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Campus Activism: Understanding Engagement, Inspiration, and Burnout in Student Experiences

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Activism, which is the use of direct and public methods to bring about social and political change, is an increasingly relevant aspect of American culture (Activism, n.d.). Around the world, countries are seeing a rise in youth activism, and the United States is no exception. Youth led organizations are prominent in the United States currently, especially in the climate justice movements (Ramadan, 2019). Organizations like the US Youth Climate Strike and the Sunrise Movement are mainly youth-led and have been gaining a lot of media attention, as have the March for our Lives and Black Lives Matter movements.

As youth activism rises, students on college campuses are no exception. Activism is a critical part of many students' experiences in college and should be researched to build an understanding of the effects of these experiences. Eagan et al. (2015) found that interest in civic engagement and activism among college students has reached the highest level in 50 years. In a survey of over 140,000 first year students, approximately 1 in 10 students expected to participate in student protests while in college. Their study also revealed that activism is an ever-increasing aspect of college student life, and the United States can expect to continue seeing protests and movements building on college campuses (Eagan et al., 2015).

Although college activism is certainly growing, it is in no way a new phenomenon. Student activists have historically been on the forefront of social change; student movements have had a significant impact both on academic institutions and society at large (e.g., Civil Rights sit-ins, Vietnam War protests; Altbach, 2007).

A variety of factors inspire people to become activists and to persevere in the face of challenges and failures. People often join or start movements because of individualized mobilizing episodes. For example, some union worker activists were mobilized by experiences in which they were put in dangerous situations in their workplace (Kaminski, Kaufman, Graubarth,

& Robins, 2000); although many explained that they were initially hesitant to speak out about issues they saw in their workplace, they were motivated when they realized other people around them were being harmed because of the conditions. Many union activists also cited the importance of a mentor or a supportive group of coworkers in helping them have the confidence to stand up for their right to a safe working environment (Kaminski et al., 2000).

Experiencing such individual hardships are often a prominent motivating factor leading people to join activist movements, yet social components can be just as motivating. For some people who join activist movements, the desire to fit into a social group outweighs their passion about a particular issue. Back, Back, and Knapton (2015) found that people who feel a high desire to fit into social groups are likely to conform to activist groups and participate in protests even when they do not feel strongly about the issue. The study by Back et al. (2015) focused on personality features, specifically rejection sensitivity and the need to belong, to try to develop an understanding of what type of students were most likely to participate in protests. They found that people sensitive to rejection who have a high need to belong were more likely to be willing to participate in group protests than the general population when they perceived themselves as being excluded by social groups. This was true even when participants did not feel like their participation in a protest would result in meaningful change. Therefore, the students may have been participating as a way of conforming to the norms of the social group. In contrast, students who viewed themselves as being included in social groups were less likely to conform to the desires of the group. They were likely more motivated to participate in protests that they thought would be effective and social incentives were less important for them (Back et al., 2015). This study explains why some people join activist groups, but it only reveals information about a very particular type of individual—those who feel a high need to belong and perceive themselves as

being excluded by social groups. It does not explain social motivating factors for all individuals who join activist movements and protests.

Schmitt, Mackat, Droogendyk, and Payne (2019) conducted a study to identify the factors that lead people to participate in environmental activism. They hypothesized that activists would be driven by identification with nature—feeling connected to the natural world and therefore wanting to fight for its preservation. However, they found that the social component of politicized environmental identification was a stronger predictor of environmental activism; people were more motivated by feeling like they were part of a collective that was coming together to fight for social change (Schmitt et al., 2019). This study revealed that activists see the social component of activist movements as central to their experience; however, this study focused only on environmental activists. Research has yet to investigate the role of social components in student activism.

Social components may play a role in the decision to join activist movements, but activism often stems from something deeper—identity. Savas and Stewart (2019) discovered that individuals develop different identities depending on which stage of life they become activists. Many people who became activists at a very young age do not cite a particular motivating event that sparked their activism, but rather a childhood that was filled with oppressive political conditions, turmoil, and violence. However, people who become activists in young adulthood usually begin their activism because of a traumatic event or a significant social event in which they recognize injustice. For young adults who become activists, their activism often becomes deeply ingrained in their sense of self and identity (Savas & Stewart, 2019).

When young people experience significant social events in which they recognize injustice, a significant identity disruption is often created, possibly because identity formation is

a vital aspect of young adulthood (Specht, 2017). Previous research has examined the impact of children living with a marginalized identity who have experienced victimization, poverty, violence, etc. Brenick et al. (2010) found that children who experienced victimization as a member of a marginalized group often develop strong moral awareness about the importance of inclusion, with more empathy towards those who have been victimized and a lower tolerance towards victimization. This may have significant implications for student activists who began their activism because of noticing injustice at a young age. Activists who begin their action as adults do not form an activist identity in the same way that young adults do. This finding reveals that young adults who become activists are more likely to incorporate activism into their identity, potentially making their activism easier to sustain for a long time. Research in the field has begun to elucidate the ways in which different age groups of activists view their pathways to activism, but so far lacks a specific focus on young adults.

The first goal of this study is to identify the pathways that student activists cite as motivating their decision to participate in activism. More research must be conducted to understand young adult activists and how their pathways to activism lead to an identity as an activist. Ultimately, these pathways to activism will help identify what factors allow activists to be able to sustain their actions long-term.

