

Mechanisms for and Barriers to Activism and its Effects on Activists: A Case Study of  
Campus Sexual Violence Activism

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

by

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Spring Semester 2020  
George Mason University  
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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to my many family members, friends, and coworkers that have helped make this thesis possible. Thank you to my thesis committee members, Dr. Charlotte Gill and Dr. Robert J. Norris, for their thoughtful feedback and advice. Finally, special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Yasemin Irvin-Erickson, for her priceless guidance and support, and to Lindsay Smith for being my trusty sidekick.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Campus Sexual Violence Activist .....	CSVA
“Dear Colleague” Letter .....	DCL
Department of Education .....	DOE
Institutional Betrayal.....	IB
New Social Movement Theory .....	NSMT
Office for Civil Rights .....	OCR
Research Question .....	RQ
Sexual Violence Elimination Act.....	SaVE
Violence Against Women Act .....	VAWA

## **ABSTRACT**

### **MECHANISMS FOR AND BARRIERS TO ACTIVISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON ACTIVISTS: A CASE STUDY OF CAMPUS SEXUAL VIOLENCE ACTIVISM**

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In recent years, many survivors of campus sexual violence have come forward, and student activists have collaborated to expose campus sexual violence, yet few violence prevention researchers have focused on activists' and activist-survivors' challenges and perceptions of their activism work (Krause et al., 2017). This master's thesis uses in-person interviews with 15 activists and nonactivists to explore motivators and mechanisms for, barriers to, and impacts of student activism at a large Mid-Atlantic university recently experiencing a surge in sexual violence activism. Study research questions and predictions are driven by the propositions of new social movement theory, the concept of intersectionality, and Maruna's (2001) redemption scripts.

Activists involved in this study are motivated by the University's mismanagement of sexual violence complaints and its controversial decision to hire a new faculty member previously accused of sexual assault. Successful activism organizations value careful

planning and voluntariness. Barriers to activism include students' stress and burnout, their misconceptions about activism, and University leadership's strong and subtle opposition to student activism. Impacts of activism at the individual level include friendships resulting from engaging in activism, redemption, and empowerment. Impacts of activism at the University and community levels include Title IX-related policy and practice reform and more on-campus resources for those impacted by sex discrimination and sexual violence. These impacts suggest a more positive college experience for students due to continued student activism. Colleges and universities should follow student activists' lead to advance Title IX-related policy and practice. Future studies should apply this study's theoretical framework to examine the perceptions of student activists and activist-survivors, particularly activists who are non-White, male, LGBTQ, and international students.

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Since 1970s, student activists, advocates, researchers, and administrators have been instrumental in bringing sexual violence issues to light (Jessup-Anger, Lopez, & Koss, 2018; Linder, Myers, Riggle, & Lacy, 2016; Sharp, Weaver, & Zvonkovic, 2017; Tani, 2017). Although attention to this issue faded in the 1990s and early 2000s, sexual violence activism resurged and gained national attention in 2013. In 2013, student activists at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill filed an Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Title IX complaint against their administrators for mishandling sexual assault complaints (Linder et al., 2016). In the nearly seven years since, student activists have taken advantage of the snowball effect; every “high-profile complaint” and every “assault survivor going public” incites more survivors to “follow suit” and more student activists to band together (Suran, 2014, p. 303). By October 2014, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) was investigating 85 institutions for civil rights violations under Title IX (Suran, 2014, p. 305). The North Carolina-Chapel Hill students started a movement; in the three years following, students from 150 schools filed complaints against their institutions with the OCR (Linder et al., 2016, p. 231).

However, the impact student activists have had on advancing sexual violence policy and expanding prevention programs and resources has been largely overlooked (Krause, Miedema, Woofter, & Yount, 2017). Few violence prevention researchers have

focused on campus violence activists and activist-survivors in the recent years following many survivors coming forward and student activists banding together to expose sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence (Krause et al., 2017). Also unknown is the personal impact that sexual violence activism has on student activists, as well as activists' perceptions of how their activism impacts their campus communities.

These gaps in the literature can be filled by speaking directly with student activists and activist-survivors about mechanisms for sexual violence activism most effective for reaching today's students and campus communities; barriers that make sexual violence activism challenging to accomplish; factors that motivate students to engage in activism; how sexual violence activism impacts activists personally; and how activists perceive their activism to impact the campus community. By speaking with campus violence activists and activist-survivors to understand these perceptions, universities can partner with these students to develop and evaluate sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence prevention programs, resources, and policies to reduce universities' mishandlings of sexual harassment and violence cases and disregard for survivors.

This master's thesis expands existing literature via a case study of campus sexual violence activists and activist-survivors of sexual violence at a Mid-Atlantic university that is experiencing a surge of sexual violence activism since 2018. Specifically, this master's thesis uses in-person interviews with 15 undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom are student activists, to explore the following six research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** *What are activists' most effective mechanisms for reaching today's students and campus communities?*
- **RQ2:** *What are the barriers that make activism goals challenging to achieve?*
- **RQ3:** *What factors motivate activists and activist-survivors to engage in activism against sexual violence?*
- **RQ4:** *How do sexual violence activism and identity interact?*
- **RQ5:** *How does sexual violence activism impact activists' healing and empowerment?*
- **RQ6:** *How do sexual violence activists perceive their activism to impact the campus community?*

## **CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Background: Campus Sexual Violence Activism and Title IX Policy Reform**

The women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s encouraged students, administrators, and policymakers to confront campus sexual violence for the first time (Linder et al., 2016; Sharp et al., 2017). For colleges and universities, increased attention to gender inequality resulted in the first federal legislation prohibiting sex-based discrimination at any institution receiving federal funding, namely Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. However, Title IX was only applied to sexual harassment situations, and the public's view of Title IX was mostly limited to it assuring equal opportunities for female collegiate athletes. Not until 2011 did the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) explicitly require colleges and universities to address other forms of sexual violence under Title IX (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018). Colleges and universities should now have a Title IX Office and employees to meet the needs of students that report sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence, but today's Title IX policy took nearly forty years in the making.

In the 1980s, focus shifted from sexual harassment to other types of campus crime. Students and parents advocated for colleges and universities to address and report campus crime to the U.S. DOE and campus community. Demands were met with the 1990 Student Right to Know and Campus Security Act—today's Clery Act—which

required colleges and universities to publicize campus crime data in their Annual Security Reports (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018). In the 1990s and early-2000s, anti-war, immigration, and LGBTQ rights and broader anti-discrimination movements overshadowed sexual violence activism in mainstream media, but students never stopped inspiring new anti-sexual violence policies behind the scenes (Broadhurst, 2014; Linder et al., 2016; Marine & Trebisacci, 2018). Citing recent Supreme Court rulings and other relevant judicial decisions, students lobbying for anti-sexual violence policy change drove policymakers' interest and reform efforts. They passed the Campus Sexual Assault Victim's Bill of Rights in 1992, requiring colleges and universities to establish a sexual assault policy that prioritized prevention efforts, new investigative procedures, and the expansion of campus resources (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018).

