

# Local to Global Justice: Roles of Student Activism in Higher Education, Leadership Development, and Community Engagement<sup>1</sup>

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*This study examined how organizing an annual social justice forum and festival through involvement in a multi-issue, progressive, activist student organization called Local to Global Justice (LTGJ; [www.localtogloball.org](http://www.localtogloball.org)) impacted students' academic experiences and professional development (e.g., scholar-activism, critical thinking, applied learning), leadership development, and community engagement and activism. Current and alumni student leaders (n = 33; 90% graduate students), faculty mentors (n = 3), and community members (n = 4) of LTGJ (N = 40) completed a close- and open-ended question online survey about their educational experiences and related activism, and shared their perceptions about the value of student activism to higher education. The study is grounded in Paulo Freire's notions of critical consciousness and praxis, and illustrates how activism, regarding local and global justice struggles, enriches students' educational experiences within and beyond the university. Findings indicate that student activism and organizing the LTGJ Forum and Festival benefited students academically, professionally, and personally in intersecting and intertwining ways. Themes emerged around the roles that activism played in the development of scholar-activism, critical thinking, applied learning, career and professional development, leadership development, and community engagement and activism. Findings also revealed that involvement with LTGJ was an avenue for engaging with communities outside of academia. The article concludes with implications for multi-issue activist groups on college campuses.*

*Cette étude porte sur l'impact qu'a eu l'organisation d'un forum et festival annuel sur la justice sociale, par l'implication dans une organisation étudiante progressiste, activiste et axée sur la défense de causes multiples : Local to Global Justice (LTGJ; [www.localtogloball.org](http://www.localtogloball.org)), sur les expériences académiques, le développement professionnel (par ex., l'activisme, la pensée critique, l'apprentissage appliqué), le développement en leadership, et l'implication et l'activisme communautaires des étudiants. Des leaders étudiants, anciens et actuels (n = 33; 90% étudiants diplômés), mentors du corps professoral (n = 3) et des membres de la communauté (n = 4) LTGJ (N = 40) ont complété un questionnaire en ligne. Les questions, ouvertes ou fermées, portaient sur les expériences éducatives et l'activisme connexe des étudiants et leur donnaient l'occasion de partager leurs perceptions de la valeur de l'activisme étudiant dans le contexte des études supérieures. Cette étude repose sur les notions de Paulo Freire sur la conscience critique et la pratique, et elle illustre dans quelle mesure l'activisme portant sur les luttes locales et globales pour la justice enrichit les expériences éducatives des étudiants, pendant et après l'université.*

*Les résultats indiquent que l'activisme et l'organisation du forum et festival LTGJ avaient procuré aux étudiants une gamme d'avantages entrelacés sur les plans académique, professionnel et personnel. Des thèmes sont ressortis autour des rôles que joue l'activisme dans le développement de la pensée critique, l'apprentissage appliqué, le développement professionnel, le développement du leadership et l'implication et l'activisme communautaires. Les résultats ont également révélé que l'implication auprès de LTGJ était une piste vers l'implication dans d'autres communautés en dehors du monde académique. La présentation d'implications pour les groupes activistes œuvrant sur les campus universitaires et axés sur la défense de causes multiples vient terminer l'article.*

An increasing number of scholars—including the authors of this paper—argue that higher education needs to prepare students to be contributing citizens to a democratic society and foster learning that propels students to work toward social justice locally and globally (see the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Pasque, Hendricks, & Bowman, 2006). There is extensive scholarship in the arena of student involvement and student affairs documenting the important role that co-curricular collegiate experiences, such as involvement in campus organizations and community volunteerism, play in fostering leadership skills and civic engagement (e.g., Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Jacoby, 2009; Kuh, 1995; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Revilla, 2004; Sax, 2004).

Student activism is another avenue through which students can develop skills of leadership, civic engagement, and community involvement. Unlike general volunteerism or involvement in non-activist student organizations, involvement in a progressive activist organization mobilizes students to engage in leadership roles and community engagement aimed at addressing, reducing, and eventually eliminating social inequalities based on race, gender, immigration status, and other social and identity markers. We argue that student activism is a form of holistic, life-long learning that reflects engaged pedagogy and radical love (hooks, 1994).

### **Scholarship on Student Activism**

The literature on student protests in the U.S. dates back to the 1700s, although social and political activism on college campuses primarily gained momentum in the 1900s (Chambers & Phelps, 1994). A number of scholars have reviewed and synthesized the history of student activism in the U.S. over various historical periods ranging from the 1700s to current times (for reviews, see: Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Rhoads, 2009, 2016). Recently, activism across U. S. college campuses has surged as students have led and joined movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, DREAMERS, Occupy, and the fight against sexual assault (Rhoads, 2016).

In the past, student activism was not considered as a legitimate avenue for leadership development; it was thought to be disruptive and viewed as a detraction from student learning and engagement (Chambers & Phelps, 1993, 1994). This negative view of student activism has declined as scholars began to assert that activism contributes to civic engagement, leadership development, and student engagement (e.g., Biddix, 2014; Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009; Chambers & Phelps, 1993, 1994; DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Ollis, 2010; Tsui, 2000).

