

Student Change Agents as Citizens in Contemporary Universities

Achieving the Potential of Engagement

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OVER OUR CAREERS, we have been involved in student, faculty, administrative, and staff roles in multiple types of postsecondary institutions. In the different contexts of our work, we have witnessed shifts in the discourses that shape academic and fiscal discussions in higher education. These shifts mirror the “academic capitalism” that Slaughter and Rhoades (2009) describe in their analysis of academic cultures and priorities, and illustrate a tension between academic and market or financial priorities. More specifically, many people making decisions in tertiary education are torn between, on the one hand, holding tightly to their missions and, on the other, maximizing revenue and reframing institutional effectiveness as doing more with less. Clearly, both considerations are important, and recent changes in state support have increased the complexity of the discussion. It is important to recognize, though, that the emphasis on one side or the other makes a difference in determining students’ experiences in our institutions.

In a recent committee discussion about the organization of graduate education at one of our institutions, a senior administrator suggested that the committee’s decisions were important but that, if we were wrong, “the market will sort it all out.” The increasing reliance on business partnerships, the marketplace as a decision-maker, and transactional approaches to education that underlies this administrator’s statement raises questions about the changing roles of education in society. With this article we ask readers to consider the effects of such shifts on students. The relationships between institutions and students can be characterized in many ways. For example, as in the era of *in loco parentis* in the United States (U. S.), institutions could be expected to perform parental roles for their students. Institutions can also consider themselves as providing a developmental role, helping students to grow either holistically or in particular ways to become ready for the next phases of their lives. Institutions can also characterize their students as

customers who are paying for services, and who are part of a larger marketplace that dictates ideal or profitable behavior. Throughout this article, we argue that administrators', faculty members', and policy makers' understandings of students within these contested discourses affect students' learning and growth as civic actors and community members in our society. We focus on research conducted with student change agents at two universities to explore these effects.

Civic Education and Student Activism

Throughout history, select students have chosen to take on proactive roles in their institutions and communities. These students, sometimes termed “student activists,” have insisted on being a part of institutional decision-making, including those decisions related to curriculum, leadership, and how social and global issues are represented on campus (Altbach, 1989, 1999; Boren, 2001; Rhoads, 1998a). Many student change agents urge university leaders to be responsible social actors who acknowledge that what they do matters both on and off-campus (Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron, 2008; Dey & Hurtado, 1995). In essence, these students see a need for change either in the institution or in the broader society.

As with any action, multiple and sometimes unanticipated effects also occur through student action. Here we present our findings from interviews with 55 student change agents and administrators at two institutions – one in the southern U. S. and one in New Zealand – to address the question: *What are the roles of student change agents within contemporary universities?* We consider the ways in which students' actions are constructed within a context that both promotes and circumscribes their roles as full members – as citizens – of their academic communities.

Student Involvement and Civic Engagement: What are the Roles of Student Change Agents?

Many scholars have established that college students who choose to be engaged in institutional and community affairs have historically had powerful effects on their institutions and communities. For example, Boren (2001) illustrates how, beginning in the 1400s, students were key players in toppling governments and challenging established knowledge, as well as instituting change on more local levels. As he concludes in his book, “In the modern world, student resistance efforts are one of the key forces in social power dynamics” (p. 249). In *Educating Citizens*, the authors assert:

If today's college graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities but also to see themselves as members of a community, as individuals with a responsibility to contribute to their communities. They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, p. 7)

In other words, educated citizens need not only to learn skills associated with effective action, but also need to feel invested in and sufficiently part of their communities such that they are motivated to enrich them.

A focus on the importance of teaching and enacting civic and/or community engagement in higher education considers the development of these skills and motivations. Specifically, much of this literature has focused on how students develop through their involvement in change, leadership, or activism (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000; Boyte & Kari, 2000; Kezar, 2004; Kuh, 1995). Less frequently studied are the effects that student change agents have on their peers, their institutions, and the larger society, or the ways that larger social discourses about students' roles in tertiary education affect the character and effect of their efforts.