The 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was the first federal legislation addressing female violence and required law enforcement and prosecutors to uphold no contact rule, make arrests, and prosecute, convict, and sentence offenders in violent crimes against women (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018; Tani, 2017). The VAWA trickled down to universities, awarding them federal funding to address sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. The OCR then issued a 1997 Title IX guidance document requiring schools to address complaints of sexual discrimination and sexual harassment (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018). The guidance was reiterated in 2001, but many schools ignored complaints of sexual discrimination and violence until students started protesting universities' mismanagement of Title IX cases (Sharp et al., 2017).

A 2007 U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) study reported that one in five undergraduate women experience sexual assault while in college (Tani, 2017). The OCR, troubled by this statistic and aware of universities' Title IX noncompliance, issued the 2011 "Dear Colleague" Letter (DCL). The DCL broadened the Title IX definition of sexual harassment to include sexual assault, sexual battery, rape, and other forms of sexual violence and required institutions to use a survivor-centered approach to investigate this wider array of complaints (Sharp et al., 2017). Shortly thereafter, the 2013 Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (SaVE Act) "amended the Clery reporting requirements, strengthened victim's rights, and required colleges and universities to adopt training requirements focused on sexual assault prevention" (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018, p. 14).

The DCL and SaVE Act gave students digestible information about their rights covered by Title IX, and "a significant resurgence" of campus sexual violence activism emerged (Marine & Trebisacci, 2018, p. 650). In 2014, Emma Sulowitz, a senior at Columbia University, made headlines for vowing to carry a mattress around her campus until the person that assaulted her was expelled (Linder et al., 2016; McMahon, O'Connor, & Seabrook, 2018). Students at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill filed an OCR Title IX complaint against their administrators, alleging mismanagement of sexual assault complaints (Linder et al., 2016). These momentous acts inspired the first outside investigations of Yale University, the University of Notre Dame, Eastern Michigan University, and Notre Dame College (Cantalupo, 2014; Sharp et al., 2017; Suran, 2014) and ultimately sparked a nationwide movement in this direction. By 2014,

the OCR was investigating at least 80 of more than 150 institutions for which mismanagement complaints were filed for (Linder et al., 2016; Suran, 2014). Persistent student activists made it their mission to hold universities accountable for their negligence, and they succeeded: 337 investigations were underway at 242 campuses by 2018 (Wiersma-Mosley & DiLoreto, 2018).

The Obama Administration also responded to students' call for action by creating the *White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault*, which adopted student activists' "Know Your IX" campaign platform (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018; Linder et al., 2016; Suran, 2014). All around the United States, today's student activists still organize sexual violence education and prevention events, such as Take Back the Night rallies, during Sexual Assault Awareness Month (Krause et al., 2017; Marine & Trebisacci, 2018). Student activists are to be credited for exposing the sexual harassment and violence that has been engrained in campus culture for decades.

### ***Proposed Changes to Title IX***

In November 2018, the U.S. DOE headed by Secretary Betsy DeVos under the Trump Administration released proposed changes to Title IX. These changes would require institutions to:

- “Respond meaningfully to every known report of sexual harassment and to investigate every formal complaint.”
- “Preserve or restore a student’s access to the school’s education program or activity, with or without a formal complaint.”
- Provide “remedies for the survivor.”
- “Apply basic due process protections for students, including a presumption of innocence...; written notice of allegations and an equal

opportunity to review all evidence collected; and the right to cross-examination, subject to ‘rape shield’ protections.”

- “Hold a live hearing where cross-examination would be conducted through the parties’ advisors.”
- Do away with “single investigator” or “investigator-only” models.
- Allow appeals by both parties.

The proposed rule would also redefine sexual harassment as: “Unwelcome conduct on the basis of sex that is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the school’s education program or activity.” Finally, the proposed rule would replace the Title IX definition of sexual assault with the Clery Act definition (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

During a 60-day public commenting period, the proposed changes drew over 104,000 comments of both praise and criticism (Witze, 2019). For example, the proposed definition of sexual harassment is criticized for being too narrow, and requiring students to be cross-examined is said to be re-traumatizing. Some believe that the changes would discourage students from reporting sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence altogether, while others argue that the changes would provide necessary protections for those that are wrongly accused.

### **Review of Sexual Violence Activism Studies**

The majority of sexual violence activist literature to-date focuses on activist roles and identity outcomes for individual activists. Only a handful of studies focus on activists’ perceptions of their work, how it impacts them and how it impacts the campus

community. The section following will provide an in-depth review of these studies' research questions and findings, followed by a brief explanation of how this master's thesis will expand previous literature by answering six research questions about: (1) the mechanisms that make campus sexual violence activism possible; (2) the barriers that challenge activism; (3) the motivators for activism; (4) how activism and identity interact; (5) the individual level impacts of activism; and (6) the campus community impacts of activism.

The section following the review of studies will provide an overview of the three theoretical frameworks used to inform this study, which were chosen in tandem with the review of research on this topic and used to finalize the six research questions. First, new social movement theory (NSMT) describes how contemporary activism is rooted in politics, ideology, and culture, and how activists incorporate identity characteristics in their goals and decisions (Buechler, 1995). Therefore, applying an identity and intersectionality theoretical framework is necessary to better understand how activists' compounded identities contribute to their strategies and perceptions. Finally, I apply Maruna's (2001) "redemption scripts" to understand how and why some victims overcome their circumstances and become activist-survivors; a connection can be drawn between Maruna's (2001) crime "desisters"—those that "redeem" themselves by giving back to their communities—and activist-survivors that overcome being victimized and advocate for other students impacted by sexual violence.

### *Mechanisms for Sexual Violence Activism*

This master's thesis focuses on the logistical aspects of student activism, or the mechanisms student activists use not only to reach today's young people but also to inspire them to get involved in campus causes. One mechanism student activists use is social media, which was highlighted by student activists in a recent study by Forenza and Germak (2015) as an important mechanism to raise awareness of issues and to mobilize the current generation of young people. In another study with 23 student activists, Linder and colleagues (2016) found that students used social media as a simple tool to engage in awareness-raising and advocacy, but social media became a powerful tool "for people whose voices are ignored or silenced in mainstream media" (p. 240). Social media helped these individuals find other people "like me" (p. 240).

