



# Understanding the Impetus for Modern Student Activism for Justice at an HBCU: A Look at Personal Motivations

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## Abstract

This study examined university students' motivations for engaging in activism for justice. Of interest is what moved a sample of university youth at a historically Black university to get involved in the Jena Six protest of September 2007 given that cases of injustice have remained fairly commonplace in recent decades for persons of color. To answer this question, a qualitative text analysis of 80 essays that were written by undergraduate students as a requirement for a seat on a bus to the protest was performed. Data were coded initially using etic codes from the literature on reasons for student activism. The findings indicate that for males anger is a significant catalyst for action. In contrast, females described a transformative future orientation for their offspring as motivating them to stand and to march in the interest of justice. Such insights are likely of interest to those leading efforts for social justice.

**Keywords** Jena Six · Student protest · Activism · Social justice · Civic engagement

## Introduction

Student involvement in Jena Six is an identifiable starting point of modern day Black student activism. This start is captivating because there were so many issues in 2007 worthy of protest (for example, a lack of accountability for the 2007 sub-prime mortgage financial crisis; the Virginia Tech massacre and related ease of access to firearms; the many persons wrongly convicted of crimes becoming evident through innocence project efforts resulting in exonerations; ongoing police and citizen conflicts), one wonders why young Black university students, ages 18–27 years old choose the Jena Six case as a cause worthy of their involvement in protest for justice. Of course, since then, many other protests by Black university students

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have occurred, such as those related to the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014, incidents of Black male youth who died under questionable circumstances. Indeed, it was in response to the death of Trayvon Martin that the popular Black Lives Matter Movement began. Of interest in this study is not all student activism, but Black students' activism specifically for justice, given the unique place of African American Blacks in United States history. Blacks herein, refer to the descendants of persons who were Black slaves in North America until the late 1800s. It is assumed, that these persons constitute the majority of the Black university protestors from historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). In terms of historical experiences influencing cohorts of people, on agency for justice, the Generation Y group (persons born 1980 to 1995) follows an arguably largely apathetic Generation X (persons born about 1965 to 1980) and appears more socially conscious as evidenced by a greater willingness to join "old school" activists in galvanizing for change. Beyond such appearances, this study is an effort to describe the motivations for activism by Black university youth. It is likely to be of substantial interest to those who desire to advance the cause of justice through protest and political activism.

The Jena Six case involved a melee between African American and White students at a high school in Jena, Louisiana. Apparently, a tree in the school yard was informally deemed a location for White students only, but September 2006, a Black student dared to sit under this tree. The next day, three nooses hung under the tree. A few fights between Black and White students followed. Subsequently, one of the White students, Justin Barker, needed medical attention (he was released hours later) and, as a result, five of the six African American students, Mychal Bell, 16; Carwin Jones, 18; Jesse Ray Beard, 15; Robert Bailey Jr., 17; Bryant Purvis, 17 and Theo Shaw, 17 faced adult criminal charges of attempted murder. The district attorney in the case, Reed Walters, was suspected of partiality given his lack of response to the terroristic threat of the hanging noose and the perceived disproportionate harsh response to the African American males in the student conflict as opposed to the White males. None of the latter were prosecuted; instead, they received 3 days suspension, ignoring the principal's recommendation for expulsion (Jones 2007).

Perhaps a few things made September 2007 a season ripe for protest: That it occurred in a small southern town, not unlike many other such places where racial conflicts still occurred with regularity. The inter-racial harshness across pockets of the former Dixie lands has remained arguably more blatant than more passive aggressive forms of racial conflicts in northern cities. Also, the southern town, Jena is in Louisiana where the frustrations with the 2005 hurricane Katrina aftermath still lingered. The inept response to this natural disaster indicated an insensitivity to the circumstances of low income persons of color. Around this time as well, the news media often reported on the racially polarizing O. J. Simpson acquittal on murder charges on October 3, 1995. Emotions from his acquittal likely re-surfaced with Simpson's legal troubles concerning a Las Vegas memorabilia robbery. More personally however, what may have gotten the attention of young university students' attention was that the Jena Six conflict may have looked very familiar to them, in that fights between Black and White high school students happen in the south with regularity according to student anecdotal accounts recounted to the authors. Thus,

plausibly, the Jena Six case may have “hit close to home” for those young people who chose to participate in the protests. Hence, the research question: Why did students participate in the September 20, 2007 Jena Six protest in Jena, Louisiana?