In New Zealand, student participants repeatedly stressed that they believed their universities should take seriously their role to serve as the “critics and conscience” of society. In many cases, our student participants lamented that the university had begun to abdicate that role due to the consumerist principles that guide society and associated organizations. Students were not alone in their critiques as faculty and public intellectuals also voiced their concerns (Peters & Roberts, 1999; Public Intellectuals Forum, 2003). Many have echoed a concern about the changing New Zealand context and its effects on universities. For example, Peters and Roberts note that:

[Historically], the university has served as the critic and conscience of society and the critical function has been protected from political interference and the vagaries of the market through the historical development of notions of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. (p. 59)

Yet, Gould (1999) writes:

If universities are to operate simply as market suppliers, there is no room for taking a longer-term, wider, community-based view of the national interest or acting (as is provided in the New Zealand legislation) as “critic and conscience of society.” (p. 28)

When the university, because of the larger social context, is challenged in playing society's role of critic and conscience, some students have taken it upon themselves to step into that role. However, the ways in which students become civic actors within their universities given this emerging consumerist culture is not fully understood. If students are to learn to be civically engaged and value democratic participation, how does the university model this engagement and provide opportunities for students to develop civically? Given the competing values within academic culture, what effects does students' involvement have in the university? If universities are becoming more businesslike in their function and priorities, how will that influence student engagement and, ultimately, students' development as civic actors?

The research presented in this article illustrates that many student change agents are concerned with improving their local and, sometimes, their global communities. Given the potential impact of student change agents on institutions and communities both during and after their college experience, the subject is an important one for higher education scholars and practitioners to consider.

Methods

The contexts in which data for this study were drawn, City University (CU) and Old South University (OSU), are similar and dissimilar in many ways. A key difference is the sociocultural environment in which they are situated, as CU is in New Zealand while OSU is in the southern

U. S. These institutions are similar in that they are large (each with more than 20,000 students), and they share a research orientation that is readily apparent – and sometimes frustrating – to students. They are both located in metropolitan areas, although CU is located near an active commerce and cultural city center, whereas OSU is located in a park-like setting some distance from the city’s downtown.

City University is an important social institution within the city and arguably within the entire country. For example, student participants in this study were able to point out current national politicians who had previously served as leaders at CU. While there is a historical memory of protests and other forms of activism, students in this study described how the recent shifting of the economic burden for higher education to students has limited student involvement in activities outside academics. This “user pays” model is institutionalized and is a source of tension for students who believe the government should do more to support their education.

Old South University is one of many universities in the region and is prominent in its state. Activism toward social and institutional change at OSU appears to be cyclical. At times, articles appear in the campus newspaper criticizing the university’s approach to various social and institutional issues, such as those associated with socially responsible trade relations and providing an inclusive climate for students. Student participants in this study described clear events where they joined together to work toward change; however, they also complained of the overriding apathy among the student population. Rising admissions standards, paralleled by state-supported tuition for high-achieving students at Old South University, likely influenced students’ involvement level. Specifically, if students failed to maintain academic excellence, they stood to lose their scholarships and, for many, their ability to remain at Old South.

At both sites, student participants were selected using criterion and snowball sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, we wanted to talk with students and administrators who were in positions to know how students who engaged actively in their university environments experienced that engagement. Data for this research were collected through 55 in-depth ethnographic interviews (Ortiz, 2003) with students and administrators from two institutions (see Table 1).

	Old South University	City University
Students	25	16
Administrators	6	8

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Questions focused on what student activism meant to students, what motivated students to become involved in change efforts, and the roles student change agents play in universities.

Of the 26 OSU student participants, 20 women and six men represented a variety of organizational affiliations. Eighteen identified as White, two as African American, two as Hispanic/Latino, one as multi-racial, and three constructed their own racial category or elected not to respond. The participants’ ages ranged from 19-25. They represented 20 academic majors and five political party affiliations.