However, previous studies stop short of discussing how social media actually contributes to achieving collective movement goals. Today's activists use several social media platforms to share their opinions, to connect with other activists, and to invite students to events, among other purposes, but the actual effectiveness of this strategy is unknown. While spreading a message to thousands of people with the click of a button is efficient, people's inboxes are increasingly inundated with "help wanted" messages. **This master's thesis examines whether social media is still an effective mechanism for campus activism (RQ1).**

Once student activists and activist groups connect virtually, they must develop more meaningful partnerships. According to Forenza and Germak (2015), "forging alliances" is an important mechanism for social welfare/civil rights activism (p. 242).

Similarly, university student activists comprise a small group of determined leaders looking to make big changes; therefore, they must be strategic in their activism approaches. Levitsky (2007) focused on community activism at the activist organizational level, conducting 31 in-depth interviews with the founders and leaders from 15 LGBT advocacy, protest, service, and cultural organizations in Chicago. Levitsky, through a collective identity lens, examined activists' partnership strategies, finding that small groups of activists represent specific niches that they contribute to the broader movement; in other words, these groups use organizational diversity to overcome financial challenges and small memberships. Individual activist groups with limited but specific resources pool them to achieve collective movement purposes, known as *movement identity* (Levitksy, 2007, p. 271). Similarly, the University examined in this master's thesis only has a handful of small student activist organizations. **This study assesses partnerships between these organizations and their pooling of resources as strategic mechanisms (RQ1).**

### ***Barriers to Sexual Violence Activism***

While partnerships provide many benefits, managing these external relationships is challenging, time-consuming, and can even act as a barrier to activism (Forenza & Germak, 2015). At the university level, external relationships predicted to hinder activists' progress include those with University administrators, professors, and other staff. **This master's thesis examines barriers to sexual violence activism, including how student-faculty and student-staff interactions may hinder activists' progress (RQ2).**

### *Motivators for Sexual Violence Activism*

A review of the recent literature suggests that many educational institutions turn a blind eye to sexual harassment and violence. Students that do not feel protected by their institutions or properly cared for following a sexual violence experience may develop negative feelings toward their institutions known as institutional betrayal (IB) (Linder & Myers, 2018). IB often results in secondary trauma that is more detrimental than the original assault, but some students channel their disappointment, anger, and trauma into campus activism. Individuals that are victimized but still have a desire to “give back” to their communities may be moved to help their institutions do and be better for other students (Linder & Myers, 2018; Maruna, 2001). Linder and Myers (2018) used interviews with ten activist-survivors to examine IB as a motivator for campus activism. Contrary to what most might assume, students that felt betrayed by their universities still had “fierce loyalty” (p. 10) and love for their institutions; this combination of loyalty and betrayal motivated students to improve their institutions for future generations of students. **This master’s thesis uses IB research to examine this University’s controversial faculty hiring decision in 2018 and alleged disregard for survivors as motivators for campus sexual violence activists and activist-survivors. Additionally, this master’s thesis explores improving the University’s sexual violence response for future students as a motivator for sexual violence activists (RQ3).**

### *Sexual Violence Activism and Identity*

After determining *why* and *how* students undertake campus sexual violence activism, this master’s thesis uses identity and intersectionality and redemption theories

to explore impacts of activism for individual activists. Today's sexual violence activists and activist-survivors redefine their identities by coming forward to share their experiences and expose campus-wide abuse. For example, Renn (2007) conducted interviews with 15 diverse students leading LGBT campus organizations and found common patterns of involvement, leadership, and identity, with one identity impact of activism being increased public LGBT identity. **This master's thesis examines how campus activism may transform activists' identities and how this process occurs (RQ4).**

Marine and Trebisacci (2018) also found a relationship between identity and activism in their interviews with 11 campus sexual violence activists (CSVAs). Researchers explored what motivated activists initially, the impact of activism on CSVAs, and their perceptions of how their activism impacted their campus communities. Researchers incorporated an intersectional framework, exploring how activism transformed CSVAs' category-based and role-based identities in regard to race, gender, and social justice. CSVAs "applied a deeply intersectional framework to the activist energies they pursued" (Marine & Trebisacci, 2018, p. 661). For example, several activists emphasized that White-centered leadership structures prohibit non-White students from feeling equally well-served. This finding is particularly pertinent to this study since the University in question is known for its diverse study body yet is made up of White-centered leadership structures. **Therefore, this master's thesis explores additional layers of the relationship between intersectionality, identity, and activism by interviewing LGBTQ and international student activists and activist-survivors**

**about their experiences accessing services and navigating leadership structures**

**(RQ4).** An additional layer of identity is explored by intentionally interviewing graduate students, whose experience navigating university settings is unique.

### ***Impacts of Activism for Student Activists***

Forenza and Germak (2015), in their discussions with eight social welfare and civil rights activists, found that “activism contextualizes a long-term empowering process” (p. 229). Researchers also associate activism with positive cognitive functioning (Forenza & Germak, 2015; Marine & Trebisacci, 2018), seen by activists’ “sustained psychological empowerment” to control their social environment (Marine & Trebisacci, 2018, p. 241) and reports of increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and future commitment to civic engagement (Marine & Trebisacci, 2018). **This master’s thesis expands this discussion by exploring additional ways today’s activists are impacted by campus activism (RQ5).**

### ***Impacts of Student Activism for the Campus Community***

The majority of previous research on activists explores how their activism impacts their individual identities, and only a handful of studies explore healing outcomes for survivors. One area of research that needs substantially strengthened involves speaking with activists about how their activism impacts the broader campus community. **Therefore, this master’s thesis explores the impacts of sexual violence activism on the broader campus community as perceived by activists (RQ6).**

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***New Social Movement Theory***

This master's thesis broadly uses "new social movement theory" (NSMT), which moves beyond traditional theories that only focus on materialistic aspects of social movements, to focus on collective action rooted in politics, ideology, and culture, incorporating identity characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Buechler, 1995). NSMT contains six propositions which can be grouped into four broader perspectives; first, contemporary activism is represented by symbolic action, which requires proactivity of activists rather than idle call to action (Buechler, 1995). Next, contemporary activism revolves around the "processes that promote autonomy and self-determination instead of strategies for maximizing influence and power" (Buechler, 1995, p. 442); therefore, activist-survivors will be motivated by a desire for themselves and for others to gain freedom from sexual violence rather than a desire to control the University's anti-sexual violence movement.