## **The Positive Roles of Student Activism**

Researchers have examined civic outcomes resulting from participating in campus political and war rallies. Biddix (2014) analyzed data from the College Senior Survey from 9,903 students across 97 four-year, private institutions, and found that students who frequently participated in demonstrations (i.e., war, political) increased their social agency, civic awareness, and leadership skills. In a case study, Biddix, Somers, and Polman (2009) found that participating in a campus protest for living wage resulted in meaningful democratic and civic outcomes. The outcomes included a) examining and reflecting on one's personal values, b) learning how to bring about social change and c) developing a sense of community on campus. Klar and Kasser (2009) surveyed 341 college students and a national sample of 718 activists and found that activism was positively related to well-being (i.e., hope, life satisfaction) and to vitality.

Rhoads (2016) argues that engagement in activism provides a special type of learning opportunity:

The sophisticated insights and forms of knowledge acquired in facilitating and guiding an array of student actors toward a collective endeavor should not be underestimated. These are complex learning outcomes that are unlikely to be developed through course readings and class discussions. (p.199)

Although studies documenting the benefits of student activism are on the rise, research is scarce on how involvement in activist student organizations may shape students' educational experiences, leadership development, and community engagement. The recognition of the valuable experiences and leadership skills that students gain via their activism is critical for understanding why student activism is worthy of institutional support (Chambers & Phelps, 1994; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Patterson, 2013), and more broadly, how activism can strengthen students' critical consciousness in addressing structural inequities both at the university and in their communities (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011).

The current study adds to emerging research on the meaningful impacts of activism on students' academic experiences and professional development, leadership development, and community engagement and activism. We used an online survey and the experiences of the authors to explore ways in which involvement in a campus-based, student-driven, multi-issue, activist organization called Local to Global Justice (LTGJ) has impacted students over its 16-year history. The current study takes a novel approach in examining a multi-issue activist organization; prior studies tended to focus on single-issue organizations or activists. Multi-issue or cross-domain activists—people who are or have been involved in activism across multiple fronts—are understudied and can serve as important bridges across social issues (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Louis, Amiot, Thomas, & Blackwood, 2016). Examining multi-issue activism is important as it sheds light on the intersectional nature of human rights and social justice issues. Additionally, the participants in the current study were mostly graduate students (90% of student respondents), whereas prior research, especially in the arena of student involvement, has predominantly included undergraduate students. We assess the perspectives of students, faculty advisors, and community members who have been part of the LTGJ Forum and Festival planning team, to describe the educational value attributed to student activism.

## Theoretical Framework: Freire's Critical Consciousness and Praxis

This work is situated within Paulo Freire's (1970/1986; 1985) theories of critical consciousness, dialogue, and praxis. The LTGJ organization and its annual event (i.e., the LTGJ Forum and Festival) provide space for critical dialogue that raises awareness of multiple issues and structural elements that perpetuate various forms of social and political oppression, affording students an opportunity to explore and develop critical consciousness. The hope is that participants ultimately make connections that encourage reflection upon and engagement with multiple social justice issues through an explicit mode of praxis. As Freire (1972) describes it,

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection...Otherwise, action is pure activism. (p. 41)

Critical consciousness (*conscientização* in Portuguese, or conscientization, in English) is the process of coming to an understanding of one's oppressors—both human and structural. Freire believed that education provides an avenue for students to change the world by opening their eyes to the inequalities and oppression surrounding them, guiding them to a critical consciousness. Education should help students become self-empowered in recognizing their own potential to be active agents of change, rather than passive learners whose education is divorced from their lived experiences (Freire, 1970/1986).

Dialogue is another important aspect of Freirean theory that is critical to this study. According to Freire (1970/1986), "dialogue is the essence of revolutionary action" (p. 135). It is through dialogue that the learner is able to engage in critical analysis of reality and in turn work with others to take action against oppression. Those who are in dialogue must have trust and be open to reality being challenged and changed. However, Freire believed that dialogue and critical consciousness only go so far in addressing injustices. Therefore, Freire connected critical consciousness with praxis, the union of theory (insight), reflection, and action (Freire, 1970/1986). Without praxis, or reflection in tandem with action, one cannot become aware of the structures of oppression and transform these structures, or in Freirean terms, achieve liberation. Freire refers to *activism* as action without reflection (1970/1986); however, in the current paper, activism denotes what Freire calls *praxis*, or the combination of reflection and action. The concepts of critical consciousness, dialogue, and praxis are embedded in the organizational values of LTGJ and are reflected in recent literature about critical consciousness and student activism (e.g., Revilla, 2004; Watts et al., 2011).