Nine women and 6 men were interviewed at CU. Ethnic or racial affiliations were not as clearly discernible as in the U. S. The terms “Pakeha,” “European,” and “New Zealander” were variously chosen by people whose ancestors originated from Great Britain. Overall, there were eight ethnicities identified by the participants, including the aforementioned, as well as Maori, Chinese New Zealander, Taiwanese, Australian, and German. Participants listed ages ranging

from 19-32 and represented nine different degree programs. Yet, they were less likely than the U. S. participants to designate a political affiliation, with only five doing so. Four of the five students indicating political membership affiliated with New Zealand Labour.

Administrators with varying responsibilities were interviewed, including some who work regularly with students and some with senior-level decision-making power but infrequent student contact. Six OSU administrators participated in interviews including five men and one woman, while eight administrators participated at CU, including five men and three women. Administrator participants held leadership positions in academic affairs, facility services, and student life.

Many student participants resisted being labeled as “student activists” because of the negative connotations they associated with the term. As such, we rethought our terminology and instead chose to refer to them as “change agents.” Students interviewed met the definition we developed for change agents: Change agents are committed to and involved in social and/or institutional change. We did not limit the participants to students involved in a particular kind of change, so the examples and experiences in the data reflect multiple orientations and experiences.

While this article focuses on students’ roles within the university, the data analyzed for this study consider student change agents’ experiences in tertiary education more broadly. Using fully transcribed interviews as data, both researchers independently read through all 55 interview transcripts and then unitized and categorized the data according to themes associated with the research question: What are the roles of engaged students within universities? Through our analytic process, we developed numerous codes that were then grouped thematically to focus on student change agents as learners, teachers, and citizens. In this article, we frame our analysis around students’ roles as citizens in their communities and illustrate how their actions are situated in and constrained by university contexts that struggle with the roles of engaged students in their organizations.

Student Change Agents as Citizens

I’m aware of two completely conflicting views of what student activism is. . . . One view is that student activism is focused on the interface between students and the university, and that the purpose of student activism is to protect students’ interests with respect to their university experience and to stop the university’s screwing the students. . . . The other view of student activism sort of says that students are actors in the world by virtue of the higher education that they’re gaining. They will, in the future, disproportionately be the leaders and the movers and shakers in society. As such, going forward, they have a responsibility to take those leadership roles as fully-informed and socially-responsible as much as possible.

We present WG’s beliefs, a City University administrator, to illustrate the multiple ways that student change agents are understood within universities. Are student change agents disruptive to normal functioning in an institution? Are they strategically important in the power struggle between students and “the university”? Or, are student change agents engaging in one of the most meaningful learning experiences possible in that institution? Moreover, what are the

possibilities and constraints of their actions as citizens of their universities and communities? Our findings explore these tensions.

Student change agents functioned as citizens who wanted to be full participants in what happened in their institutions and communities. In both of these settings, they performed civic roles by identifying areas of concern and working with, or challenging, others to address those concerns. In each of these roles, students and administrators discussed how they struggled to engage in effective communication with each other. Many of these struggles were rooted in tensions about students' roles as shapers or consumers of what their institutions had to offer. In these findings we draw on both students' and administrators' perspectives to focus on student change agents' roles in institutional decision-making, their disruptions to institutional functioning, their efforts to educate others, and their roles in representing student needs. Finally, we focus on student change agents' desire to bring about societal change.

Influencing Institutional Decision-Making

Students and administrators who participated in our study generally agreed that students should be involved in some level of institutional decision-making. Tiger, an OSU administrator, even went so far as to say that, "It is fundamental to the long-term success of the university to have student input." While this sentiment was not disputed, participants spoke of the nature and complexities associated with students' involvement.