Third, contemporary activism prioritizes collective action rather than competition over limited resources available to activist groups (Buechler, 1995); therefore, one mechanism for campus sexual violence activism will include resource pooling between small student activist organizations at the University. Gahan and Pekarek (2013) tested this proposition among union activists and found collective action and resource pooling to reduce the burdens (effort-, material-, and time-related costs) of union participation, while increasing participants' satisfaction. Fourth, collective action should transform into

partnerships among small student activist organizations and result in mutual goals and an overall collective identity (Buechler, 1995). Van Dyke (1998) examined this process at 423 colleges, referring to this conglomeration of small student activist organizations as “multi-movement activist subcultures” (p. 208). Van Dyke (1998) found that these subcultures, supported and motivated by one another’s protesting, expand until the university is recognized as a “social movement community” (p. 208). Therefore, this University’s extreme level of sexual violence activism in recent months, if continually spurred on by other activist organizations on campus, could foster a common culture of student activism that represents the University.

“New social movement theory is a powerful tool for understanding the macrolevel social structures that shape contemporary activism” (Buechler, 1995, p. 460). However, new social movement theory has been criticized for applying only to movements in Western societies with White, middle-class participants and leadership structures (Buechler, 1995). Therefore, this master’s thesis also uses identity and intersectionality theoretical frameworks alongside new social movement theory to understand collective action surrounding sexual violence victimization in a more realistic context.

### ***Identity and Intersectionality***

Individuals have core beliefs that characterize their “true self,” but identity is not a fixed, trait-like self-concept (Maruna, 2001). Today’s activist-survivors reshape their identities by coming forward to share their experiences and expose their abusers. This master’s thesis examines how activist-survivors use activism to overcome sexual violence experiences and redefine their identities, but first, we must examine the concept of

identity and its intersecting components. “The effect of one’s identity/ies must be considered to understand individuals’...responses to being a victim of crime” (Potter, 2015, p. 8), whether responses include taking on an activist identity, entering into a violent relationship, seeking on-campus resources, among other outcomes.

One’s racial/gender/sexual identity is compounded by their social class, nationality, and any variety of other identities (Potter, 2015). In 1991, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) defined this effect of overlapping identities as *intersectionality*, “The various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women of color” (p. 1244). Intersectionality relies on the proposition that “individuals have multiple intertwined identities that are developed, organized, experienced, and responded to within the context of the social structure and its dis/advantaged ordering” (Potter, 2015, p. 76). Crenshaw’s idea was that women of color experience “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” that increase their being marginalized and chances of being victimized (p. 1243). Poor socioeconomic status further exacerbates victimization experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Potter, 2015). Crenshaw’s ideas preceded Sampson and Laub’s (1997), “Among the disadvantaged, things seem to work differently. Deficits and disadvantages pile up faster, and this has continuing negative consequences for later” (p. 153), but researchers did not begin empirically testing the effects of intersectionality until years later.

Scratching the surface, Vogt Yuan (2010) found that despite Blacks using less alcohol and drugs in early age, the negative effects commonly associated with alcohol and drug use, such as anxiety and depression, catch up to Blacks and surpass Whites by

middle age. Vogt Yuan (2010) concluded that while different dimensions of structural disadvantage pile up for middle-aged Black individuals, their opportunities and resources for overcoming alcohol and drug use, such as treatment and employment, diminish. In the same way, it can be predicted that traditionally disadvantaged populations that are sexually victimized will have access to fewer resources and will experience harsher long-term consequences of being sexually victimized.

This master's thesis examines additional layers of intersectionality by interviewing LGBTQ and international student activist-survivors, along with graduate students specifically, about their experiences accessing services in unfamiliar and potentially unwelcoming institutional settings. In the same way that Vogt Yuan (2010) found a relationship between intersectionality and difficulty overcoming negative consequences of alcohol and drug use, I predict non-White, LGBTQ, and international student activist-survivors to have a harder time accessing on-campus resources, like counseling/psychological services, and navigating official reporting processes with the Title IX Office.

Next, we must lay a foundation for how intersectionality contributes to how particular populations “do activism.” Here, intersectionality theory relies on the proposition that “each category difference (e.g., race, gender, class) has within-group diversity that sheds light on the way we think of groups as actors in politics and on the potential outcomes of any particular political intervention” (Hancock, 2007, p. 251). Similarly, Jaramillo (2010) writes, “untangling the complexities of intersecting identities at the microlevel” is necessary for understanding political participation (p. 193).

Jaramillo (2010) conducts 11 group interviews with 38 Latinas to empirically analyze how gender and ethnic dimensions of intersectionality empower and mobilize political activism, finding intersecting gender and ethnic identities to spur Latinas into political activism, while the separation of gender and ethnic identities causes Latinas to downplay their political activism. Therefore, to use an intersectionality framework, researchers must be mindful of both individual and interacting dimensions of identity. Only then can researchers form a complete picture of how different populations “do activism.” In this sense, we can translate “political participation” to *campus sexual violence activism participation* and untangle intersecting gender, sexual, racial, ethnic, and educational level identities to understand different activists’ and activist-survivors’ strategies and perceptions.

### ***Meaning-Making and Redemption***

Similar to how some people that have committed crime may be bound to an offender identity (Lemert, 1972; Tannenbaum & Randall, 1925), people that have experienced sexual violence may be bound to a victim identity. The mental health consequences and retraumatizing reporting process attached to the victim identity makes it a personal prison for those that have experienced sexual violence. However, some victims, like some offenders, can transform this identity into a survivor, or even activist-survivor, identity. In the same way Shadd Maruna (2001) examined how some justice-involved individuals can transform their offender identity into one that is productive and meaningful to society, this master’s thesis applies Maruna’s (2001) theory of redemption

to examine how some survivors take on an activist identity to make meaning of painful past experiences.

Maruna's (2001) theory relies on the proposition that identity is not a static, trait-like self-concept. Rather, one's identity depends on the narrative they embrace; persistent offenders that believe they are destined for deviance embrace a "condemnation script." Desisters, on the other hand, develop a "redemption script" to take power over the "bleak circumstances" of their pasts in order "to give something back to society" (p. 87). Maruna (2001) conducted the Liverpool Desistance Study to produce evidence for his theory. He interviewed 65 offenders and found that 30 had desisted, 20 had persisted, and 15 had persisted in some sense.

Offenders that desisted and embraced a redemption script had (a) core beliefs that defined their lawful, moral "true self"; (b) individual autonomy and an optimistic view of their futures; and (c) a desire to make meaning of their lives in society. Additionally, desisters were not held back by stigmatization that so commonly impedes on a justice-involved individual's ability to transition from prison to society. In the same way, this thesis predicts that a sexual violence survivor can overcome their victim identity and embrace an activist identity if they (a) can separate their true self from their victim identity, (b) have an optimistic view of their future, and (c) have a desire to make meaning of their negative experience.