Although there are a myriad of motivating factors to engage in activist work, research has also identified burnout as a threat for sustaining activism. Burnout results from a chronic state of imbalance, in which activists are constantly pushing themselves and feel like there is no limit to what they have to do (Maslach & Gomes, 2006). This is particularly important to activists who start at a younger age because if they experience burnout too quickly and without finding the right support systems, they may never meet their potential of the work they could have done.

Student activists in particular often have to balance their college education, work, family, relationships, and more while trying to work in activism, which may result in more immediate and intense burnout.

Activists may be particularly vulnerable to burnout because of the characteristics that are inherent to the unique nature of activism work. Burnout is often identified as a central threat to caregiving occupations, but activism shares many similar characteristics (Maslach & Gomes, 2006). Activists are often more aware of looming social problems than the general population and constantly examine, and fight against, issues that the majority of society ignores; this can lead to feelings of pressure and isolation (Maslach & Gomes, 2006). There are three central factors to burnout: exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy (Maslach & Gomes, 2006). Exhaustion often stems from activists feeling overwhelmed by the immensity of the problems they are facing and cynicism often develops in response to the exhaustion. Cynicism is an emotional buffer to the exhaustion, and often leads to activists feeling detached from their work and losing the passion and enthusiasm that initially fueled their work. Finally, inefficacy results as activists doubt their ability to make any real change towards their long term goals. When activists struggle with these three symptoms, they are susceptible to burning out and failing to sustain their activism work (Maslach & Gomes, 2006).

Emotions, including feelings of burnout and frustration, play a role both in why people begin any type of activist work as well as how activists experience and are impacted by their work. Activists often feel discomfort and even anger in the face of broken systems they are fighting against (Quaye, Shaw, & Hill, 2017; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). Some activists are able to mobilize their anger to use their emotions as fuel to continue fighting for a better world (Jasper, 2011; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012). Others burn out and lose hope in their work. When

activism is related to a social identity, such as race, activists often face the broken system they are fighting against constantly in their everyday lives. This may lead to feeling like they do not have a choice of deciding if they want to participate in activism and feeling like they are disproportionately burdened with the responsibility of keeping an activism movement going (Quaye et al., 2017).

The second goal of this study is to examine the way students experience, and are (or are not) protected from burnout. Activism is often unpaid work that people need to organize the rest of their lives around; research on adult activists has found that individuals who are able to organize their careers and families around their activism work are most likely to persist and continue their work for long time periods (della Porta, 2000). There is a lack of research examining how student activists balance their other responsibilities (education, work, families, etc.), and whether they can protect themselves from burnout by also organizing their other responsibilities around their dedication to activism work.

Research on activism has been fairly successful at outlining the reasons non-college aged individuals join activist movements and organizations, as well as how they experience burnout from their work. However, there is a clear lack of research on the intersections of being a college student while also doing work as an activist. This qualitative study will address those gaps and elucidate the experiences of student activists on a college campus and the challenges they face. We will focus both on what drove the student activists to their work and the role that burnout has played in their experiences. In addition to understanding the pathways that lead students to activism, we would also like to understand how students maintain their activism despite the challenges they face. Therefore, we will also be asking: how do student activists experience burnout, and what characteristics/factors protect them from burnout? Specifically, this study will

examine: 1) students' pathways to activism; 2) their experiences of balancing student life and activist work; and 3) the way student activists experience and are protected from burnout. The nature of this study is exploratory as we are seeking to understand the experiences of student activists from their own perspectives; therefore, there are no hypotheses for this study.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants in this study included four student activists from the University of Connecticut at the Storrs campus. Student activists were operationalized as current students at the University of Connecticut who have regularly participated in some form of activism (including protests, grassroots action, lobbying, etc.) for at least a year. Participants included three females and one male between the ages of 19 and 22. All participants in this study were recruited via email sent to individuals because of their known prominence in the activist community on campus. Participants were selected to represent a range of experiences as student activists on a college campus working on different issues, including environmental justice, food insecurity, social justice, and voting rights.

Four participants were chosen to represent exemplars of different experiences as student activists. Participant one was a 22-year-old white male of European descent. They were in their fourth year of college and while currently the vice president of a collaborative organization on campus, had been participating in activism for the entirety of their college experience, including some work while abroad in Sweden during their junior year. Participant two was a 20-year-old white female of European descent. She was in her third year of college and had been working in activism for the entirety of her time in college. She worked with a student-run nonpartisan organization that focused primarily on environmental issues and voting rights. Participant three

was a 21-year-old white female of European descent. She was a senior in her fourth year of college and had been an activist for all four years of her college experience. She worked primarily on voting rights and accessibility and was the chair of a nonpartisan student organization on her campus. Participant four was a 22-year-old black female of Jamaican and West Indian descent. She was a senior and had been a student activist for all four years of college, but had participated in volunteering and other various forms of activism in high school. She was the founder and president of a collaborative organization on her campus. Interviews were continued until there was a saturation of themes in the responses. Limiting the number of participants interviewed is common in qualitative research on activism, as it allows researchers to capture in-depth stories for a small number of individuals and identify patterns between participants' stories to best understand overlapping themes (Broadhurt, Martin, Hoffshire & Takewell, 2018).