The Jena Six protest in Jena on September 20, 2007 was largely publicized through the internet and media sources that target a Black audience. Calls to participate came from the likes of activists such as Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and young student leaders at universities and colleges across the south. An estimated 20,000 attended the protest (Jones 2007). Some studies have found a connection between how frequently persons use social media and political interest (Valenzuela 2013). Indeed, social media seems to offer youth a safe place from repressors in which to express their objections to perceived injustice. Recently, Owen (2017) concluded from his study of law enforcement surveillance of activism, that social media spaces are now not as protective as they seem. They offer a multitude of information to perceived oppressors.

More broadly, the fierce courage of youth, to stand against injustice has been integral to social movements worldwide. Internationally, these include the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, China in 1989 against the country’s politics and economic structure; and the Chilean student protests of 2011 to 2012 over a lack of necessary education reform. In the United States, Black youth activism has included the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s Youth Council and the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in the 1930s to 1940s; plus, the Southern Non-violent Coordinating Committee of the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s Black American students protested the Vietnam War; in the 1970s the protests are related to the rise of the Black Panthers and related movements critical of the actions of political structures. In the 1990s, in specific urban areas largely in the northeast and in California, young Blacks protested police excessive use of force. Since then however, there has been a long drought in large scale Black student activism until 2007 with the Jena Six case. While television impacted the reach of the protests of the 1960s and 1970s; by Jena Six, the widespread use of social media facilitated the reach and galvanization of this modern day activism. Social media became spaces in which youth in various places could connect and share their concerns about injustices, then organize toward collective actions in response. While it is likely that social media facilitated other regional movement, Jena Six is one that eventually garnered national attention. The next major youth movement, years later, has been the ongoing Black Lives Matter Movement with its genesis after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. It protests a law enforcement disregard for the life of Black youth. Black Lives Matter has inspired the high school student-led Never Again Movement which calls for changes in the access to guns in the United States. This is in the wake of the Parkland Florida School Shooting.

## The Recent Literature on Student Activism

A context that will allow activism is important to its realization. Harre (2007), looking at youth activism and service referred to context and experience as significant to generating activism in times of collective crises. At such times, activism might

be indicative of parental modeling, direct or indirect experiences with injustice or pain; being moved by inspiring stories; religious values and organizational affiliation. Harre also noted that it is important to provide space for youth to engage in activism and to recognize that engagement or other priorities may prevail.

Some (Dikec 2018; Sternheimer 2015) posited that activism is more common in times of prosperity; consider the 1960s and early 1970s. With prosperity, there is supposedly more time and energy for activism. Indeed, Johnston (2015a) noted that the dearth of protest over the past 50 years reflects the fact that an increasing number of students do not reside on campus, and, given rising tuition and other costs, they are more likely to be part-timers or commuters with financial strains. Others (Cleveland 1994) attributed the activism of the 1960s to personal threat—such as a fear of being drafted. If the latter perspective is correct, involvement in the Jena Six protest of September 2007 might reflect some underlying vicarious fear for some of those who participated. Plausibly, there was a fear that what happened to the Jena Six defendants could have easily been their fate or that of persons close to them. This way of thinking may have also made the Trayvon Martin case of 2012 of strong social justice interest for youth involved in the Black Lives Matter Movement.

Colby and Damon (1994) in their study of social activists found that those advocating social justice did so with emotions of “righteous anger.” Yet, it remains unclear the extent to which emotion matters in agency for justice. It appears that something has to “hit a personal note” for many to take action; but beyond that, what internal processes get an individual to move? Externally, in the Jena Six case, there was an opportunity for a collective response, largely facilitated by internet-based communications of a call to action whereby it was not “I” against injustice but “we”. In this “we” the activists may have experienced a powerful camaraderie or belongingness. Relatedly, Courville and Piper (2004) posited that “hope asserts agency”; “it can mobilize various marginalized groups to find collective voice”; “collective hope”; otherwise, “hope without agency is a mere illusion” (Courville and Piper 2004 p. 49).