Previous researchers, to my knowledge, have not applied Maruna's (2001) redemption theory to the study of sexual violence survivors. Previous studies have, however, examined meaning-making of sexual violence experiences in military settings.

For instance, Hannagan (2017) predicted that labeling women that have experienced sexual assault as *victims* both binds them to this identity and retraumatizes them.

Hannagan, in interviews with women that had experienced military sexual assault, found domineering victim discourses in the United States to illegitimately reduce women as “susceptible or vulnerable to injury, weak, and thus victims/sufferers/patients” (p. 638). These labels contradicted how the women truly perceived themselves; they spoke about themselves as warriors, soldiers, mothers, wives, political leaders, feminists, and heroes. These women illustrated autonomy, voice, courage, advocacy, helping others, dignity, resilience, and goals. They overcame the victim label to “make meaning of their experience and (re)construct their identity” (p. 638).

Sexual violence survivors may embrace a redemption script to make meaning of their shameful experiences. Maruna (2010) uses the motto, “You are not responsible for being down, but you are responsible for getting up” (p. 148) to represent a desister “taking control over one’s life and using that life to contribute, accomplish something, and leave a positive legacy” (p. 150). In the same way, survivors may take on an activist identity to return to their true self and save future students from being victimized by others and revictimized by the University’s insufficient reporting processes.

### **Current Study and Predictions Based on the Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

Speaking directly with activists in one-on-one interviews at a University that recently experienced a wave of sexual violence activism provides a unique opportunity to

better explore what motivates, enables, and challenges activists, how their activism impacts them personally, and how they perceive their activism to impact the campus community. The current master's thesis applies new social movement theory to predict how (mechanisms) and why (motivators) activists and activist-survivors engage in activism. The study applies the concept of intersectionality to predict how compounded identities impact survivors' and activist-survivors' abilities to navigate campus resources and University leadership structures. Finally, this master's thesis applies redemption theory to predict how some individuals can overcome a victim identity to embrace an activist identity, make meaning of their sexual violence experiences, and experience healing as an impact of their activism. Based on these theoretical frameworks and the review of current literature, I make some following predictions:

**RQ1: What are activists' most effective mechanisms for reaching today's students and campus communities?**

- *1a: Social media will be a powerful tool for connecting individual activists and smaller activist organizations on campus.*
- *1b: Mechanisms for campus sexual violence activism at the organizational and community levels will include resource pooling and partnerships between small student activist organizations at the University.*

**RQ2: What are the barriers that make activism goals challenging to achieve?**

- *2a: "Red tape" and discouraging interactions with University administrators will hinder groups from achieving activism goals.*

**RQ3: What factors motivate activists and activist-survivors to engage in activism against sexual violence?**

- *3a: Activist-survivors will be driven by a desire to gain freedom from sexual violence rather than a desire to control the movement.*

- *3b: Activists will be driven by a combination of sense of institutional betrayal and a low level of faith in the University's response to sexual violence but belief that the University can do better.*
- *3c: Activist-survivors will be motivated by the goal to ensure future generations of students do not experience sexual violence nor mistreatment by the University should they have a sexual harassment or violence experience.*

**RQ4: How do sexual violence activism and identity interact?**

- *4a: Survivors that embrace an activist identity have separated themselves from a victim identity.*
- *4b: LGBTQ activists will be more willing to claim their sex and gender identities as a result of their activist work.*
- *4c: LGBTQ and international student activists and activist-survivors will feel less supported by the institution.*
- *4d: Graduate student activists will feel more confident in their activist abilities—advocating and navigating leadership structures—yet disconnected from the University and less confident in the University's response.*

**RQ5: How does sexual violence activism impact activists' healing and empowerment?**

- *5a: Activists will experience personal healing and propensity to commit to future civic engagement.*
- *5b: Activist-survivors will have a more optimistic view of their futures.*

**RQ6: How do sexual violence activists perceive their activism to impact the campus community?**

- *6a: Activist-survivors will have a more optimistic view of University Title IX policies and procedures changing for the better.*
- *6b: The recent surge in sexual violence activism has connected smaller activist organizations on campus.*

## **CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY**

### **IRB Statement**

The Institutional Review Board of the author's university approved all research activities described in this master's thesis.

### **Study Location**

This study takes place at a Mid-Atlantic university with one pending case of sexual violence and one pending case of sexual harassment currently under investigation by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) as of 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Many students and other campus community members started accusing this large University of complacency in investigating sexual violence reports and disregarding students impacted by these incidents. For example, the University was criticized for not having enough Title IX investigators and full-time clinicians at counseling services to accommodate the student body; for not publicizing campus resources; for not helping students that had been harassed/assaulted in their residence halls to relocate in a timely manner; for not requiring all students, faculty, and staff to complete Title IX training; for not notifying students when sexual harassment or violence incidents occurred on or near campus; and for not having a female campus police officer for students to report to.

Students' and community members' frustration with the University intensified in 2018 when an individual who had been publicly accused of sexual assault was hired as a

faculty member under a three-year contract. Already disappointed in the University's sexual violence response, this controversial hiring motivated students to initiate their own student-led movement against campus sexual violence and for University transparency. They founded a large organization for sexual violence survivors and quickly created a pledge demanding Title IX policy reform, University police reform, and more resources for students affected by sex- and gender-based harassment and violence.

The University responded to this pledge by hiring new Title IX investigators and forming a partnership between the University and City police departments. Shortly thereafter, I conducted one-on-one interviews with 12 administrators at this University, including the Title IX Coordinator, and several of these administrators reported that the student-driven movement had a "direct impact" on these changes. These campus-wide events preceding this study make this University a great study location to have in-depth conversations with the student activists and activist-survivors who led and are continuing to organize this movement against campus sexual violence.