### **Design and Procedure**

This was a qualitative study consisting of semi-structured interviews. Once participants were identified, we arranged a time to meet for an interview. They were brought into a private space and given consent forms, at which time we explained the study further and gave participants the opportunity to ask any questions they had before we began. Upon receiving consent, the semi-structured interview began. The participants were asked a pre-set list of questions, but were given the opportunity to talk about their experiences openly and did not have to stick to answering only the questions that were asked of them. The interviews were scheduled for one hour, but the interviewees were told that they could continue to speak beyond the one-hour point if they felt comfortable doing so and had more that they wanted to say. The

interviewer followed the semi-structured interview questions, but allowed the responses from the participant to guide the discussion.

Interviews were audiotaped in order to best understand the participants' stories and perspectives on student activism. However, names of the participants were asked not to be given on the recording. Upon completion, participants were given \$20 gift cards as a token of gratitude for their time. The audiotapes of the interviews were transcribed and the content of the interviews was analyzed using NVIVO 12 qualitative statistical analysis package.

### **Measures**

The semi-structured interviews consisted of thirteen open-ended questions that were created specifically for this study. The first three questions were used to elicit the pathways to activism that student activists cite as motivating them to get started, and continue, in activism. For example, we asked participants "How did you get started in activism?" The next nine questions were asked to elucidate how the student activists experienced burnout and/or what characteristics or factors they cited as protecting them from burnout. For example, we asked "Have you ever hit a wall where you felt like your actions were useless, and you doubted your ability to make a difference? What did you do from there?" Finally, participants had the opportunity to add anything about their experiences with activism that had not been covered in the rest of the interview (see Appendix for full list of questions).

### **Results**

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, NVIVO 12 was used to qualitatively analyze the data in thematic nodes (categories). There were five main categories that emerged from the qualitative analyses: 1) pathways to activism, 2) risk factors for burnout, 3) experiences of burnout, 4) healing from burnout, and 5) protective factors.

### **Pathways to Activism**

Overall, there were shared reasons that participants cited for beginning their work as an activist. Some were inspired by others - either their parents and parental values or political candidates. Participant two was inspired to take action by a presidential candidate who she felt opened her eyes to issues in the world and made her want to volunteer on his campaign, which eventually led to greater investment in activism. Participant one, on the other hand, was inspired by his parents' values and stories of participating in activism. These values were evident to participant one, as his parents purposefully exposed him to a variety of volunteering and other opportunities to explore and aid his community. He was also exposed to his parents values through storytelling of their experiences in activism: *"I had always heard stories, of course you grew up hearing about the civil rights movement and I heard stories about my mom like going to some environmental protest when she was in college and stuff so I guess I had some positive role modeling as well in terms of what like I could get involved in."* (Participant One)

However, not everyone was inspired by others to join activism. Two participants spoke about noticing injustices in their own lives that frustrated them and forced them to step up and take action. Participant Four, after spending a few years in a relatively wealthy, majority white school district, moved into a poor, majority black school district. She immediately recognized that the level of education was so poor that students had "virtually no prospects" after graduation. At this moment she recognized the systematic racism in the education system, which fueled her desire to work on issues of race once she went to college.

*"I was very outspoken my entire life... and then yeah I just have this, I can't see problems and not do something about it. It irritates me in my soul. So I have to get involved in some way or another."* (Participant Four)

*“I saw that as a moment of reckoning with where I was and where I wanted to be because these were people that I considered to be my closest friends, yet their favorite jokes were the jokes where a woman is demeaned, or a person is demeaned, or they were making fun of friends of ours who were not, um, who were not white, and that was common. So, I started to just find fault with that, and I realized that whatever I did in college, I wanted to prevent that kind of put down, that kind of marginalization.”*

*(Participant Three)*

Those who entered activism because they noticed injustice were more likely to work on issues directly related to their identity related to the injustices they experienced, such as race or gender. Those who entered activism because they were inspired by others did not begin their activism by directly working on issues related to their identity, but instead worked more broadly on issues that might be more timely or proximal. This finding ties directly into privilege, which plays a role as a risk factor in burnout (discussed below).

### **Risk Factors**

The results of this study identified a few risk factors for burnout that participants felt made themselves or others more vulnerable to burnout. These risk factors were:

- 1) exceptionalism, 2) having to do too much at once, 4) working on issues related to identity, and
- 5) working outside the system.

Exceptionalism was recognized as one of the most serious risk factors for burnout. Exceptionalism, which is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as the condition of being different from the norm, comes with the implication that an individual who is seen as “exceptional” is superior in some way (Exceptionalism, n.d.). Student activists feel like other

people within their communities assume that there is something about them, such as a specific personality trait or personal history, that makes them so unique and special that they can succeed in things that others cannot. This is often expressed to these student activists when others communicate that they see these student activists as more exceptional than other students.

Some participants expressed their frustration with exceptionalism, as it made them feel immense pressure and high expectations:

*“I think there is an unreasonable expectation oftentimes when students have been consistently successful and others witness that. And I've seen this with other activists on campus as well, where they are significantly successful and only known for their greatness, not for the fact that they're a student.” (Participant Three)*

When faced with exceptionalism, some student activists experience higher levels of burnout. They feel that there are incredibly high expectations put on them, and that whenever something happens on campus, people look to them for a response. This does not leave much room for student activists to make mistakes or take time off to focus on themselves — they are constantly being watched and evaluated by others.