Given the limited access to resources common among youth, the realization of collective activism often involves cross-age collaborations where older persons serve in at least an advisory capacity (Kirshner 2007). While it is commonly perceived that young people are largely powerless and subject to the control of adults, with adult support they can discover their power in their social context (O’Donoghue and Strobel 2007). Indeed, much youth activism reflects a continuation of the behavior of their parents (Watts and Guessous 2006). Franklin (2003) reported that in the 1920s as more Blacks grew as a presence on college campuses, a common student paradigm was that the newly educated Negroes would be catalysts in advancing their race. Further, this way of thinking was encouraged by various magazine articles by W.E.B. Dubois and the result was student activism against traditional authorities at Lincoln, Howard and Fisk universities.

Hence, in addition to the influence of adults on what youth do, there was an interest in this study on the extent to which students connect what they may have learned in class with the social and political aspects of context (Stake and Hoffman 2001); after all, education and information should raise consciousness (Courville and Piper 2004 p. 48). This emphasizes critical thinking (challenging established paradigms)

and an open-mindedness to different worldviews, in particular the extent to which more open mindedness moves persons to a concern about increasing equality; awareness of discrimination; personal confidence and validation of personal experience (Stake and Hoffman 2001). Certainly, disciplined protest might be interpreted as a sign of developing social consciousness (Biddix et al. 2009 citing Hunter 1988).

Theoretically, the literature refers to perceptions of legitimacy of structures as a factor influencing whether students decide to take action. Wong (2015) in a news review of student protests identified a theme in a belief amongst the youth that they can still impact or change their world. She cited the work of Angus Johnston who identified 160 student protests in fall 2014 usually around three issues: police and racism; sexual assault and, student rights at universities. All of these, Johnson claimed, had a common perception behind them, that without a change, the future was in jeopardy. Johnston (2015b) also concluded that students resort to protests when they realize that within the boundaries of their context and its rules of decorum, they are parties with very little power. Protests then, are a means of changing the context and the dynamics of power. Hope et al. (2017) concluded from their study of 504 college youth that for Black freshmen students, political activism seemed protective against stress, but high levels of activism seemed related to exacerbated indicators of mental health problems (such as anxiety). Further, Livingston et al. (2017) utilized a quantitative study of an African American Midwestern church sample to explain their reengagement in activism. They concluded that racial centrality that is, race being central to a person's identity, psychological empowerment and activism itself predicted behavior. Given this knowledge, this study is an effort to describe the voices of youth protestors themselves on motivation for involvement in activism for justice. It also queries the extent to which the educational experience might have impacted the young people's decision to get involved in protest.

## Method

This study is a descriptive, qualitative text analysis of essays from university students on reasons for wanting to participate in the Jena Six protest on September 20, 2007. The essays were required by an Office of Student Activities and the campus Student Government Association at a historically Black university as a part of the process of joining the university's Student Government on a bus to the Jena Six protest in Louisiana. Over a hundred students from the university participated in the protest in Jena; but 80 essays were available for analysis. The essays were from 17 males (21%) and 63 females (79%). Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from the university to access and to analyze these essays. Largely based on the literature on student activism a code list and preliminary analysis matrices were prepared. The etic (outsider knowledge or assumptions based on the existing literature) codes with which the researchers approached the essays were: *connections with activism in the past* (an interpersonal connection, given that relations with an activist is one of the strongest predictors of student activism) (McAdam and Paulsen 1993); *influence of academic content* (that challenges established paradigms; open-mindedness; and, an awareness of discrimination); *adult support* (that facilitates student collective action and, or serves as an

extension of a social network with experienced activists) (McAdam and Paulsen 1993); *personal motivations*; and *collective motivations* (Battle and Wright 2002); *religiosity*; *hope*; *righteous anger*; *compassion*; *a desire for egalitarianism*, and *belongingness*.