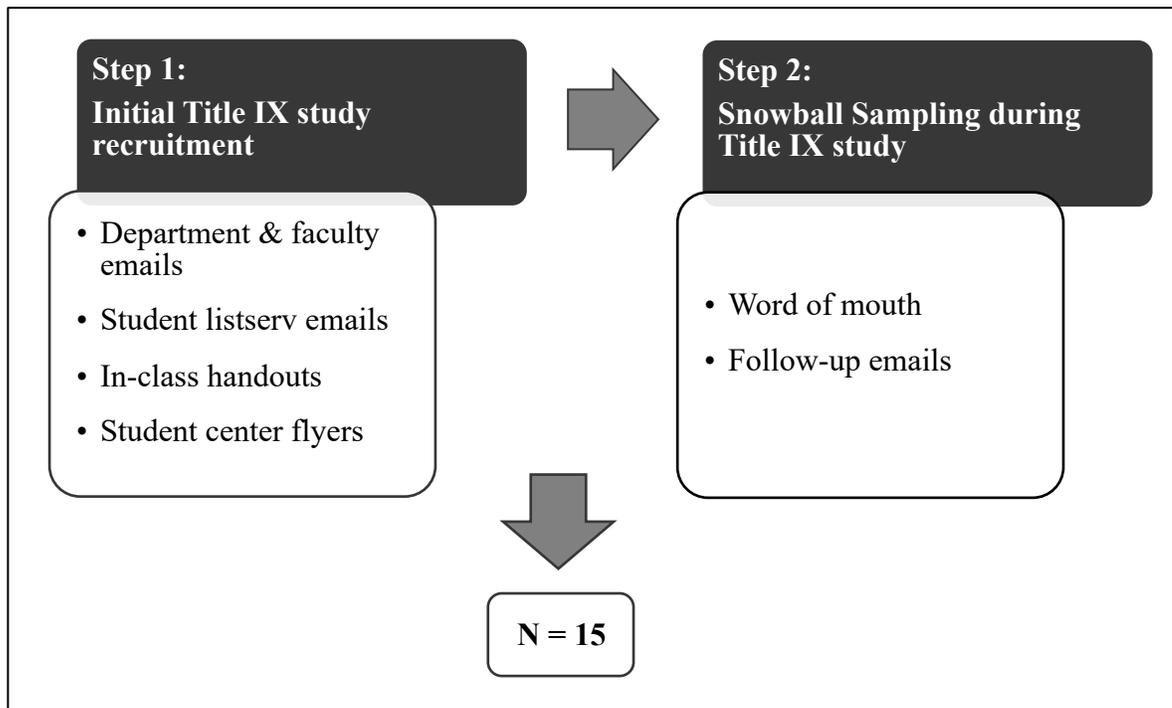
### **Unit of Analysis and Sample**

This case study uses data collected from one-on-one, in-person interviews with adult (18 years or older) undergraduate and graduate student activists and activist-survivors at one large Mid-Atlantic university (n=15). The total sample size includes 15 students, eight of whom are student activists (by self-description), and two of whom are activist-survivors (by self-description). The remainder of the sample includes three students that are unsure whether they consider themselves activists and four students that do not consider themselves activists (hereinafter referred to as "nonactivists"), even

though many of these students participated in activist work, such as participation in discussion groups, tabling, and “sharing” events on social media, at least once in the past. As explained in subsequent sections, these participants were recruited for another study at the same Mid-Atlantic university about reporting sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence and perceptions of the Title IX process. For this master’s thesis, the study participants were additionally interviewed about their perceptions of activism, despite whether they considered themselves activists or not. The nonactivists were still included in the sample, because their perceptions provide great insight about (a) why some students who have participated in activist work do not consider themselves activists and (b) what it takes then to be considered a student activist, according to these nonactivists.

### **Participant Recruitment**

This master’s thesis used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit student activists and activist-survivors. A broader study (hereinafter referred to as “Title IX study”) was conducted with another researcher to examine students’ perceptions of Title IX policies and procedures at the same University. Through the Title IX study, individuals who are activists and activist-survivors were identified to be asked additional interview questions for this master’s thesis study. Participants from the Title IX study were also asked if they know campus sexual violence activists and members of activist organizations who would be interested in participating in this activism study. This snowball sampling method led to connections with three additional student activists in two activist organizations at the University, including the newly founded organization for sexual violence survivors.



*Figure 1.* Participant recruitment strategy for master’s thesis.

***Participant Recruitment for and Details of the Preceding Title IX Study***

For the Title IX study, a multiprong recruitment strategy was used. Student organizations, including a group for sexual violence survivors, a social justice group, a LGBTQ pride group, minority student groups, international student groups, and student government, were reached out to directly. Researchers were already aware of most of these organizations, and others were recommended by colleagues. The goal of this recruitment strategy was to include students with a wide range of racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. To achieve this goal, LGBTQ services, the international student office, and the women and gender studies program at this University were contacted. Researchers also reached out to program directors and professors in several additional

departments including education, humanities/social sciences, sciences/engineering, business, and policy/government. These colleges/schools sent a recruitment email to their student listservs and/or faculty listservs and helped researchers form connections with professors in order for researchers to recruit students in-person during undergraduate and graduate class periods.

In all recruitment efforts, students were directed to a five-minute REDCap survey link to sign up for an interview. This survey also asked students about their involvement in student organizations, athletics, and fraternities/sororities; their college/school program; and undergraduate or graduate student status. These questions were used to gauge students' campus-involvement. Students were also asked how much knowledge ("no knowledge," "some knowledge," or "very much knowledge") they have of Title IX as an entity and as a process; whether they have used/know someone who has used the Title IX Office, either for an investigation or to receive services; and whether they/the person they know was the respondent (i.e., accused) or complainant in this case. These questions were used to understand students' current knowledge of sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence reporting procedures at the University. Finally, students were asked demographic questions (i.e., age, race/ethnicity, international student status, gender, and sexual orientation). Students that completed the REDCap survey online were followed up with via email to schedule a one-on-one interview on campus.

### **Data Collection**

Both activists (n=8) and nonactivists (n=7) were asked a variety of open-ended questions via in-person interviews that explored (RQ1) activists' most effective

mechanisms for reaching today's body of students; (RQ2) barriers that make student activism goals challenging to achieve; (RQ3) activists' and activist-survivors' motivators for participating in sexual violence activism; (RQ4) how sexual violence activism and identity interact; (RQ5) how sexual violence activism impacts activists' healing and empowerment; and (RQ6) activists' perceptions of how their activism impacts the campus community (Please see the **Appendix** for the interview questions.).

All interviews took place in one of two student resource centers on campus and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, including consent and debriefing processes. After the consent process, participants completed a five-minute demographic and university involvement survey; information from the previous online REDCap survey was deleted immediately after recruitment to protect confidentiality, especially for those that signed up for the study but did not end up participating. Participants self-reported age, year in college, college/school department, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, level of knowledge of Title IX, use of the University's Title IX Office, and use of other on-campus resources (Please see "**Descriptive Data**" in **Findings** for these results.).

Participants were also provided a \$10 gift card as a thank you for their participation. After all interview questions were asked, participants were debriefed wherein they were provided directions to counseling/psychological services and a document with a list of campus, local, and national resources and hotlines and researchers' contact information.