In addition to leading to individual burnout, exceptionalism is a danger to the continuation of activist movements. Activists spoke about trying to defeat exceptionalism by inspiring others to get involved and take action: *“Anyone can be an activist, anyone can be that person that you're looking up to. You can be that person. You just have to decide that you will be that person. And I tell people all the time and I really hope they listen.” (Participant Four)*

The second risk factor was having too much to do at once, which led to burnout for most participants. This was where the intersections with their private lives were most visible, because participants talked about experiencing burnout when they had a lot on their plate from their lives

outside of activism, such as, family, intimate relationships, and school work. This led to burnout because the student activists were not able to balance their activism with the other work that they had to do, and had to sacrifice things that were important to them and their mental health in order to keep up with the activism-related work that was expected of them. Burnout occurred when they were not only overwhelmed with their work in activism, but also had to deal with increases in school work and family or personal problems.

*“I was not in a good emotional place...I was just so tired because of emotional and family stuff going on and then as well as I just kept constantly getting things put on my plate from that activism... that I was just at this point that I was like, like what? like what is wrong? What is going on? ... At this point I was just so tired, so so so tired, and I just had no I had no idea what to do.” (Participant Two)*

Privilege also plays a huge role in burnout. When people work on issues that are directly tied to their identity, such as race or gender, they cannot easily separate themselves from their work. It is easier to work on issues that are separate from your sense of self, like reducing waste on campus or increasing access to voting, than it is to address racist incidents that occur on campus as a black woman. In addition, opposition to issues related to identity are more damaging to student activists than opposition to separate causes. For example, administrators who do not care about waste may be frustrating to student activists working on environmental causes, but that is not nearly the same as administrators who do not care about racism on campus. The latter is much more damaging and can lead to a failure to protect the lives and safety of racial minorities on campus as well as a devaluing of the self.

Participant four worked mainly on addressing racism on her campus. She explained people working on addressing racism on her campus were getting death threats and that their

mental health was seriously impacted. In addition, at the same time as she was organizing a march for solidarity, her family was dealing with the real life implications of a racist society as her cousin was sentenced to 40 years in prison at 23 years old: “*an egregious, egregious over sentencing that we all know happens to black men in America*”. She explained that for many people, they can learn about these issues in the classroom, but have the privilege not to experience them in their own lives:

*“We learn about these things in academia, but it’s a lived experience. So that really fueled me too because... I’m sure there are other people on this campus who’ve experienced the same thing as me. And I’m sure they look a certain way. Because of the fact that we’re not talking about it and like some people here can just learn about it but other people here are actually living it and I’m both of those people.” (Participant Four)*

An interesting note is that while this egregious over sentencing was a major part of what led to her personal burnout, it still did fuel her activism.

An additional but related risk factor for burnout is having to work outside the system to address issues. Participants one and four both spoke about their experiences trying to hold the university accountable and act on racist incidents that occurred on campus. This often led to challenges and conflict with administration, who often do not treat student activists with the same amount of respect they would treat others when they know that those students are leading marches calling them out for their inaction. For example, participant four felt that she was treated very poorly by administration after she led a march that brought students to the board of trustees meeting, in which the students spoke out about the university’s failure to provide adequate mental health resources for students and blamed those failures for the deaths by suicide of two students. The day after she led this march, her organization’s email account was blocked from

sending emails to any students at her university, and she had to find an outside server in order to communicate with anyone. She felt that this was clearly the university's reaction to her march.

*"The way people treat me depends on how they meet me. It's very different. So if they meet me at a post march setting, that's they're defensive, I'm aggressive... I don't like you because you publicly call me out, I don't like you because you're trying to hold me accountable and you're relentless... I've had some administrators be real fake towards me. Especially like straight up meeting me in meetings, versus real-life experience, march against racism meetings, the hostility, the coldness, the disrespect to be honest."*

*(Participant Four)*

### **Experience of Burnout**

Burnout is often conceptualized as a feeling of frustration and inability to complete all of the tasks that one has to do. In contrast, some student activists experienced burnout in a physiological way. They pushed themselves so far that their bodies started having physiological responses that forced them to take a break — a break they likely would not have taken otherwise. This physiological response can vary. For some, it was related to how well they were sleeping and eating: *"I got my period twice in one month, I wasn't sleeping well, I started overeating because I stress eat so I gained weight."* (Participant Four). For others, it led to very serious health issues:

*"I was so busy I didn't get a flu shot that year and then I ultimately contracted the flu and pneumonia in my right lung. That resulted in me going home and having to reschedule a bunch of my finals and I was out of commission from any serious physical activity for six weeks... I think a lot of it was the fact that I never took time, much of my weekend was spent doing homework on Friday nights instead of taking time off because I was so*

*behind on homework because I spent so much time doing this activism.” (Participant Two)*

It’s important to note that while burnout is seen as a negative aspect of activism, it is fairly common and expected for student activists. The key is that it is also possible to heal from burnout and to protect yourself from experiencing too much.