Through their involvement in institutional decision making, we learned that student change agents intended to improve the institution. Examples of these efforts included: bringing to career day employers who were friendly to lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people; initiating a recycling program; supporting business policies that reflected the institution's stated values; and starting a peer mentoring program for new students. Sophie, a CU administrator, told us, "Activism is about the students who just see needs and fill them and just have energy and enthusiasm and organize things. They don't need to be asked or told." Karl, another CU administrator explained that, in his view, student involvement in improving the institution is part of higher or tertiary education's purpose:

Maybe it was quite a romantic vision of the university, that this was the time in a young person's life where they come into their own where they develop a sense of themselves and they develop a sense of the world around them as well, and they start to think more about how that world should be. And the university, if they're coming here to study, is the first place that they could actually not only just be a consumer of the product that the university is offering . . . but they also get the respect given to them that they can have a positive influence on the overall continuum of the university as well.

He articulated his frustration, though, with how student attempts to be involved in improving the institution were devalued, indicating, "[Administrators] are not recognizing that those [students] could have, and have had in the past, a real contribution . . . to give to the university itself."

Though not many, some administrators and students articulated examples to us of how interactions between students and administrators strengthened their efforts to improve the university. Yet, despite administrators' assertions that students' involvement was of tremendous benefit to both students and the institution, many students explained to us their difficulties in

getting involved in institutional decision-making. OSU students, in particular, explained their strategies and frustrations. In her recounting of a sustained effort in which she had been involved, Randi explained:

There were two students who really organized [this effort] and asked for volunteers to help petition. And each of us got a petition with 100 lines on it for 100 names. . . . So we got something like 3000 signatures. It's a big stack. We still have all these petitions, and then we got a meeting with [a senior administrator]. We packed the meeting room, and it was like all kinds of progressive people and faculty and students all saying, "We need this place. We need this place."

Another student involved in this effort told us, "We never would have gotten a meeting with [the provost] if we hadn't been petitioning. If we would have gone in with nothing, we wouldn't have gotten anything."

Keith described a different strategy for trying to get administrators' attention. Rather than rely on students' names on petitions, he organized an event that drew on the broader community, including the local media, for support.

[We brought in some speakers] and this [event] got on [our] news. We had like 500 people. And OSU decided to join [a workers' rights organization] the day before [the speakers] showed up. . . . It worked like clockwork in this case. So [administrators] sat down and said "Let's make a concession because the social costs have become too high."

Helen indicated that various strategies were necessary to be heard in institutional decision-making because "as the issues have changed the administration has treated us differently." And Nick, an OSU student, articulated a desire for the administration to more proactively engage students. He described an experience where he was involved in generating opposition to a privatization effort that was already underway. He explained:

When [a campus unit was trying to privatize, we were] getting signatures day-to-day-to-day to say we don't want this. . . . Everyone knew about it. . . . So we got all these signatures and we brought it to the administration, and they said, "Oh, um, we didn't hear about this. It's too late." . . . I think that administration . . . should have the attitude of "what can we do to help you?" Instead of "This is what we're going to do to help you." . . . I think that's what the ideal administration would be here, to listen to the students.

While more prominent at OSU than at CU, many students at both institutions articulated a concern about the ways in which they were heard in decision-making processes. In many cases, students did not feel they were heard or taken seriously as true members of the university community until they strategically wielded political power to force administrators' responses.

Most administrators at both institutions were more reticent than Nick in expressing a desire for widespread student involvement. None expressed a desire to dismiss student input, but several pointed out the complexities associated with that input. For example, Bill, an administrator from OSU, asserted, "I think the more students can be engaged in decision-making whether it's the early stages of design of new residence halls or something like the technology

fee, then the better.” Yet, he went on to describe how student interest “fizzled,” despite administrators taking their original concerns seriously. Leon, another OSU administrator, pointed out that students were transient members of the university community and therefore may not be well-positioned to be involved in all types of decision-making. He described a time when students expressed frustration at not being able to vote on a key campus initiative.

It’s not by just a democratic process. . . . There is a place for student input into the decision making process. But the day-to-day hard business side, my gut feeling is that would be a very difficult position for a student to be in. They just don’t have that life experience yet.