## The Local to Global Justice (LTGJ) Organization

### History and Mission

LTGJ ([www.localtogloball.org](http://www.localtogloball.org)) is a registered student organization at a large, public university that is located in a historically politically conservative state in the southwestern U.S. The organization was founded in 2001 by a group of graduate students and faculty, who identified as activist-scholars with interests in community organizing, many with direct action experiences in various social movements. The primary goal of LTGJ has been to foster a community that

facilitates connections among student groups and surrounding communities to encourage students to “see their place in a cultural context beyond their immediate local circle” (Quaye, 2007, p. 5), and to provide a space for anyone interested in social activism to learn about other overarching social justice issues and concerns of the local community. The first LTGJ Forum and Festival, formerly called the LTGJ Teach-In, was held in 2002. This inaugural event, themed “Knowledge, Networks, and Action,” drew about 100 people from campus and community, and went on to play a pivotal role in planning anti-war protests and other events in LTGJ’s first six years. Within two years of its founding, the free, annual LTGJ Forum and Festival grew to 450-500 local and regional activists, students, and faculty. Themes change annually, responding to pressing social justice issues. More recent event themes have consisted of “Justice for Women, Justice for All,” “Food Justice,” “Water Justice,” and “Racial Justice,” including an emphasis on “Black Lives Matter” with connections to global anti-racist activism.

### **Organizational Structure**

Themes are chosen by consensus of the entire organizing committee, which consists of graduate and undergraduate students, as well as community members, high school students, and faculty advisors. Similar to a Chicana/Latina feminist student organization called Raza Womyn de UCLA (Revilla, 2004), the LTGJ organizational structure and theme selection reflects a non-hierarchical structure whereby all members have an equal opportunity to participate in collective decision making. Furthermore, similar to Raza Womyn, there are no initiation rules or rules based on seniority; new members are swiftly welcomed and involved in decision-making. The LTGJ planning committee meets every other week throughout the school year to discuss not only the Forum and Festival, but also other avenues and opportunities for community and student activism. Some of these involve organizing with other local groups supporting social and environmental justice causes such as fighting unfair conditions in sweatshops, raising minimum wage salaries, and immigration reform.

Student leadership and planning committee members change each year as students graduate. Students represent a wide range of disciplines (e.g., gender studies, justice studies, sustainability, non-profit leadership, and education) and home countries (e.g., Peru, Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Hungary, the Philippines, and the Czech Republic). A key component to the sustainability of the group is that newer planning team members are mentored by more experienced ones, who model leadership, fundraising, and organizing tactics, while new student leaders bring fresh enthusiasm and ideas to the table, creating a vibrant exchange of concepts and experiences.

### **The Current Study**

The primary aim of the current research was to explore, through a Freirean lens, two overarching questions:

1. How has involvement in LTGJ contributed to students' academic experiences and to their career and professional development?
2. How has involvement in LTGJ contributed to students' leadership development, community engagement, and activism?

## Method

**Participants.** The co-authors of this article represent current and alumni members of LTGJ, spanning over a decade. Three of the authors (Farago, Eversman, and Roca-Servat) are alumni student leaders of LTGJ and two of the authors (Swadener and Richter) are current faculty advisors, with Swadener being one of the founders of LTGJ. Each of the five authors served as a participant in the study and brought their experiences and insights into the ways in which LTGJ has functioned and impacted their lives. The direct experiences of the authors complemented the open coding method used for analyzing the open-ended survey items.

Participants (N = 40) included current and alumni student leaders, community members, and faculty advisors, all of whom either served on the LTGJ Forum and Festival planning team or were veteran festival volunteers. Participants completed an online survey about the impact they believed involvement in LTGJ had on students' educational experiences and community engagement. Although most respondents were current and alumni student leaders (n = 33, 90% graduate students), faculty (n = 3) and community member perspectives (n = 4) were gathered to complement student members' perceptions about the impact of LTGJ on student development.

**Procedures.** The online survey included close- and open-ended questions about the roles planning team members played in organizing the LTGJ Forum and Festival (e.g., publicity, fundraising, booking speakers and performers) and questions about aspects of their roles that they found most impactful or meaningful. Additionally, current and alumni student respondents (n = 33) were asked about the positive influence LTGJ had on the quality of their education, educational experiences, academic and career goals; professional development and career trajectory; teaching and mentoring; research; leadership skills (e.g., event planning, communication); and community engagement and activism. Answers were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *no or very little influence* to (5) *very strong influence* with an option for open-ended responses. Faculty advisor respondents (n = 3) were asked about their roles as mentors in LTGJ, and about their perceptions about the role of organizations, such as LTGJ, in student development in higher education. All respondents answered questions about organizations they have co-founded or joined as a result of their involvement in LTGJ, and about why an incoming student should join LTGJ. Sample questionnaire items are listed in the Appendix.

We utilized open coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to analyze open-ended responses. Open-ended responses were coded independently by four of the authors. The authors then compared codes and adjusted codes as needed. This practice allowed the authors to ensure the validity of the initial analysis. Analysis commenced, and the open-ended questions were openly coded to discover emerging themes, using preliminary codes derived from the research questions. After the first round of coding, two of the authors with background in qualitative research further analyzed these data, developing axial codes and identifying emergent themes and connections. Salient quotes were chosen to illustrate these themes and their relation to the overarching research questions, as well as to complement the quantitative findings. Overall, our methodology followed suggestions for applied qualitative research outlined by Stake (2010).