All sessions but two were audio-recorded with all participants' consent; two sessions could not be audio-recorded due to a malfunctioning audio-recorder, but

extensive hand-written notes were taken in place of audio-recordings. Hand-written notes were taken in all interviews to supplement audio-recordings.

Interview questions and the interview procedure were pilot tested with seven female and three male students from the University's criminology department between early- and mid-September 2019; data from these students were excluded from the analysis. Recruitment took place between mid-September and mid-October 2019. Data collection lasted a total of nine weeks, beginning in early-October 2019 and concluding in mid-December 2019.

### **Data Analysis**

Both handwritten notes and audio-recordings were immediately transcribed into Microsoft Word documents following interviews and destroyed thereafter. Any identifying information was redacted from the transcribed documents.

### ***Coding Process***

Data were coded and analyzed simultaneously using a constant comparative method "to generate theory more systematically" (Glaser, 1965, p. 437). I established initial codes and broader categories that emerged along the way by line-by-line color coding two interviews that were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. In this pilot effort, the master's thesis chair reviewed the codes and categories for clarity. We then discussed our code definitions and analytic interpretations of the descriptive data (i.e., memos) before creating a final list of thematic codes and definitions. This process involved revising codes and definitions, adding and removing codes, and merging codes. I used these final codes and definitions to carefully code all 15 interview documents,

conferring with the chair throughout the process. This careful back and forth process helped establish intracoder reliability, “The consistent manner by which the researcher codes” (Given, 2008, p. 445).

### **Analysis Approach**

This master’s thesis used interviews with activists, activist-survivors, and nonactivists as the data collection method to understand motivations, mechanisms, barriers, and impacts of student activism. I used narrative analysis as the main analysis method for this master’s thesis. However, descriptive quantitative analysis was also used to describe demographics of the study participants and to assign a numerical value to some of the responses from the study participants (i.e., to quantify the majority of responses in some cases or to provide the exact number of responses to a particular question).

## CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

### Descriptive Data

#### *Sample Demographics*

The sample included a total of 15 participants. Participants completed a brief demographic self-report survey that asked about age, gender, sexual orientation, and race, before interviews took place. All participants were between 18 and 22 years old, with the exception of two participants who were 25 and 27. The majority of participants were female (n=12), either straight (n=5) or bisexual (n=5), and White (n=6). (Please see **Table 1** for detailed demographic information.)

**Table 1**

*Key Demographics of Study Participants*

	<b>n</b>	<b>University N</b>
<b>Age</b>		
18	3	
20	7	
21	2	
22	1	
25	1	
27	1	
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	12	19,862
Male	2	17,877
Transgender male	1	
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>		
Straight	5	

Bisexual	5	
Queer	1	
Pansexual	1	
Prefer not to say	3	
<b>Race</b>		
Hispanic/Latinx	2	4,920
White	6	15,771
Asian	4	6,643
White/Asian	2	
Prefer not to say	1	
<b>International Student</b>	4	3,020

Nearly a third of participants were international students (n=4); for context, the University's international student population comprises just over 8% of the overall student population of nearly 36,000 students. Three participants were graduate students, compared to the graduate student population of 3,735 students; graduate students make up just over 10% of the total student population. The majority of participants were humanities/social sciences majors (n=8). (Please see **Table 2** for detailed educational information.)

**Table 2**

*Educational Information of Study Participants*

	<b>n</b>	<b>University N</b>
<b>Year in School</b>		
Freshman	3	
Sophomore	2	
Junior	5	
Senior	2	
Graduate	3	3,735
<b>College/School</b>		
Humanities/social sciences	8	

Sciences/engineering	3
Business	1
Government	1
Undeclared	1
Unreported	1

***Title IX Knowledge and Use of On-Campus Resources***

Participants were also asked about their knowledge of Title IX as an entity and/or as a process; whether they had used/knew someone that had used the University’s Title IX Office, either for an investigation or to receive services; and whether they had used any other on-campus resources. Most students had “some knowledge” of Title IX (n=13) and had never used/did not know anyone that had ever used the Title IX Office (n=9). Several participants had used the University’s counseling/psychological services (n=6), but an equal number of participants did not report using any on-campus resources (n=6). (Please see **Table 3** for participants’ Title IX knowledge and use of on-campus resources.)

**Table 3**

*Title IX Knowledge and Use of On-Campus Resources of Study Participants*

	<b>n</b>
<b>Title IX Knowledge</b>	
No knowledge	2
Some knowledge	13
Much knowledge	0
<b>Used/Knew Someone That Used Title IX</b>	
Yes	5
No	9
Prefer not to say	1

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<b>Other On-Campus Resources Used</b>	
Counseling/psychological services	6
Diversity/international student resources	3
Academic/career resources	3
Advocacy resources	2
Disability resources	1
University police department resources	1
None reported	6

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### **Defining Student Activist**

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked whether they consider themselves student activists or not. Participants were then asked to describe the reason(s) why they label or do not label themselves activists, especially if they have participated in activism activities in the past.

#### ***Activists***

From the fifteen students interviewed, eight participants self-identified as activists, two of whom described themselves as activist-survivors. Two of these eight activists indicated that although they consider themselves activists, their level of activism is low. For example, one female graduate student reported, “I think if somebody has a chance to talk to me that I’ll tell them my opinions and hopefully change something, and I’ll listen to theirs, but I don’t have time to go write policy changes, you know?” (Participant 11).

Participants were members of the following organizations: a newly founded University organization for sexual violence survivors (n=2); an organization for University transparency (n=2); a mental health/wellness organization (n=1); a domestic

and sexual violence organization (n=1); a campus environmental organization (n=1); and an organization “fighting period poverty and ending the stigma around periods” (n=1).

### *Nonactivists*

Three participants (including one male and one graduate student) who indicated that they were not sure if they would consider themselves activists or who did not answer the question of if they self-identify as activists were labeled as “nonactivists” for this master’s thesis’ purposes. Additionally, four participants, including one male, indicated that they were not student activists. These seven nonactivists were still included in the sample, because (a) several had participated in some type of activism in the past, and (b) their perceptions provide great insight about *what it takes then*, according to them, to be considered a student activist.

An important finding in this study is that five out of the fifteen participants hesitated to label themselves activists, even though they had participated in activism in the past; many had recently engaged in formal and/or informal discussions about reforming the University’s Title IX-related processes. For one, participants hesitated to label themselves activists because of their self-described *low levels of involvement*; for example, a sophomore in humanities/social sciences said, “Yes, I agree with [the organization’s mission], but I won’t be the person that’s at all the meetings advocating for it. Not that I don’t want to be...I have other priorities” (Participant 8). Another sophomore that helps lead a mental health/wellness organization that prioritizes empowerment and “winning over anxiety” was unsure if her efforts “would be considered under student activism” (Participant 5).

