Google+ Hangout, or in person. The interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher.
- You will receive a transcript of the interview along with the researcher’s initial interpretations generated from an analysis of the transcript, and you will be afforded the opportunity to verify the researcher’s initial interpretations and findings or provide clarity for the researcher.

### **Risks/Benefits:**

There are minimal risks involved in participating in this research. For example, you may experience some discomfort responding to some of the interview questions related to racial and ethnic identity, or when describing the ways in which you have engaged in activism on or off campus. There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but data gathered from this study will help add the voices and experiences of Asian American college students to the research on student activism and social change in higher education.

**Confidentiality:**

- You are encouraged to create a pseudonym. If you do not select a pseudonym, the principal investigator will create a pseudonym for you. After the interview, a transcript will be e-mailed to you to confirm the accuracy of your statements.
- Face-to-face interviews will take place at a location that is convenient for you. Online interviews will take place via an Internet-connected computer with webcam at a location of your choice.
- Interviews will be transcribed by an individual who is not the principal investigator; that individual will not be affiliated with your college/university and will have no knowledge of your involvement in the study.
- All interview transcripts and audio recordings related to this study will be stored on a password-protected computer. Only the principal investigator will have access to these data (e-mail communications, pseudonym information, audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts).
- Upon conclusion of the study, all data and information related to the study will be destroyed (e-mail communications, pseudonym information, audio recordings of interviews, interview transcripts).
- At no time will your participation in this research be revealed to anyone other than the researcher.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions about this research study, please contact Lester Manzano at [lmanzan@luc.edu](mailto:lmanzan@luc.edu) or the faculty sponsor, Dr. OiYan Poon, at [opoon@luc.edu](mailto:opoon@luc.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at 773-508-2689.

**Statement of Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

---

**Participant's Signature**


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**Date**


---

**Researcher's Signature**


---

**Date**

Instructions: Please print, sign, scan, then e-mail this form to Lester Manzano at [lmanzan@luc.edu](mailto:lmanzan@luc.edu).

APPENDIX E  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: FIRST INTERVIEW

**Interview Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to understand how self-identified Asian American college-student activists come to understand and define activism.

**Research Questions:** How do contemporary Asian American college-student activists define activism?

1. What experiences, if any, contribute to Asian American student activists' journeys toward social justice activism?
2. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of consciousness and awareness of social issues?
3. How do Asian American student activists define activism in terms of actions and behaviors?

### **Introduction:**

*Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your experiences with student activism. This study aims to better understand how Asian American college students come to understand and define student activism. The notion of student activism has taken on many forms over the last several decades, and I am particularly interested in learning how contemporary student activists who identify as Asian American define student activism today.*

*Do you have any questions about the study or the participant consent form?*

### **Questions:**

#### **Establishing Rapport; Pre-College Experiences**

1. Tell me about yourself. Where did you grow up?
  - a. Tell me about your family life? Parents? Siblings? Generation?
2. How do you identify racially/ethnically? What does it mean to be this racial/ethnic identity?
  - a. Tell me a story of when you first understood your identity as an Asian American.

#### **University and Community Involvement**

3. In what activities or programs on campus do you participate on campus? Off campus?
  - a. Do you hold any leadership roles on campus? If so, what types of roles do you have?
  - b. How else are you involved at the university? And in the community?

#### **Coming to Understand and Define Student Activism**

4. When did you first engage in student activism? What was the activity, act?
  - a. Tell me a story of how you first engaged in any form of student activism.
  - b. What attracted you to get involved in student activism?
5. Share with me a story of when you first came to understand what student activism is.
  - a. How did you come to this understanding?
  - b. What social issues have been most important to you in your activism?
6. What experiences in the past, growing up, have you had that may have informed your engagement in activism?
7. What aspects of participating in activism are most important for you to consider it activism?

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: SECOND INTERVIEW

### Questions:

#### **Forms of Activism: Actions/Behaviors and Consciousness/Awareness**

1. In your own words, how would you define student activism?
  - a. What does it mean to be a student activist?
2. In what ways are you currently or have you been engaged in activism? Describe your campus activism.
3. What are some of the strategies or tactics you've seen used in activism?
  - a. If activism is not just about actions/strategies, what else might it be about?

#### **Meaning-Making**

4. What aspects of participating in student activism stand out for you?
5. How has participating in student activism affected you?
  - a. How would you say your activism has influenced your identity and how you see yourself?
  - b. How has your involvement in student activism affected your experiences as a student at your university?
6. What changes have you made in your life since becoming involved with student activism?
  - a. How do you see yourself continuing to engage with the issues that matter to you in the future?

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## VITA

Since 2007, Lester J. Manzano has served as assistant dean for student academic affairs in the College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola University Chicago, where he previously served as an academic advisor. Before arriving at Loyola in 2005, Manzano served as director of residence life at Lake Forest College, assistant director of residential life at Colgate University, and graduate assistant in the Department of Residential Life at the University of Vermont. Throughout his career, Manzano has also served as an advisor to Asian American student organizations, supporting student leaders and activists in their development. From 2009 to 2012, he served on the Board of Advisors of the Midwest Asian American Students Union (MAASU).

A member of ACPA–College Student Educators International and NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education since 1997, Manzano served on the local arrangements committee for the 2010 NASPA Conference, was chair of local arrangements for the 2011 NASPA IV-East Regional Conference, served as director for the 2011 and 2012 NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) Dungey/Summer Leadership Institutes (DLI/SLI), and was chair of the national NUFP Board from 2013 to 2015.

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## DISSERTATION APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Lester J. Manzano has been read and approved by the following committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation, and the signature that appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

5/5/2018



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Date

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Director's Signature