## Findings

### Academic Experiences and Career Development

Close-ended responses from student respondents indicated that on average, student leaders believed that their involvement in LTGJ exerted a strong positive influence on the quality of their overall education ( $M = 4.13$  out of 5), on their educational experiences ( $M = 4.08$  out of 5), on their academic and career goals ( $M = 3.78$  out of 5), on their professional development and career trajectory ( $M = 3.63$  out of 5), and on their teaching and mentoring ( $M = 3.58$  out of 5). Participants also reported that their involvement in LTGJ exerted some positive influence on their research ( $M = 2.80$  out of 5); Table 1 provides a summary of these findings.

In the next section, results from open-ended responses are outlined. Unless otherwise noted, responses are from current or alumni student leaders.

**Scholar-activism.** In line with close-ended responses, open-ended responses indicated that involvement in LTGJ enhanced students' educational experiences. Responses reflected the intersectionalities inherent in a group with a multi-issue focus, including reflections on the conjuncture between activism and scholarship. Students commented on ways that their work with LTGJ provided models for being a scholar-activist, especially pertaining to the development of critical consciousness in relation to political and structural inequalities. As one respondent reflected, "LTGJ gave me experience and a model for being an activist-scholar, rather than an armchair leftist." Another student stated, "My involvement solidified my interest in serving as a scholar-activist," suggesting that LTGJ models methods for activism that blend well with traditional academic goals. Accordingly, another respondent mentioned that their involvement in LTGJ "proves that activism is compatible with academia." Several former student leaders are now faculty members at other institutions, and they indicated the importance LTGJ played in broadening their understanding of research, and inspiring them to include critical pedagogies in the classroom. Respondents commented on the influence that activist-scholars and public intellectuals had in challenging their preconceptions about research, teaching, and service, and showing them how the learning process was intrinsically linked to the practice of knowledge construction for social change. With regards to research, one participant stated that "I see my involvement in LTGJ both as a professional and personal experience as it influences many aspects of my life. My research now tends to have a broader focus on social

Table 1

*Impact of LTGJ on Students' Education, Leadership, and Community Engagement*

Rate the degree of positive influence your involvement in LTGJ had on your ...	n	Mean (SD)
Community involvement (organizing, activism)	24	4.54 (0.72)
Overall quality of your education	24	4.13 (0.74)
Educational experiences (what you learned in classes)	26	4.08 (0.85)
Academic/career goals	27	3.78 (1.12)
Leadership skills	24	3.67 (1.49)
Professional development/career trajectory	27	3.63 (1.31)
Teaching/mentoring	19	3.58 (1.12)
Research (e.g. dissertation, thesis)	20	2.80 (1.36)

*Note.* Scores range from 1-5 (1 = No influence, 2 = Slight influence, 3 = Some influence, 4 = Much influence, 5 = Very strong influence).

justice.” Similarly, a former student leader commented:

LTGJ has fundamentally impacted my teaching practice. The importance of being inclusive and facilitating spaces for people to dialogue about various social justice issues was demonstrated very well through LTGJ and has influenced me to include practices like story and narrative in my teaching.

One faculty member noted, “I was able to get my students into the teach-in to see real-world activists changing the world.” Students also became more aware of faculty’s critical and activist work through LTGJ, allowing insight into faculty’s activist-scholarship, potentially helping students envision the intersection between scholarship and social change.

**Critical thinking.** Another finding revealed that LTGJ provided a space to learn about civil debate and dialogue, while offering the possibility of seeing issues from multiple angles; this enhanced critical thinking abilities for students. It was clear from open-ended responses that LTGJ provided opportunities to, as one student put it, “meet, learn from, and discuss ideas about justice with scholars, activists, and public intellectuals doing cutting edge social justice organizing work around the world.” A former student leader put it this way, “I think I learned a profound amount just from being at the table with the LTGJ team in seeing how people shared ideas, respectfully heard and debated issues, and supported one another to build skills and gain valuable experiences.” As another student reflected, “By meeting people from other departments I was able to learn about other scholars who, while not directly related to my field, truly helped open my mind to new ideas.”

Students lauded the opportunities LTGJ provided for cross-disciplinary work and for the opportunity “to learn about ways of knowing and being that are different than your own and being invited to celebrate, not just tolerate, those differences.” One person noted, “Many degree programs are isolated - this organization helps you meet folks from cross disciplines and work on a variety of ways to express and explore a theme.” These reactions encapsulate Freire’s ideas of critical consciousness with praxis, with students learning how to become social activists, scholars, and critical thinkers. Indeed, according to Freire, social change involving dialogue cannot exist unless people engage in critical thinking or reflection that allows them to identify the causes behind social injustice (Freire, 1970/1986). Reflection via critical thinking is indispensable to social transformation (Freire, 1970/1986). Without critical thinking or reflection, social change or social justice can cause harm to the very people it is designed to uplift, and simply reify existing inequities or recreate the status quo. Critical reflection allows people to identify the root causes of social injustices and creates a path for their elimination.