Further, from local anecdotal reports to the researchers, there was a suspicion that Black youths protested because the Jena case “hit close to home” (*self-identification*) in that it was possible that persons protesting were either victims or connected to victims in similar racial brawls where they did not receive justice. A common scenario might be one in which a “brawl” was perceived as “not fair”—for example, if a Black youth was outnumbered and severely beaten. Often these conflicts go unreported and people sit without the justice that a collective response might bring. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2009) explored Carl Jung’s idea that emotions might be powerful enough to “transform apathy into movement” (p. 310). They focused on *sympathy* which they defined as a concern about the suffering of another without self-identification with the other. Herein, we suspect that something more powerful than sympathy, a self-identification moved the students to active protest.

This study is valuable because the narratives are from students at a historically Black university (HBCU), which the authors suspect *still* offers students more in the way of sensitization on matters of social justice in that, the education offered might be one that more readily challenges established paradigms—especially those that suggest that “the criminal is young and Black.” Such challenges are likely to occur amidst an examination of the social, historical, economic and political context behind such skewed worldviews. Markedly, the HBCU involved does not have an African American studies program, but African American life and matters of social justice are commonly weaved across its social science curricula, of which a minimum of 15 semester credit hours is required of all undergraduates.

The qualitative analysis of the text data involved reading and coding the data, then re-reading and re-coding the essays after a gap in time for consistency in coding. The process also involved memoing notes along the side of the text that indicate support or non-support for assumptions about student activism based on the literature. This facilitated identifying emerging patterns and themes across the essays which were then depicted in a table.

The researchers’ positionality or paradigmatic lens influencing their interpretation of the data reflect a largely constructionist orientation and to a lesser extent, a critical race conflict perspective. The researchers are females who are originally from outside of the United States who embarked on the project to understand the advocacy of specific United States African American youth in high schools and in university. Thus, they approached with an open- mind, but vigilant for narratives that reflect racial conflict given the United States’ racial history, the remnants of which still impact today’s justice system practices.

## Findings

The findings may be organized according to four dominant themes in the essays. These are: An opportunity to stand and to take collective action; learning from history; self-identification with the event and, impetus differences by gender.

## An Opportunity to Stand and to Take Collective Action

One of the motivational themes that emerged was seizing upon the *opportunity to stand* and to take *collective action*. The students at the university in the current study had elected a criminal justice major as their student government president. He had influence over budgetary resources and mobilizing student action, both of which are common ingredients of college student activism (Altbach 2007 citing Levine 1980). Recently, Swain (2010) concluded from a statistical analysis of national data from over 1000 Blacks interviewed after the 1996 presidential election that membership in a community or other organization with an African American agenda facilitated Black activism; religiosity however, had a negative relationship with non-electoral activism. References to collectivism, that is, an interest in serving the group, namely the Black race through collective action to have realistic impact were evident in 80% of the essays, but mention of religion in only 5%, which supports the existing literature. One mention of religion referred to a Nation of Islam duty to act and in all four of the essays that included a religious reference there was mention of the matter being ultimately left to God's authority. Closely related to the concept of collective action was an appreciation of the opportunity provided by the Student Government (SGA) for the students to engage in the collective action. Apparently, there had been individual desires to act, but a lack of opportunity to do so until SGA. As one person wrote: "When my children gain knowledge of their history, the 'Jena Six' is guaranteed to be in their remembrance. By participating in this historical event, I cannot only speak of the event but I can say that I had the gracious opportunity of experiencing the event directly." Only four essays (5%) directly mentioned adult, usually family support to participate. The researchers had expected this to be higher.

There were many essays (68%) that mentioned that it was time to take a stand.

To be coded "taking a stand" required the use of the word "stand". The researchers suspect that this commonality might reflect the language of faculty when encouraging the students to participate in the march. References to "taking a stand" were often connected to the value of African American's history of protest. For example:

#2: I would like to travel down to Jena not only to show that the stereotypes of young African Americans are false, but to show that the hard work and lives lost during the civil rights movement were not in vain. Their cause stood for a purpose, and it is our time to honor the truth and hard work that they put forth in order for things like this to never happen again. This is a modern day civil rights movement of sorts, and it is our duty to stand up for what is right and not let our voices be silenced as they have been many times when it really mattered.