*I do think that in activism, this is accepted a little bit. I think a little bit of burnout, like a little bit of stress, is normal. It’s when it’s an unmanageable amount of burnout that it’s, that I see it as a real problem. Because I think when you’re a little bit tired, it’s okay, as long as you can take space and take efforts to ensure that after that, you can sustain the energy.” (Participant Three).*

## **Healing**

While burnout was experienced in some way by all of the student activists who participated in this study, burnout did not lead any of the student activists to completely stop their work. The participants found that it is very possible to heal from burnout. Healing occurs when student activists accept that they cannot do everything at once and learn to forgive themselves when they have to say “no” to helping someone or to taking on an additional responsibility: *“I’ve been practicing taking a break, calming down, and not trying to be involved in everything because I do do that.” (Participant Two).* For some, healing comes from just accepting that they have to lower their own standards for themselves:

*“ I think I’ve learned how to like moderate it a little more, partly by just lowering my standards for myself... I have to like take a step back every once in a while, and tell people that I’m stretched a little thin and need to handle my own sh\*t right now” (Participant One)*

Taking time for themselves often leads student activists to feel guilty for taking time off when they could be working. Some activists even explained a culture of self-sacrifice in their organizations and in activist movements as a whole:

*“I think it's an expectation that's either implicit or explicit, that you will give up time for, for, self-sacrifice in the terms that you've sacrificed things that matter to you for the cause that matters to you. So you might give up personal well-being, or time with family, or personal time, space, not responding to text messages and emails immediately and that's perceived as not productive. That's perceived as not being productive, and not being an achiever.” (Participant Three)*

Clearly, it's difficult for student activists to strike the balance between taking care of themselves and fulfilling all of their responsibilities. However, it is absolutely vital that student activists learn to accept that sometimes they do have to step back and handle their own lives. By taking a step back and focusing on taking care of yourself, student activists may even be able to see issues more clearly:

*“I might not even look at the whole picture the way that I am approaching an issue if I'm just looking at it 24/7. Sometimes it's good to just take time off and that can make your life when you do put time into doing something more effective and make it better in the long run, so I think it's like self-care can be very much a part of activism but when other people are depending on you for that activism, it's hard.” (Participant One)*

### **Protective Factors**

Burnout was experienced by every participant in some way. Although it seems that student activists who are extremely involved in their campuses experience some type of burnout

regardless of the factors in their life, there are definitely conditions that make them less likely to burn out completely and more likely to be able to continue their work.

The individual who experienced the least burnout believes they did so because rather than sticking with one group throughout their entire college experience, they bounced around between a number of different organizations and causes. The other participants found themselves sticking with one organization, or one central cause that they were organizing around, but this individual felt that moving around to different organizations helped them balance their priorities and avoid extreme burnout. As soon as they would start feeling burnt out within one cause or organization, they would switch to a different organization so that they could be reinvigorated by the cause and the work involved:

*“I was never able to stick with an individual group for like that long... I floated around different orgs as a result of my burnout because I would get burnt out with one organization or what I was doing because I wasn't balancing my priorities right.”*

*(Participant One)*

The most common protective factor that participants discussed was social support. The participants were all friends with people who were also student activists and who understood the type of work they do, which allowed them to lean on each other, especially during difficult times or when facing personal issues or failures.

*“I probably wouldn't be in this organization if I didn't have my friends in this organization to be honest. Came for the issues, stayed for the people... You're with a group of people who understand all the sh\*t that you're doing and y'all can talk about it and y'all can vent. And these are the type of people who completely understand what you're going through.” (Participant Two)*

Building strong social connections allows student activists to lean on each other and “spread” the burnout: *“I think the better established communities you have, the easier it is for everybody to be able to engage in that because there's more people to kind of spread that weight, and I think that even goes into how I address my own burnout.”* (Participant One)

Relationships and community building were key factors in ensuring that students were not burning out from their activism, which was especially critical during times of personal grief or traumas. Building those strong interpersonal relationships helps student activists mobilize each other as well and recognize how they can use their experiences to make positive changes in the world:

*“I mean going back into like sort of my realization of how important the relationships around me are, to even just keeping myself afloat through my own grief...So much of activism is about building relationships and I think like so many of those relationships are built upon being unapologetically and fully vulnerable with other people.”*

*(Participant One)*

This social support does not always have to come in the form of friendships. Faculty can also have a huge impact on protecting students from burnout by being understanding and flexible when students are struggling:

*“I actually just sent out a blanket email to all of my professors and I was like listen, I might not be pulling up to class. And they were, the thing was they were so supportive that it honestly replenished me. Like so much. Like not only in the email, but when they saw me in person, they were like listen, can I find you a therapist... Or they were like listen, I noticed you weren't participating as much in class, like are you okay, take time,*

*just like straight up I love you please take care of yourself. Like all of that. It made such a difference like it was honestly healing.” (Participant Four)*

In addition to social support, self-forgiveness and being okay with letting some things slip by also protected student activists from burnout. Multiple students mentioned sacrificing school work and having to accept that they just cannot do everything.

*“Sometimes it will take me weeks to send an email that I should have sent three weeks ago because it's just not a priority. And that is where there's a lack of balance...*

*Oftentimes I am sacrificing school. Like I will send emails and do write ups and do things during class because I know the professor isn't checking. That's not good, and I don't recommend that to anybody, but it's one way of dealing with the amount of work that is placed on.” (Participant Three)*

*“Some things just have to give, if it's my class, like schoolwork or whatever, I guess I'll take a B+ or like whatever I get on like that assignment or that class. Because I just can't go 100% on everything all the time. (Participant One)*

When students were able to forgive themselves for that and understand the need for prioritization, they were better able to avoid burnout and deal with the high level of expectations that they face from trying to balance both school and their work in activism.