For students who wanted to be involved in social activism and critically evaluate social justice issues from multiple angles, LTGJ provided a place where these ideals could be expressed in ways not always possible in a traditional classroom setting. As one student noted, “I’ve learned a lot more by being involved in LTGJ and other social justice organizations on campus than I have learned in my classes.” This response alludes to another theme that emerged, the theme of applied or experiential learning.

**Applied learning.** Several students mentioned that their involvement in LTGJ has allowed them to take learning into the “real-world.” As stated by a respondent, “The Festival has been a kind of application of what I have learned in class.” LTGJ student members found more relevance for academic research and interests via involvement in the community as they applied knowledge previously confined to the classroom to situations directly pertinent to communities beyond academia. LTGJ demystified the classroom as the only serious space for educational



experiences, and instead provided a space “to learn things outside classes and more in relation to the community,” as one participant identified. LTGJ offered a space for students, faculty, and community members to see each other as equals in a common cause, and empowered students to be confident and focused in their interests around social activism while respecting and learning from community members on a local level. One faculty respondent stated:

I think it adds real-world examples of real people doing things to change the world. The media teaches us to be passive and that there are a few stars we should worship, and we should just obey and get a decent job and not worry about solving bigger problems. And in many ways our education system reinforces that—teaching passivity and obedience, versus action. LTGJ turns that on its head—teaching leadership and exposing students to local leaders who are the real stars of the world, but who are not recognized as such. Students can see how real change happens.

Involvement in social justice organizations like LTGJ offers both faculty and students incredible experiences interacting with each other and with community members via breaking the “professor versus student” hierarchy as well as the “town and gown” divide. This type of non-hierarchical, student-driven organization, in which students, faculty, and community members learn from and with each other, is at the heart of what Freire calls *problem-posing education*. This type of learning allows for the emergence of critical consciousness and social transformation (Freire, 1972). According to this model of education, students are active, critical co-investigators in dialogue with teachers, rather than passive listeners to be filled with information (what Freire [1972] calls the *banking model of education*, which is antithetical to social change).

Overall, the non-hierarchical nature of LTGJ allowed students to use their educational experiences beyond the classroom and to understand themselves and the university as part of larger conversations in the community. As noted earlier, some alumni commented that their coursework did not prepare them to do activist or social justice-focused work, and that their work with LTGJ served this role. Other students and alumni disclosed that their work with LTGJ complemented or enhanced coursework they were taking.

**Career and professional development.** Several students mentioned that their leadership roles in LTGJ, including experiences with event and conference planning, managing a budget and fundraising, helped them prepare for their future work. One student stated, “Being an officer [in LTGJ] helps me in my goal of working for a nonprofit.” Another student noted, “The leadership skills I developed through booking speakers, performers, coordinating fundraising and paperwork, and helping to manage the planning team are invaluable experiences that will certainly come in handy in whatever job I land in the future!” Another student reflected,

LTGJ gave me an opportunity to be a leader. I was the president of the group for two years and learned much about myself and about working with all different kinds of people. I learned to work under pressure and how to balance an insanely busy schedule.

As these responses demonstrate, the theme of developing valuable leadership skills emerged in response to questions about career development; this theme of leadership re-surfaced when students were asked about community engagement and activism. Career development and community engagement are not distinctly separate categories, much like applied learning and

community engagement are inherently interconnected in the context of student activism.

Several respondents commented on how their work with LTGJ influenced their career aspirations. One respondent stated, in reference to hearing a keynote address by Keith McHenry, the founder of “Food Not Bombs,” that the speaker’s passion “helped support my own goal to devote my life to helping the growing homeless population.” Respondents also emphasized that LTGJ directed them to careers or fields of study they had not recognized as previously appealing. One respondent noted that LTGJ “Helped direct me to fields of study that I didn't realize I was interested in (e.g. environmental justice or environmental science).” Echoing these sentiments, another respondent mentioned “It made me realize that I really like working with people and helping work on events that make people aware, especially making children aware of specific justice issues. I could do stuff like this for my career.”

These examples and stories underscore the critical role that LTGJ has played and continues to play for students who are drawn to careers focused on social activism. It was in LTGJ that these students found an outlet for multi-issue activism and for opportunities for applied or experiential learning, which ultimately influenced their career interests and provided a way for them to become part of a community outside of the university’s boundaries. This theme of eliminating the divide between academic and community endeavors segues into the next section of the findings on leadership development and community engagement and activism.

### **Leadership Development and Community Engagement and Activism**

Close-ended responses indicated that the majority of current and alumni student leaders believed that their involvement exerted a strong impact on their leadership skills ( $M = 3.67$  out of 5) and a very strong impact on their community engagement and activism ( $M = 4.54$  out of 5) (see Table 1). The degree of positive impact was strongest for community engagement, out of all items, indicating that LTGJ has inspired students to take their education beyond the walls of academia to pursue service and community activism. In terms of leadership skills, the majority, or near majority, of respondents reported that they learned valuable leadership skills around praxis, such as event planning (67%), community organizing (52%), and interpersonal skills (49%). A little less than half (39%) of respondents indicated that they gained publicity skills, and a little more than fourth (27%) of respondents indicated that they gained oral communication skills (see Table 2).