#8: For a simple school fight these students should receive 100 years that is very unjust and unfair to these young men. As African Americans it is time for us to take a stand against the injustices done towards our race.

The "taking a stand" indicated an awareness of discrimination in 78 essays (96%), often followed by a specific comment about wanting these dynamics to change,

coded as *egalitarianism*, that is, an interest in fairness or justice in 60 essays (75%). An example of egalitarianism is:

#1: The audacity of law enforcement officials to strip these young men of their last high school memories and replace them with real life images of unforgiving steel bars, concrete walls, and relentless nights is a blatant mockery of our justice system. Yet on the other side of the spectrum the trouble makers who began this debacle are free to enjoy their days after only serving a mere three day suspension from school.

Taking a stand and the interest in collective action were also often connected to the theme of *belongingness* in 14 essays (18%). This was the idea that the activism was to benefit a group, African Americans, in keeping with historical traditions. Belongingness, most often, was about being a part of the community of African Americans; less often it was about being “American”, for example:

#46: I feel that in order to do so I must take part, participate and contribute to our community and our civilization...I want to speak truth to those that hold the power in Jena, Louisiana and all over the world; that injustice to those boys, is an injustice to me, to my people, to all my ancestors who came before me and risked their lives, worked their hands until they bled, were whipped until their skin gaped open...it’s an injustice to Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and I want to stand and make a difference.

Regarding support for the ethic codes from the literature, *taking a stand* was a central, *present* moment, pivot point connecting *past* protests with hopes for an improved *future*. For example, #25 commented:

As a [references her university] Woman, I am required not to tolerate dishonesty, but promote brotherhood, and consider others. By joining the rally in Jena, Louisiana I stand up against dishonesty, promote the uniting of my brothers and sisters for change, and become selfless. I sacrifice missing classes and losing sleep just to make sure generations after me will not have to experience the same trials. Besides, I stand on the shoulders of pioneers who sacrificed their lives just so I could be able to succeed.

### Learning from History

A second thematic category is that of *history learned* and the possible connection with academics. Any reference to history, such as the mention of Dr. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X or the African American history of protest was coded as “academic/history” which has the assumption of learning possibly in an academic setting. The researchers however, were not able to discern from the essays where learning took place. The learning could have been from family, peers, religious communities, books, television, et cetera. Nevertheless, a few essays mentioned the student being inspired by a faculty and staff who spoke at a Jena march informational event. There were 57 essays (71%) that referenced history connected to academics, but only 4 (5%) that directly mentioned a history of activism.



#1 After the recent tragedy, that has named six young high school boys as attempted murders: I have begun to see these United [Stated] States of America for their true colors. These colors are ones filled with unjust and inadequate practice of the civil rights laws our parents and grandparents fought so hard to obtain only a little over 40 years prior to this unpleasant incident....A glimpse at his true segregation and tyranny would allow me to see firsthand what type of oppression my people from years past had to tolerate....the catastrophe at hand is a direct example of the old saying ‘history repeats itself’.

#3: On Thursday, September 20<sup>th</sup>, I \_\_\_[full name]\_ would like to participate in the Peace and Protest Rally in Jena, LA. I want to be a part of this historic event that I compare to the marches in Washington in the early 1960s. It is up to us to show leaders and innovators of our past, that we can infuse the modern-day civil rights movement with fresh faces and fresh viewpoints. Young black people of the Hip Hop generation have our footprints all over this event and I’m glad to see us come together for this fight against racial inequality.

#82: Dr.\_\_\_\_\_ spoke about power and I know that is most likely the reasoning behind these charges. I just don’t understand how the whole world can watch these events happen and this town is still able to get away with this blatant form of racism. Before the forum tonight? I really did not have the knowledge of what went on in this town of Jena, Louisiana afterwards I felt really informed and ready to make a difference. I know that I am only one person, but I feel that with this group of students we can make a difference together. Dr. W.E.B DuBois said “a little less complaint and whining, and a little more dogged work and manly striving, would do us more credit than a thousand civil rights bills.”