Administrators seemed to value student input in particular ways, but at times indicated frustration at students’ lack of sophistication, knowledge, or sustained commitment in those decision-making processes.

Marlow, an administrator at OSU, conceived student involvement in institutional decision-making in a much more integrative way than did most of the other students and administrators. He insisted that changes in both policies and practices were more likely to occur if the student change agents were involved in the process.

There’s a certain amount of messiness associated with student activism that leads to frustration. I find that students would very much like to follow that paternalistic model. “Well you’re the [administrator]. You could change this if you wanted to.” . . . I think that it’s good for those of us in charge of areas to get out of the way, and say to students, “This is a mess. You’re going to have to get involved and get your answers.” Yes, it would be fun to come to the [administrator] and have me wave some magic fairy dust on the situation and make it go away, but that’s not my role.

In essence, Marlow places the responsibility of initiating change with the student change agents, acknowledging that they are fully-functioning members of the institution and society, and that they thereby need to be involved in institutional improvement efforts. They are, in his view, citizens of their universities.

Disrupting Educational Functioning

Students and administrators also recognized that sometimes student change agents disrupted institutional functioning or educational practices. Several participants in our study described antagonistic relationships between student change agents and administrators. Bill articulated, “I think student activism can be a potent force in shaping campus life and campus policy and has potential for good and potential for ill including the potential to disrupt and even paralyze the institution.” Interestingly, the majority of student change agents with whom we talked agreed that antagonism was not the most effective way to move initiatives forward.

Administrators pointed out that student change agents who move quickly to antagonistic behaviors do not often find a receptive audience to their demands. For example, Wendy, an OSU administrator, advised:

[Students] need to do their homework and should not approach things always in an adversarial role. We get . . . inflammatory resolutions [stating]: “We demand this.” If you were on the receiving end of this, are you likely to receive this in a good way?

Daniel, a CU administrator, said that administrators were often placed in difficult positions when student change agents approached their relationships with administrators antagonistically. Reflecting on a situation that had happened years prior to our conversation, he articulated:

I suppose that the most frustrating part of my job is that you're here because you believe in higher education. You're here because you're trying to make things work so that students can have the opportunity of a higher education, the opportunities which a degree gives you in the world. Yet, the sort of protest that is involved in the occupation of a building really hits you right in the face because it's attacking you. An occupation of a building is like an occupation of a home. . . . We're here working for these people and they turn around and throw it at us. And, a lot of what they throw at us is not what the university has done; it is the position that the university's being placed in, frequently by government. In these earlier stages it provided much higher percentage of our revenues. So, in many ways, some of the protests have been about government policy. So, it's the university that sits in the middle.

Daniel and several other administrators and students noted that when antagonistic relationships occurred, they were typically not effective. Instead, they often were both the symptom and cause of a lack of understanding among those involved, especially in terms of the others' intentions, priorities and decision-making contexts.

While there were notable exceptions, several students asserted they learned through experience that antagonism was not the most effective way to advance their change efforts. Helen described the following:

[In our first campaign about privatization], we antagonized the administration. . . . The university is doing something bad. It is going to cost you money. They are bad. Sign this. Tell them they are wrong. We did not approach the university really. It was simply a petition campaign and getting out there yelling. It was very effective. . . . We got about 3,000 signatures, which for OSU is just amazing. So, I mean it was a very effective campaign. But it wasn't a very proactive campaign with the university. So when we went to the university it was just like “these dirty hippies.” We have actually been called dirty hippies before. So, it wasn't a good campaign for working together for either side.

On a more individual basis, John Paul, a student at OSU, described an incident, that upon reflection, he realized was ineffective. In his words:

One thing that I can say that I wish I had not been involved with is a covert operation that a few students undertook. We were very much against something that the school was putting on because we felt like it was a violation of rights. But it's also a very popular event at school. And instead of protesting in a way that I felt was appropriate, we . . . went around late at night and put stickers all over the school that were in protest of this. And while it was fun at the time, I don't think it was very effective; I think it just mostly

made people angry. . . . I just felt like it was just the coward's way out. We weren't facing the problem. We weren't changing anything. We were just defacing property.