Table 2

#### *Skills Learned or Practiced by Students in Planning the LTGJ Forum and Festival*

Skill	n	%
Event planning	22	67
Community organizing	17	52
Interpersonal	16	49
Publicity	13	39
Oral communication	9	27
Budget prep./fundraising/grant writing	6	18
Written communication	3	9

Only 18% of respondents gained fundraising or budgeting skills and only 9% written communication skills. Additionally, 49% of participants joined and 28% of participants founded or co-founded an organization as a result of their involvement in LTGJ. Table 3 lists these organizations.

Results from open-ended responses regarding leadership development and community engagement are outlined in the following sections. Unless otherwise noted, responses are from current or alumni student leaders.

**Leadership development.** As indicated earlier, the theme of leadership emerged in reference to career and professional development and in reference to community engagement. The benefit of leadership development via involvement in LTGJ were relevant for both educational experiences and community engagement; initially, we expected a clear distinction between the two. These intersectionalities of multi-issue activism are representative of the boundaries and borders that LTGJ seeks to blend, such as the limitations between activists and scholars, academia and community, faculty and students, and racial and gender justice, as well

Table 3

*Organizations Joined or Founded via LTGJ*

Organizations joined	Organizations formed
Black Lives Matter	Las Otras Hermanas
[University] Ethnic Studies Group	Safe Space Ally Training
[City] Copwatch	[State] Alliance for Peaceful Justice
Las Otras Hermanas	[University] Human Rights Coalition
UNIDOS	GMO Free Hiking (LLC)
Repeal Coalition	A2D Project
Amnesty International [City]	Reclaiming Group
International Workers of the World	United Students for Fair Trade
Fair Wage Coalition	
Guadalupe Community Garden	
Global Sustainability Network	
Food Not Bombs	
Real Food at [University]	
Veg-Aware at [University]	
LGBTQIAA	
Intergroup Relations	
Prisons Inside-Out Teacher Training	
[City] Anarchist Coalition	
[State] Indymedia	
Building with Justice Coalition	
[State] Teachers for Justice	
RAD Child (Radical Child)	

as the restrictions that isolate social justice issues and academic disciplines. Students, faculty, and community members alike referred to LTGJ as a “connector,” “bridge,” “space,” and “platform” that allows for traditional boundaries and separations to blur as people, issues, ideas, and causes, spanning a wide range of disciplines and expertise, intersect.

Benefits to students in the arena of leadership included an increasing sense of the possibility of political change; a stronger political voice; and, more confidence in their organizing, interpersonal, and leadership skills, leading to a stronger development of the praxis of student activism. One student respondent stated, “I felt incredibly supported to take on leadership roles and learn more about my own capabilities in that regard.” Another student leader noted that through involvement in LTGJ, “you will be offered opportunities to challenge yourself and grow into roles you may not otherwise have exposure to/opportunity to explore.” One respondent noted that LTGJ helps “people organize against systems of oppression.” At a time when youth increasingly see national politics as outside of their ability to affect and inherently mistrust elected officials (e.g., Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Wayne Osgood, & Briddell, 2011), LTGJ provided opportunities to engage with a local view of politics, where change from the grassroots level is critical for social change. Freire was an advocate for dismantling systems of oppression through grassroots activism—in fact, according to Freire, social change can only be achieved via a bottom-up approach (Freire, 1972). This bottom-up approach, within the context of LTGJ, has meant that students and community activists have lead the way in organizing for positive social change, whereas faculty, administrators, and other persons occupying formal positions of power and influence have played a supportive role.

### **Community Engagement and Creating Community**

**Activism powered through meaningful connections.** The opportunities that LTGJ provided for bridging social justice issues with the community were frequent themes both in response to inquiries about academic experiences and career development, and in response to community engagement, demonstrating that these LTGJ spheres of influence are not mutually exclusive and overlap in intertwining ways. Several respondents emphasized the important role that LTGJ has played not only in connecting them to communities across the city and state, but also in connecting them to new friends and to a like-minded community of students, faculty, and activists. Participants reiterated that “love,” “respect,” “kindness,” and “friendship” strengthened the bonds among group members and helped them connect to, as one faculty member put it, “other like-minded folks who are not content with just studying justice, but actually understanding, employing and practicing justice concepts and ideals in a different context.” Students consistently emphasized their experiences as beneficial for meeting like-minded yet diverse, activist-oriented students, faculty, and community members, and underscored the importance of learning more about the breadth of activism in the region.

Some stated that they did not “find their people” until they became active in this organization, or as one student put it, “Up until that point I did not have a sense of community at [Public University],” pointing to the idea that LTGJ became its own community activist group, comprised of individuals who represented a constellation of social justice issues, but who were unified through concerns of justice. When asked about the role that organizations, such as LTGJ, play in student development in higher education, faculty described such opportunities as crucial to providing students real-world experiences and the necessary connections to community that students desperately need at a large university. As one faculty member

commented:

So many students feel dislocated, isolated, and don't know how to get involved. LTGJ offers a fair and open space for these students to help apply their education to outside issues and help them connect with the greater community ... and gives them confidence to pursue their own social justice interests.