### Self-Identification with the Event

In contrast to a group interest for activism, the researchers wondered about how much *self-identification* with the circumstances of the Jena Six motivated participation. This was the third thematic category. It was evident in 14 essays (18%). Indeed, essay #7 was from someone who knew a member of the Jena Six and who concluded that, “He was a very intelligent, ambitious, and athletic young man who had big dreams of going to college and pursuing a career in the NBA.”

Other examples of self-identification references are:

#49: When I was in middle school, my...Caucasian classmate made a Ku Klux Klan mask out of white paper, wrote KKK across the top, and poke[d] holes for eye in it. He then held his hand out in front of him like he was holding a gun and said\_\_\_\_\_.

#5 My family and I are also from northeastern Louisiana and we have been exposed to similar types of injustices that still go on today. So in that respect, I can relate to that lifestyle and I empathize with them because I have been where they are and I have seen what happens when no one stands up for what’s

right and I refuse to be a bystander and watch the system destroy more lives when I can make a difference.

#16 referring to growing up in California noted that: “I’ve seen young black kids get wrongfully convicted of petty crimes and sentences get increase[d] to a felony charge and they get convicted as adult.”

#65 I have family from all parts of Louisiana and it would absolutely break my heart if this happened to them. It was never far from my mind that situations like this still occur today in the year 2007, but to be intoned [intuned] into an actual situation just turns flips in my stomach from much anger. This has hit very close to home for me, too close for comfort actually. How can I sit back and not take a stand? How can I know what’s going on and do nothing about it? How could I possibly ignore that this could have easily happened to my brother? I am now presented with the opportunity to make a difference and I don’t want to pass this opportunity up.

Related to self-identification is the concept of *compassion*, an extension of caring given the plight of the Jena Six. This was explicit in 27 essays (34%). One example is #9 “Well, originally I didn’t plan on going to Jena, Louisiana on behalf of the Jena Six but after watching a CNN newscast on the case, and after seeing them I can’t help but want to participate.” Additionally, there was a related code of *personal motivation* which required that the student state that the participation was for him or herself. Often this included wanting to have a memory/story of being a part of something significant—something to tell others about—to satisfy a personal need (longing, urging, passion, deep emotion) to act on behalf of someone else. This, in 48 essays (60%) was always in relation to some broader motivation, for example #64, a female stated: “I want to attend the rally not only for myself but for my ancestors and my descendants to come.”

### Impetus Differences by Gender

A fourth category of themes was *anger* and, or a *future transformational orientation*. The essays revealed a gender difference in the rationale and language for activism. Males were more likely to speak of anger or outrage at their perceptions of injustice (23% of the essays) while females were more likely to use language of empathy, compassion and support for the Jena Six boys and their families. Females (almost 25% of the essays) were also more likely to connect participation to an interest in the future and in particular the lives of their children yet to come. It was striking how the genders differed in this regard—in that, males rarely mentioned children but were more inclined to a personal motivation connected to self-identification and, or anger at the injustice. The future-oriented comments from females, however, suggest a commitment to the possibility of social transformations. This should not be interpreted to mean that males do not share this concern, but that it was likely not at the forefront of their motivations to act.

A future orientation requires hope and as one male put it:

#7 The racial injustice that is going on in North Louisiana is a tragedy to all Americans. This is a clear case of racial hatred toward the black youth in this small town. We, as black men and women, have to support our own people. We have to pull them out of the grips of the white south, because nowadays instead of hanging us with ropes, they lynch us [with] prison bars. In conclusion, I want to go to Jena because I want to make a change.

As one female stated:

#8 This case with the young men regarding our race can lead to change for our African American society in the nation. It can open the eyes [of those] whom do not see the racial factors that are in the United States, and maybe change the way people feel about other people.

Yet, a rare skeptic in the group, a male wrote:

I would like to go because it's hard for me to know that anybody is getting locked up. Especially for something that I don't see is wrong. Yes, I personally don't think going to Louisiana is going to change anything but I would like to go try...Personally, I would like to see as many people go out there as possible, because [it] is going to take a lot of support to turn everything around.