Marlow's interpretation of student involvement in terms of challenging the university system was unique in that he wished that students would be more active and forthright than they were. In a sense, he wished for more productive antagonism among students. In his words:

I'm always taken back by the very polite and comfortable nature with which students approach issues. I haven't had a sit-in in this office yet. I'm receptive; I'm open. . . . I think I take groups that come into my office aback every once in awhile [when I say], "Well, of course you should feel outraged. Who wouldn't be? Now, what are you going to do about it?" . . . I'm not going to lead the charge for them. The leadership is going to have to come from them. And that's part of their development. I try to help them figure out the system so that they can begin to grab the levers of change and figure out how they go about doing it.

While there was clear consensus that students should be involved in institutional decision-making and improving tertiary education, the associated complexities related to the manner in which those change efforts were initiated.

Educating Others

According to our interviews at OSU and CU, one of student change agents' primary roles was to educate not only themselves but also others within the campus community. We heard about this role more from students at OSU than from students at CU or from administrators at either institution. Generally, the education students referred to centered on issues related to larger social issues, often related to equity, diversity and inclusivity, and their particular manifestations on their campuses.

The student change agents in this study believed it was necessary to educate not only students, but also faculty and administrators about their causes. By educating faculty and administrators, student change agents were able to gain additional support for their activist issues. Paul, an OSU student, stated:

Educating faculty and staff will have an especially long-lasting effect because they're the ones who teach other people. And even if they don't educate their students on these issues, there are issues that affect the way that they teach and their attitudes; and [it's important for] administrators in the way that they deal with students and the legislation that they propose and things like that. So if we can change their attitudes and the way that they think about things, it will have an impact on the university.

Atalanta, an OSU student, described how in a meeting with the provost, the dialogue between the provost and student change agents influenced him to make a more informed decision:

I was part of a group of people that lobbied for the women's center to be moved to the [Smith-Taylor] building. And when we had a meeting with [the provost] about it, [he] told us it couldn't happen. So as students we got together and we made a petition and we

did a little research and decided that there is no reason why it shouldn't happen unless they are not telling us something. So, we had a meeting with [the provost] and we got a lot of people in there.

Atalanta described how she and several others did research on the building's capacity as preparation for the meeting. They came to their meeting with clear understandings about the issue, ready to ensure that all information considered was accurate. She recalled vividly, "During the meeting [the provost] tried to tell us that the building was less than 1,500 square feet and I said 'No it is 2,103 square feet.' And either he didn't know his information or he was lying to us. . . . and both ways that's not very nice." In the end, the provost decided in their favor and agreed to the request.

A major focus for student change agents on both campuses was the importance of educating their communities about equity and diversity. Student change agents at both institutions were concerned about diversity and the lack of representation for students from historically underrepresented groups. Sam, a CU student, commented:

[Students] could bring up things like women's issues or racial issues, or queer issues, or any minority group. With a strong students' association and strong student movement, they can bring those issues to the student body and the student body can actually act on that and make a difference. Student activists also play a role in the university for representing the needs of minority groups. . .for example, cultural groups or Pacific Island groups, or Maori groups.

Rose, a student at OSU, described how some efforts at OSU were perceived as being only for the African American students, and how those perceptions impeded her educational role. She described how an annual program jointly sponsored by OSU and another university was portrayed in the school newspaper. She commented:

We know about our heritage and culture but we want you to come and learn about it. I learn about American history in American history class, but it's predominantly White history. It's not my history. I have to learn about it somewhere else. So, I think that it's my responsibility to educate you as I was educated about my history too and educated about American history.