This is especially relevant at large research universities, with enrollments in the tens of thousands, and especially at the university where this research was conducted, which has approximately 100,000 students and is one of the largest universities in the United States. Helping students locate and connect with sympathetic communities is a critical aspect of student retention, especially for marginalized students, allowing students to establish meaningful connections between their lives and education and become agents of social change (Revilla, 2004).

One faculty respondent stated, when asked about the most meaningful aspect of LTGJ, that it was “The people. The people are amazing, inspiring, and I would walk through fire with them and for them. They never give up, and they are the reason grass-roots organizations are a meaningful and crucial part of addressing systemic injustices.” Similarly, a student respondent indicated, “I made good friends with people and in a way those friendships are a form of accountability to do more and to take better care of ourselves and each other—promoting peace, justice, and kindness.” Yet, another respondent noted, “The power of LTGJ is to put wood under the fire of activism and inspire students and community members to feed off of each other's energy ... LTGJ also allows folks to link the university to larger social movements. ... so it is a bridge of sorts.” Much like the responses indicated, Freire (1972) emphasized that love, trust, and caring are critical to for liberatory social change. Both the connections among LTGJ members, as well as their connections to the larger communities they were part of and collaborated with, nurtured a sense of love and kinship that facilitated envisioning and working toward a more just world.

Freire (1972) also argued that hope is indispensable to eliminating oppressive social structures. One respondent mentioned, regarding what they would tell an incoming student about reasons for joining LTGJ, “It will give you hope for a more just future and may show you unique ways you can apply the skills you acquire through your education for greater justice in your future communities and work.” According to Freire (1972), social transformation cannot transpire in an aura of hopelessness. Respondents described their involvement in LTGJ as “inspiring,” “motivating,” and “hopeful,” reflecting Freire's conviction that hope is inextricably intertwined with and necessary for social transformation.

Responses reflected that LTGJ provided and continues to provide a way for those who are interested in activist work to be made aware of what is happening on, around, and beyond campus. One respondent noted, “LTGJ is a great chance to learn more about a social issue, as well as find ways to work to solve it. It is a great first step to a more active citizenship and into activism.” The following quote from a faculty member reflects the impact of LTGJ in this regard: “The teach-in is an amazing portal into a range of communities outside the campus.” As a student respondent stated, “Participation in LTGJ made me motivated to become a more proactive community member and it also made me believe more strongly in a community's power to change things for the better in our world.” The notion of a student-community organization serving as a portal of possibilities for activism was echoed throughout.

**Multi-issue activism and intersectionality of causes.** One striking finding was the

diverse list of community and campus organizations and causes that LTGJ members mentioned in relation to their involvement in LTGJ, which are listed in Table 3. An important intersectional aspect of LTGJ is the space the festival has provided for cross-pollination across issues of class, gender, sexuality, race, and nationality. One faculty member noted that these groups, such as labor unions and the anarchist community, were sometimes in conflict with one another. Seeing these groups engage in civil discourse with each other modeled how community-oriented student activism can be conducted, even when the methods or end goals are different, creating spaces for intercultural dialogue and intersectionality of issues. LTGJ panels and workshops have shed light on the intricacies of injustice, blurring scientific, disciplinary, and technical divides, and have placed an emphasis on modes of praxis that center intersectionality in grassroots activism. Overall, the diverse members of LTGJ felt like the organization and the annual event provided a nourishing space for engaging in progressive, collective actions and for learning from the many activists and groups across campus and the greater community.

### **Summary**

LTGJ has meaningfully contributed to students' academic experiences and career development via fostering scholar-activism, critical thinking, applied learning, and supporting career and professional development relevant to social justice. LTGJ has also fostered students' leadership development and fueled their community engagement and activism. The themes of leadership and community engagement were salient across both academic (i.e., scholar-activism, critical thinking, applied learning, career and professional development) and non-academic (i.e., leadership development, community engagement and activism) aspects of the findings. We feel that the distinction between academic and non-academic realms is a false binary that groups like LTGJ seek to bridge.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Findings indicate that student involvement in LTGJ reflects Freire's theories of critical consciousness and praxis. Consistent with Freire's theories, students acknowledged that their involvement in LTGJ has helped them recognize their active role in initiating social change, both through their academic experiences and professional pursuits, as well as via their community engagement. Students reported that their involvement in LTGJ has made them aware of the intertwined connections between their education and the lived realities of surrounding communities, the crux of Freire's theory. Involvement in LTGJ has allowed students (as well as faculty and community activists) to create and participate in new dialogues with different groups and individuals across the university, the urban metropolis, the state, the nation, and the globe, creating new avenues of critical consciousness by expanding the applications of theories learned (or in some cases, not taught) in the classroom.