*“I will recognize oh, I definitely should have done this but also it's okay, you're one person. I think I have a track record of getting things done, despite that. Error is going to happen right? That's part of the job. We're also doing, students and activists, we're doing work that is not nine to five and will never be. So to expect that errors are going to*

*happen for those in a nine to five job, you need to expect that they are going to happen increasingly if you're working a job that requires even more time.” (Participant Three)*

These results suggest that burnout is a common experience for student activists. While many people experience burnout, however, burnout does not mean that student activists must give up their work. By building strong relationships and learning how to forgive themselves for letting some things slip, students can not only heal from burnout, but they can protect themselves from experiencing it as well.

### **Discussion**

This study was the first of its kind to elucidate the experiences of student activists on college campuses and the unique challenges this population faces in burnout--a common experience with all activists. While some of the results were expected and aligned with previous research, such as social support as a protective factor, this study allowed those findings to be generalized to the college student activist community. However, this study also presents unique findings that have applied and scientific implications for student activists. These novel findings include new pathways to activism, previously undiscussed risk factors and protective factors, as well as the promising discovery that healing from burnout is possible.

### **Pathways to Activism**

A novel finding not previously shown in the literature is that activists can be inspired by others such as their parents or political candidates. It is possible that this inspiration is based on the transmission of values from one generation of activists to their children. Previous research on intergenerational value transmission has revealed young adults are strongly impacted by the

values that their parents instill in them as children (Pratt, Norris, Hebblethwaite, & Arnold, 2008). Politicians and other inspirational figures were also not mentioned in previous literature about pathways to activism. However, there are many examples of charismatic leaders who kickstarted movements, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Greta Thunberg. In order to fully understand pathways to activism, there must be further research that examines inspiration by others in college student activism more widely as well as in the broader activist community.

Contrary to previous findings (e.g. Back et al., 2015), social motivation was not recognized as a reason for joining activism in this study. However, this may be an artifact of the study's sample; I interviewed students who have participated in student activism for multiple years. That level of dedication requires a great deal of persistence and investment that goes beyond simply joining movements for belongingness when it is accompanied by a high degree of burnout. People may join activism because they want to be socially included, but longitudinal analyses might find that motivation likely will not sustain people for years of hard work and sacrifice.

Previous research, although mainly focused on non-college students, suggested that people often start or join movements because of individualized mobilizing episodes, such as being put in a dangerous position in their workplace (Kaminski et al., 2000). The results of this study build on these findings, as some student activists were motivated to join activism when they noticed injustice; however, for these college students, this injustice often was not a singular event. Rather, it was a sustained understanding of inequality in the world, frequently related to their identity, such as race or gender. Given that identity formation is important at this time, it is especially important to consider in college student activists. Savas and Stewart (2019) found that when people become activists as young adults, their activism often becomes deeply ingrained in

their sense of self and identity. My findings on the formation of identity in activism should be expanded to fully understand the ways in which identity and activism intersect.

### **Risk Factors for Burnout**

Confirming previous research, burnout was identified as an issue for all of the student activists who participated in this study. If student activists burnout at high rates and are not able to continue their work, they will not be able to reach their full potential, make as much of a difference, or inspire others to do so. All of the student activists who were interviewed, although they have experienced burnout at some point, are still participating in activism. This suggests that burnout can be a normal and manageable aspect of activism. However, it is essential that college student activists learn how to protect themselves and others and heal from burnout so that they can continue being active and engaged in their communities and activism.

One way to protect oneself could be to learn the risk factors of burnout. Exceptionalism was one of the first risk factors associated with burnout, but has not been discussed in previous research. Student activists in this study acknowledged the pressure from other people seeing them as so unique and special that they were succeeding in things that no one else could. This is dangerous because it makes people think that there is something special that makes someone an activist, rather than understanding that anyone can participate in activism and be successful in making a difference. If student activists want to work towards the continuation of a movement, they should ensure that they are building others up and instilling in them confidence to know that they too can be successful. Knowing that burnout is such a danger to activist movements, activists must work to ensure that they are doing their part in encouraging others to participate. This was expressed by multiple participants in this study, who spoke about the importance of mentoring newer students and giving them the tools and knowledge they needed to be successful.

More research is needed to fully understand the role of exceptionalism in student activism versus adult activism, how that exceptionalism plays a role in burnout, and the ways in which student activists/activist groups can integrate procedures to diminish the conceptualization of the exceptional activist.

Issues of privilege were also recognized as a risk factor for burnout. This was especially relevant for those who joined activism because they noticed injustices in their own lives, because they were usually motivated to work on issues related to their own identity, such as race or gender. Quaye et al. (2017) found that when activism is related to a social identity, activists often have to face the broken systems they are fighting against constantly in their everyday lives, leading them to feel like they do not have a choice in deciding if they want to participate in activism. Black student activists in particular, especially when faced with a racist campus environment, need a lot more personal support. While issues of privilege are not unique to the college student population, some characteristics of a university setting such as, cultural centers may provide organized spaces for students of similar identities to come together, discuss issues facing their community and determine ways to address them. These are resources that may be unique to college student activists. More research must be conducted to investigate the experiences of being a minority student activist working in identity driven activism as this study has just barely begun to grasp how black student activists have a fundamentally different experience than white student activists.