Rose expressed her commitment to educate the university community about African Americans' experiences through her efforts, perhaps in an effort to draw attention to what does not exist in formal curricular offerings. She was somewhat unique in that she expressed support for her group's efforts from the administration, but frustration that there was nevertheless so much to do to educate the larger campus about historical and contemporary racial dynamics.

The conversations with student change agents revealed that educating themselves and others was essential to affecting social or institutional change. We learned that student change agents viewed themselves as educators of their peers, faculty, and administrators. As a result of educating others, student change agents were able to recruit new change agents, increase the university community's awareness of specific issues/concerns, and gain the support of their peers, faculty, and administrators.

Representing Student Concerns/Initiatives

The dialogues with the student change agents revealed that they thought it was their responsibility not only to educate others about the needs and interests of students of color and historically underrepresented student groups, but also to serve on organized bodies to ensure the concerns of these groups were heard. Rachel, a student at OSU, explained that she campaigned for student government office because, “I felt the need to be a bigger voice for the rights of [students of color].”

Rose also became involved in student government because of her desire to raise the awareness level of others in the campus community about the concerns of students of color:

I’m at a majority White university that I have no say. So, I have no purpose except to go to class. . . . I felt that it was my job to raise that awareness [among other students] and say, “You do have a voice. You do have a say and your opinion does matter.”

Asha, an administrator who was previously a student change agent at CU, made similar statements regarding her motivation to become a student change agent. She wanted to ensure that the student government at CU was representative of all students.

In order for Pacific students to become a force with [student government] and particularly the students’ association, we had to move closer together and that was part of the move to mobilize. And I began to read [the student government’s] constitution and it said things like, “to serve all students” but really, at that time, [it] was serving the majority which were White Pakeha students. But it was collecting fees from Asian students, Pacific students, and Maori students.

Student change agents represented students of color by confronting racism and discrimination on their campuses. Ayn, a student at OSU, described her experiences:

One of my biggest problems is just discrimination in any way. And I think that it just amazes me to hear people say things that they thought would be accepted, like “It’s OK to discriminate. And I don’t think we should give any sort of special consideration to minorities.” People say that in public; they’re proud of it. They don’t find anything wrong with it. And I think that activism, a lot of it is about saying, “We’re here. And we’re not going to be quiet. And you have us to deal with. And even though we’re not in power right now, we’re watching you.”

Through their activism student change agents represented the concerns of underrepresented groups, such as graduate students on their campuses. Meina thought the student government at CU was more focused on issues that impacted the undergraduate students and that graduate students’ concerns were largely ignored. She explained that though it makes sense for the student government to represent undergraduates as they are the majority of the population, “It does leave a bit of a gap in terms of post-graduate students.” She focused her efforts on the question, “What is it that would make their lives better or make their research go more smoothly?”

Student change agents took it upon themselves to represent students' of color needs and underrepresented groups on their campuses. Through their activism, student change agents sought to increase their campus community's awareness levels in regards to the concerns of all campus participants.

Initiating Change in Society

Several student change agents sought to initiate change not only on their campuses but in society in general. Only rarely did students indicate that they were not interested in connecting the issues they worked with on campus to broader social implications. Paul described being involved with an organization whose mission broadly covered many areas of social injustice:

That was what our founding statement was, that we affirm and support the causes, we opposed classism, racism, homophobia, sexism – those sorts of things. And we affirm helping the environment, civil liberties, women's rights, freedom of religion. . . . We believe that our purpose is to unify where we intersect.

Helen could not identify a specific initiative that motivated her involvement as a student change agent. She just knew that it was important and that if it was done, it would have long-term effects on society. She stated, “[Activism’s] what I do. Someone has to do it. This stuff is important. Pretty much any issue that we work on is going to have a major lasting impact on society.” Shara described her activism as an effort to positively change the world:

We want to make this world a better place by just talking to people, exchange ideas, support each other....We do believe in [activism] and we want to create social agents who, once they leave the organization [in] the longer run, they could be doing something that's benefiting the world, society at large.