The structural organization of LTGJ, such as the non-hierarchical nature of the LTGJ Forum and Festival planning team, the consensus decision-making model whereby faculty, students, and community members have equal input, as well as the facilitation of and participation in community forums and collective community activism together enable what Freire (1972) calls dialogical practice. As such, students, faculty, and community members are co-creators and co-teachers of knowledge, and collectively work toward social transformation. The diverse list of organizations formed and joined as a result of involvement in LTGJ

demonstrates the power of grassroots activism in an organization that represents a coalition of student leaders, faculty, and community activists.

Findings confirmed initial expectations that students would acknowledge that their involvement in LTGJ helped them recognize their active role in social change and deepen their awareness of connections between their educational development and community engagement. Current and former student leaders reported that LTGJ has played a meaningful role in their education and leadership skills by grounding their learning in community engagement and direct actions, and by exposing them to new ideas and career paths. The event planning and organizing skills that student leaders learned and practiced while planning the LTGJ Forum and Festival enhanced their community engagement and furthered their professional development relevant to their future careers.

According to Freire, education should help students become self-empowered in recognizing their own potential to be active agents of change, rather than passive learners whose education is divorced from their lived experiences (1970/1986). Student activism becomes a vehicle through which students can interrogate and understand the scope and scale of oppression and denigration of certain cultural or racial groups on their college campuses and in their communities. LTGJ has offered and continues to offer a means and method of praxis for social change and participation for engaging with community and university members as equals in designing and creating the annual LTGJ Forum and Festival.

New connections were forged among student activists and communities, connections that helped students engage more effectively with social activism. Implications for encouraging and sustaining student activism in higher education include the importance of providing spaces and events for multi-issue activism that create and underscore connections between local issues and global struggles. Much like Barnhardt, Sheets, and Pasquesi (2015) found that having meaningful discussions with peers about social change and partaking in community engagement increased college students' civic skills and commitment, meaningful connections among LTGJ members and participating in community engagement inspired students to work towards social justice, as evidenced by the plethora of social causes they initiated or joined as a result of their involvement.

Taking a multi-issue approach allows the issues of focus to be relevant and sensitive to broader concerns in the community, the nation, and the world. Organizing a large event, and smaller ones throughout the year, provided opportunities for students to gain experience in fundraising, planning, consensus decision-making, and facilitating events. The inclusion of community activists as well as committed faculty mentors in the student organization and in the LTGJ Forum and Festival planning process has implications for the sustainability of organizations like LTGJ, by providing continuity as students graduate. Working to actively diminish hierarchical and dichotomous relationships (e.g., student/faculty) is another important implication so that students are driving decision-making, planning, and coordinating events in collaboration with community activists. As Rhoads (2009) argues, to render universities as socially transformative spaces, the principles that LTGJ embodies are needed: Partnering with communities, centering social justice, developing critical consciousness, foregrounding egalitarian structures and relationships, and connecting to broad social movements.

Despite the contributions of the study, some limitations remain. Namely, some student participants were active in the organization years prior to this research taking place, potentially weakening the validity of the retrospective data. Going forward, we plan to use survey

assessments more frequently to capture responses about impact immediately and over time for longitudinal analyses. Also, although community members are active participants in LTGJ, the community organizations that LTGJ collaborates with were not consulted in the current work, resulting in a one-sided assessment of impact. In the future, we will involve community groups to more holistically capture the impact of LTGJ on surrounding communities. Lastly, although the survey included options for open-ended responses, to fully capture the nuances of student activism and its impact on students, qualitative work is needed. We have recently begun working on a qualitative, narrative-based research project on the impacts of participation in LTGJ. It will also be important to examine students' motivations for joining activist student organizations such as LTGJ and barriers to involvement to delineate how to render involvement in activism accessible to a wider range of students.

In conclusion, we argue for the importance of having spaces for student activism in higher education to support student development. Student activist groups provide a direct line of communication between universities and surrounding communities. Activist groups can serve as spaces for collaborative actions between students, faculty, youth, and communities. LTGJ has spent 16 years cultivating community- and university-based engagement, without privileging one over the other. We hope to have many more years ahead to develop our model and continue to engage with student and community activists to make the world a more just, inclusive, and sustainable place for all.

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### Note

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### Appendix: Sample Survey Items

1. What do you feel are the most important skills you learned and/or improved as a result of your involvement in LTGJ? (check all that apply)

- Oral communication skills
- Budget preparation skills
- Publicity skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Fundraising skills/Grant writing
- Event planning skills
- Community organizing skills
- Other (explain):

2. Rate the degree of positive influence your involvement in LTGJ had on your:

No or very little Influence	Slight influence	Some influence	Much influence	Very strong influence
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Educational experiences (e.g., what you learned in classes or more generally) (explain):

Academic/career goals (explain):

Professional development/career trajectory (explain):

Research (dissertation, thesis, post-grad research) (explain):

Teaching/mentoring (explain):

Overall quality of your education (explain):

Community involvement (organizing, activism) (explain):

Leadership skills (explain):

3. What challenges, opportunities, and strengths do you see in multi-issue activism?

4. If you had to describe to an incoming student the top reasons why they should be involved in LTGJ, what would these be?

5. What aspect(s) of your involvement in LTGJ did you find most meaningful?