The final risk factor that was identified in this study is working outside the system to address issues. Issues with working outside the system did not come up in the broader literature related to burnout among adult activists, but definitely requires further investigation. It is obvious that university administrators may not like when students organize protests claiming that

administrators are failing to protect their students, especially when those protests gain outside media attention. Although non-college activists often face suppression from the police, their workplace, etc., universities often have the power to censor students in unique ways, such as shutting down email accounts and refusing to book spaces for events.

Student activists are still students who go to class, participate in events, work on campus, etc. However, when they are the face of movements on their campus that administrators do not agree with, it can be difficult to separate their work in activism from anything else, leading to faster burnout. Sometimes, it might be hard to identify how working outside the system negatively impacts student activists. For participants one and four, they thought that administrators were trying to block their activism when their organization's university email account was marked as spam and prevented from sending emails to anyone at the university. This type of censorship is hard to prove or stop, but presents additional barriers that student activists must find ways to work around. This finding has implications for communities of student activists. Knowing that they may face opposition from the administration, they must find ways to work around the barriers that are put in front of them by administrators and find allies within the university who can support them and their work.

Unsurprisingly, most research participants felt that they experienced burnout when they simply had too much to do, related and unrelated to their activism. When student activists are overwhelmed with having too much to do, they are not able to balance their activism work with self-care techniques that can help protect from burnout. This factor is likely similar for non-college activists, who may have to balance family and work responsibilities the same way that college students have to balance school and work. Findings from this study, combined with previous research (della Porta, 2000), suggests that if student activists are able to organize their

education and other responsibilities around the time they spend on activism, they may be more likely to avoid burnout. This means that student activists may need extra flexibility and understanding from their families, professors, employers, etc., showing that everyone in a student activists' life can play a role in preventing their burnout. This finding, while unsurprising, has implications for how student activists treat each other. Since social support was identified as such an important protective factor and aspect of healing, it is vital that student activists support each other, especially in times when they can see that someone is getting overwhelmed with the work that they have to do. If student activists can manage to identify when someone is starting to get overwhelmed with work and their outside lives and can identify ways in which they can step up and help each other, they may be able to help their fellow activists avoid or minimize burnout. Student activist organizations should put protocols in place that allow flexibility of roles so that students can have others take over their responsibilities when they need to take time off (which also helps to negate the idea of exceptionalism). These protocols should be activated when there are symptoms or risk factors of burnout present so that student activists can take the time they need to heal.

### **Experience of Burnout**

Unlike previous work that has characterized burnout as a psychological phenomena (e.g. Maslach & Gomes, 2006), this study found that student activists tend to experience burnout in a physiological way. This study may have found different results because it looked at student activists who had not experienced complete burnout. They were still activists at their university, despite various periods of burnout. These students may not have been as susceptible to burnout because of the protective factors that were found, so they fought through psychological aspects of burnout until it began to impact them physiologically. Student activists also face unique

challenges because they have a much more limited time frame for action than non-student activists, as they are often only on campus for 15 weeks at a time, twice a year. This requires them to compress a lot of work into a short period of time, potentially pushing past the psychological aspects of burnout knowing that their time for action is so short. For the students interviewed, physiological burnout came after periods of time in which they were already overwhelmingly busy and had failed to take breaks to take care of themselves. More research is needed to determine if physiological burnout is widely experienced by activists.

### **Healing**

Previous to this study, there was a clear gap in research on healing from burnout in activists as a whole, student activism included. These results exhibit that it is possible for student activists to heal from burnout, but more research is needed to further understand how healing occurs for individuals within different contexts, causes, and age groups. The ability to heal from burnout has important implications for student activists. It is normal to experience burnout, but student activists must be honest with themselves and others when they begin to experience it. They should accept that they cannot do everything and that some responsibilities might have to be dropped in order to maintain some form of balance and allow themselves to return to a state in which they can continue their work. Tzu, Bannerman, and Hill (2017) discussed burnout in an untraditional but interesting way: they consider burnout to be an emergency, but also an opportunity for an awakening that allows an individual to let go of previous thoughts and gain new insight. This was reflected by participant one, who touched on the importance of stepping back from activism occasionally in order to fully see the bigger picture. This reveals that taking the time to heal from burnout helps not only the individual, but also the cause, because people are able to reinvigorate their passion and see the issues they are facing more clearly.

Although it is important, it can also be difficult to actually take the time to step back and heal from burnout. The student activists in this study all felt a lot of pressure to keep up their work so that they would not let others down. Learning self-forgiveness is absolutely vital. There is a culture of self-sacrifice in activism, which was revealed by participants in this study. Student activists hold themselves and others to unreasonably high expectations of sacrificing things that matter to them for “the cause”. This has strong implications for student activists because of their role as students, who go to college for an education and a degree, yet often might have to drop responsibilities for their classes. When student activists are not able to forgive themselves for taking time off from their activism when they need to attend to school work, or when they are struggling with something in their personal lives, they will burn out quicker. Student organizations should be aware of the general culture of self-sacrifice in activism movements and work to create a community in which students can take time for healing and support each other through their burnout. These findings indicate that it would be beneficial to look into ways to support healing in student activists and find more informed ways to provide training that will help student activists recognize signs of burnout and know how to take action to protect themselves and others.