Laura also commented on the importance of initiating change.

I think activism is really with the mindset that you are [activist] because there is something wrong with society as it is, or that it could be better a different way. And not necessarily that you're going to go out and take the physical actions – that's like the manifestation of the word – but that things you do may or may not, but probably will, have an effect on society.

Through their activism student change agents sought not only to promote and initiate change on their campuses but in society in general.

Discussion and Implications

This article focuses on students' roles as change agents within complex universities that are struggling to determine who students are in relation to their institutions and communities. If students are “customers” or “products” of their institutions, are they supported in their efforts to change those institutions or, to significantly change society through their involvement in those

institutions? If students are seen as “future leaders” in or “citizens” of their institutional and larger communities, how are their change efforts perceived and supported? We argue that student change agents have the potential to influence institutional decision-making, disrupt educational functioning, educate others, represent the needs of underrepresented persons, and improve society. In our study, administrators and students alike agreed on this potentiality. Our question, though, remains: How do the tensions associated with students’ relationships with their postsecondary education institutions affect the potential of students to both be and become influential citizens of their communities?

Student change agents have historically played significant roles in movements for university and social reform (Altbach, 1999; Boren, 2001; Rhoads, 1998a); yet, the motivations and characteristics of student change efforts have changed over time (Levine & Cureton, 1998; Rhoads, 1998b). By exploring the roles of student change agents, this research taught us that students’ efforts help them create spaces wherein students can be active citizens in both their institutions and the larger society. We do not mean to glorify activism. At the same time, we do mean to suggest that students who are involved as change agents have opportunities to teach and learn through their experiences, and that those experiences give them a chance to practice skills and development motivations associated with civic engagement.

The perspectives articulated by both the students and the administrators at Old South University and City University indicated that students and their universities must foster dialogue to ensure that the promise of civic development among student change agents is met. University faculty and administrations need to teach students how to engage with the political, social, and institutional processes that inform institutional interactions. While this can be implemented in individual settings, such as academic classes and leadership programs, such education needs to be more systematically implemented. At both OSU and CU, there was a sense among a few students that they had access to outstanding leadership development, while other students had no idea where to begin to find institutional support for their ideas. At both institutions, a small number of administrators articulated and enacted a vision that embraced students’ civic development through active engagement. At the same time, it was clear from these interviews that many students were not aware that those administrators were open to conversations in that vein. In fact, as discussed elsewhere (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005), students often saw administrators as barriers to their learning and change efforts. As we continue to promote students’ civic engagement and development, support for that development that truly fosters effective communication between students and administrators is necessary.

Within this enriched dialogue is the need for administrators and representatives of institutional systems to learn how to listen differently. Students may not know all the institutional rules, norms or procedures around giving input. That does not warrant their exclusion. In the broader society, such an exclusionary stance has led to wide groups of people being disenfranchised in democratic processes associated with self-governance. Many administrators at OSU and CU told us about the ways in which they tried to enlist student input. At CU, Sophie hosted focus groups that were sparsely attended. At OSU, Marlow invited small groups of leaders to join him for reflective discussions about their experiences and needs. Yet, the majority of student change agents (to say nothing of the larger student population) did not mention these opportunities as significant to their efforts. Most did not mention them at all.

Postsecondary education is preparation for future involvement and life experiences. When we reflect on the implications of this work for the broader society, we are troubled. Students in our study were those who actively and deliberately attempted to be involved in conversations

about improving their communities; however, they regularly felt stymied. Administrators in our study were well-intentioned and thoughtful professionals who prioritized the improvement of their educational settings and they regularly felt in conflict with or confused by the actions of student change agents. If civic education is an important component of postsecondary education, and if civic participation is an essential value of these two nations, it is imperative that educators continue in earnest to improve their modeling and their practices. Universities and those within them serve important roles as the critics and conscience of society. We argue that forging relationships with student change agents, and embracing their teaching, learning, and civic functions, is a step toward fulfilling that role.

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