Overall, the codes that were most commonly supported by the essays content were: an awareness of discrimination (96%); collectivism (80%); egalitarianism (75%); references to the value of history (71%) and, time to take a stand (68%) (see Table 1). Time to take a stand was a novel code. Other emic (evolving from the data) codes were utilizing an *opportunity* and a concern for “*my children*”, a future orientation specifically voicing concern about the lives of offspring yet to come specifically from the female participants. Self-identification and expressions of concern about the boys and their families were also very evident.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The students largely reported wanting to participate in activism because being united was more likely to have impact than acting alone. Further learning from history the importance of taking a stand and acting because the scenario of the Jena Six was somewhat familiar also mattered. Males however, seemed moved more by anger and females more by a concern for the future. The Jena Six march could be tagged as a significant development in the evolution of the modern era of youth protests. Unlike many protests that followed it, this one had a relatively positive outcome. By June 2009 the Jena Six cases ended with five of the African American defendants getting up to 7 days probation and a five hundred dollar fine after pleading “no contest” to misdemeanor simple battery. This was a much different outcome from what they faced initially with charges of attempted murder. In December 2007, the first of the six to go to trial Mychal Bell had pled guilty to a reduced charge of second degree battery which meant a sentence of 18 months incarceration.

**Table 1** Students' explanations of the reasons they decided to actively protest

Code	Frequency (N=80)	Percent (%)
Activism (reference to history of activism)	4	5
Academics/history (references to academic content in higher education)	57	71
Open-mindedness	1	1
Awareness of discrimination	78	96
Adult support (to engage in activism)	4	5
Opportunity (because the opportunity was presented to act; opportunity not to be missed)	40	50
Personal motivation	48	60
Collectivism (serving the group, namely the black race; need for the power of group action/response)	64	80
Religion (references to religion as a motivator)	4	5
Hope/future (about improving the future)	46	58
Anger (about what happened such that it moves one to action)	18	23
Compassion (an extension of caring given the plight of the Jena 6)	27	34
Egalitarianism (toward fairness; justice)	60	75
Belongingness (as a result of a group identity)	14	18
Self-identification (a sense that the circumstances of the Jena 6 could have happened to them)	14	18
Time to take a stand (statement that it is time to "take a stand")	54	68
My children (references to being involved to improve the lives of their future children)	20	25

Undeniably, Black university student activism has been an important part of United States' history. Understanding this student activism is important because it deals with the kind of learning environment that institutions might help to create (Hope et al. 2017). For decades, tertiary institutions have been the base for powerful social change movements dating back to at least the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1960, out of Shaw University, a historically Black university in North Carolina. A key element in the success of this activism effort was the facilitation by faculty and staff, as students seemed to need the support of their administration to assist them in the realization of their intentions. That was the case here, as these facilitators helped to see to the transportation and other details of the protest effort. Grande and Srinivas (2001) referring to student health advocacy suggested solidifying students' knowledge of how to effect social change by offering instruction on strategic planning, team building, coalition building, media advocacy, effectively communication ideas, politics and fundraising. There has been push back to student activism, such as the state of Missouri's legislature's 2015 proposed bill to strip athletes of scholarships if they refused to engage in athletics for the purpose of protest. The bill was withdrawn, likely in recognition that student activism would not be diminished; after all, the athletes could simply go elsewhere.

A limitation of this study is that the essays were written after an information session about the Jena Six hosted by local activists and faculty. Some persons mentioned being moved by the speeches –but the essays were varied (indicating that there was not a large scale regurgitation of remarks made) and no one attributed his or her participation directly to the speeches. This suggests that the students left the meeting with time to seriously reflect on the relevance of the opportunity to themselves as individuals. The fact that most of the essays were typed supports this assumption (as typing takes time). Another limitation is that it was not evident to what extent the university education impacted the desire for activism. Also, the findings of the study regarding reasons for activism are not generalizable as the sample is limited to students at one institution. The essays were also self-reports and might reflect some social desirability effects.

Future studies could involve in depth interviews with current student activists on their motivations and the evolving role of social media on protests. They might also examine a broader sample and explore the extent to which particular forms of perceived injustice evoke particular types of activism. The youth in this study were in a predominantly Black context with faculty support. It would be worth documenting the motivations of Black youth in predominantly White and other ethnic academic settings.

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