### **Protective Factors**

Similarly to how self-forgiveness is crucial to healing, self-forgiveness is in and of itself also a protective factor. Although not discussed in previous literature, this has implications for future research because building self-forgiveness could potentially be an intentional method of preventing burnout in student activists. Interventions could be created that encouraged student activists to confront their inability to always meet every goal, so that they can hopefully be more accepting of themselves and others when they do drop some responsibilities. However, this may

be a hard line to draw, because with too much self-forgiveness, it could cause student activists to spiral into complacency and failing to be actionable on the goals that they do have. This finding also begs the question, “What resources are available on college campuses to help student activists specifically with burnout?” College campuses provide an ideal context in which protective resources can be put in place for these young activists.

Another newly-discovered protective factor was switching organizations when student activists started to experience burnout. Only one participant did this, but he experienced less burnout than any of the other participants. Although this has not been widely discussed in previous literature, previous research has identified different paths that activists follow. Della Porta (2000) discussed differences between “persisters”, who keep their commitment to one organization or cause over time, “shifTERS”, who move around between different causes, and “dropouts”, who stop their activism work completely. ShifTERS may be able to avoid burnout because once they start to experience signs of it, they are able to move to another organization and become reinvigorated. Student activists are unique in this sense because colleges often have many different activism organizations, making it easy for student activists to explore and move around to different causes. This might also help facilitate student activists learning more techniques, helping them be more successful in their work, and build more social connections that they can lean on when they need social support. However, it is also possible that moving around to multiple organizations and causes prevents “shifTERS” from building social networks that are as strong as they would be had they stayed with the same group of people. Future research should compare the differences in burnout between “persisters” and “shifTERS” to gather a deeper understanding of how dedication to a singular movement or cause increases or prevents burnout.

The positive impact of social support was unsurprising, as previous research has found that perceived social support can mediate burnout (Chen et al., 2019; Rossiter & Sochos, 2018). Relationships are key for student activists, especially with other activists who understand the pressure they experience. This finding has strong applied implications, as student activists should intentionally build networks of people who support each other throughout periods of burnout. This can be built into organizations by mentorship programs, social events, etc. that encourage and strengthen social bonds. Faculty and administrators can play a role by providing flexibility and support for their students, similarly to how participant four's professors reacted when she emailed them explaining how she was struggling. Quaye, Shaw, and Hill (2017) identified ways in which faculty members can support and elevate activism on their campuses by creating spaces that foster engagement and remove unnecessary barriers between students and faculty. More research must be conducted to understand the interactions that student activists and faculty have with each other, and how working together can improve campus activism and prevent burnout.

Participant one, in his explanation of how social support had been so helpful to him, touched on the way that historically oppressed communities rely on social support in different ways. Previous research has recognized the importance of community and solidarity among groups who have been historically oppressed and experience systematic racism on a daily basis (Dale & Safren, 2018). More research should be conducted to identify the ways that community building and social support mitigates burnout for student activists of color specifically. This will further reveal how activist groups can be intentional about supporting their students, as well as how universities can ensure that student activists of color have the support they need to feel safe and empowered on their campuses.

### **Limitations & Conclusions**

This study functions as an introduction to the experiences of student activists on a college campus. However, it comes with limitations. First, the sample included only four student activists attending a large, public university in New England. Although I chose these participants intentionally to create a clear view of student activism on campus, studies such as the current one should be replicated on other college campuses with additional activists. Moreover, the current findings can inform larger assessments delivered to a wider range of activists on this and other campuses in the future. The findings highlighted the significant need to study burnout in student activists as many findings were unique to this population. There are applied and scientific implications for student activists themselves as well as universities and organizations that want to support their student activists and create an environment in which healing from burnout is possible.

This study serves as an introduction to research student activism, both why they participate and how they experience burnout. I revealed important implications for individual activists, organizations, and universities for helping student activists protect themselves from burnout and heal when they do experience it. There are ample opportunities to expand on this work and learn more about burnout in student activism, which will ultimately benefit student activists and help to create a more supportive and healthy culture in activism.

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## Appendix

### *Full list of interview questions*

**Research Question 1:** What are the pathways to activism that student activists cite as motivating them to get started, and continue, in activism?

- How did you get started in activism?
- What was your first real action as an “activist”?
- Tell me about your experience being an activist at UConn.
- What motivates you to continue being an activist?
- Do you feel like being an activist is part of your identity? How so?

**Research Question 2:** How do student activists experience burnout, and what characteristics/factors protect them from burnout?

- Do you know what “burnout” is?
- Have you ever hit a wall where you felt like your actions were useless, and you doubted your ability to make a difference? What did you do from there?
- Do you think burnout plays a role in your organization or group?
- What has given you strength to continue on days where it felt hopeless?
- Did you have any mentors who have helped you?
- Has being in any activist groups helped you protect yourself from burnout?
- How do you maintain a healthy balance of activism and other aspects of your life?
- Do you practice self-care? How?
- What is the reaction from others when you take time for self care? Do you ever feel guilty about taking time for self care?

**Closing Questions:**

- What didn't I ask?
- Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with activism?