Second, students avoided claiming an activist identity *to avoid taking on a political identity*; for example, when an undergraduate junior was asked if she considers herself a student activist, she responded, “[I’m] not one of those people that goes out saying smash the patriarchy and all that stuff” (Participant 12). Finally, participants hesitated to label themselves activists if their *motivations were self-serving*; for example, a graduate student brought up a self-serving motivation underlying her student activism: “[I’m] not actively [a student activist], because, again, I was trying to pick myself up [after experiencing sexual harassment]” (Participant 2).

### **Defining Student Activism**

Participants were then asked about their own definitions of student activism. Please note that participants’ definitions do not necessarily reflect their approaches to participating in student activism, as their actual approaches will be discussed in a subsequent section. Both activists and nonactivists spoke about the *personal desires*, the *cognitive awareness*, and the *emotionality* attached to student activism. Specifically, participants defined student activism as being *passionate* about and/or *supporting* a particular issue (n=6) and *raising awareness* about that issue (n=3).

Several participants went further, however, to explain that “true” student activism also requires *action* (n=8) and/or *creating change* (n=2). Supporting this perception, an activist leader and member of both the organization for University transparency and the newly founded University organization for sexual violence survivors reported, “[Activism] is all about reaching out and about action, so it’s using your perspective as a

student to increase and inform the actions that you make in your wider school culture” (Participant 15).

Action and change can come in different forms, one being *advocacy* (n=5). One freshman female noted, “To be a real activist, you have to be able to talk about [the issue]” (Participant 8). Participants (n=3) also listed *policy reform* as an action. A senior studying government reported, “A student activist is someone who’s passionate about stuff and actually does something to make policies to change the problem” (Participant 14). A female graduate student (Participant 11) summed up her definition of student activism:

I think having informal conversations with people who don’t agree with you is a form of activism...Um, but then there’s the stuff that obviously takes more time, which is writing up actual policy changes, responding to [policy changes/proposed changes], which I would have done if I would have known about [the U.S. Department of Education’s proposed changes to Title IX rule]. So, yeah. There’s lots of forms.

An important finding from interviews is that several participants included *helping* or *supporting others/other students* in their definitions of activism (n=4). Additionally, participants said that student activism requires *young people*, either helping or being helped/supported (n=3). Finally, participants noted specific *events* in their definitions of student activism, including general *educational* events/discussions (n=3), *speaking* engagements, *mental health/wellness* events, and *research-related* events.

## Student Activism Approaches

Participants were then asked what mechanisms or tools make their student activism more successful, but students often responded with the actual approaches they undertook to “do activism”; they listed particular events—like rallies, for example—that they were involved in. A major approach to activism that activists reported is planning or participating in *informal discussion groups* (n=5). Simply gathering with peers to discuss controversial topics and other issues that impact themselves and other students, such as mental health, was one frequently described approach. For example, one activist-survivor (Participant 2) thought a discussion group could help her overcome her sexual harassment experience:

I did approach international student services, and I asked them if there is any way that I can, you know, make a group of maybe female students, or just international graduate students, so that, you know, they can talk about these [sexual harassment-/violence-related topics].

Similarly, the other activist-survivor (Participant 14) described how this approach helped form the activist organization for sexual violence survivors:

It was about 60 students, and we all gathered in a room [on campus]. We all kind of went around in a circle and told our names and why we’re here, so people were able to [know] it was a safe space, so survivors could talk about how [the controversial faculty hire] has affected them and stuff...Then we broke up into small groups and came up with lists about things that need to be changed at [the University], specifically regarding sexual violence. Then the people who wanted

to be core organizers kind of stayed after and [discussed]...A couple of weeks later, we all met up in a study room, like all 20 of us literally just created this campaign.

Though most activism approaches included these informal discussions and other *informal events*, like gathering to pick up trash around campus, some students planned and/or attended more *formal events* including rallies (n=2), informative movie nights, speaking engagements, and research-related events.

Finally, participants discussed their approaches for *promoting* activism, such as hanging up flyers, creating a website, and marketing via various social media platforms. One participant (Participant 15) described these technology-related approaches:

A lot of different people, a lot of my other friends use technology for activism...The things like Instagram, putting things on Instagram stories, posting photos, having an Instagram campaign, photo campaigns, having different people take photos, Twitter as well.

Many of these activism campaigns were linked to policy and practice reform goals; for example, two participants spoke about the new sexual violence survivor organization's "list of demands," which requested for the University to hire more Title IX investigators and remove the newly hired controversial faculty member from their position, among other items. The organization also created a petition alongside the list of demands, which ultimately accumulated 15,000 signatures; the widely circulated petition was used not only to demonstrate support for the movement but to advertise the organization's list of demands and overall mission.

## **Findings for Research Question 1: Mechanisms for Student Activism**

As mentioned above, study participants were asked about the mechanisms that facilitate their student activism. Activists described mechanisms used within their organizations (i.e., activist organizational level), mechanisms used at the University administrative level, and mechanisms used at the wider campus community/societal level.

### ***Mechanisms at the Activist Organizational Level***

At the activist organizational level, participants drew attention to the importance of careful *planning/organizing* (n=2), *organizational structure* and *member roles* (n=5), and *tools* (n=4) as mechanisms that enable their activism. “I’m just really glad that we organized really hard to make those big changes,” one participant and cofounder of the new organization for sexual violence survivors said of the organization’s rigorous planning efforts (Participant 14). Another participant (Participant 15) concurred; organizing starts with sitting down and asking:

How do we make people know about this? How do we make people come to our events? Who makes the flyers? Who runs the events? Who books the room?

That’s really the practical stuff of organizing...It requires a lot of scheduling, a lot of planning, and a lot more thought than a lot of people think to execute a natural and understandable action.

Next, participants described how *organizational structure* and *member roles* contribute to successful activism. One participant (Participant 14) explained how many of today’s activism organizations are structured:

Something that I really love that we do, actually in all my organizing, is a horizontal structure of organizing, so there's not someone [that's] one specific leader; we're all student leaders, so we're all on the same playing field, which I think is really beneficial, especially in college, because we're busy trying to get a degree.

Later, this participant explained her organizations' structures at the individual level: "We rotate things, like we rotate who facilitates the meeting. We rotate who's going to present at our open meetings, or who's going to meet with administration on a rotating basis" (Participant 14). This structure fosters both individuality and teamwork. A sophomore in the humanities/social sciences commented, "Everyone has their own energies and their own intentions that they can bring" (Participant 5).

Rotating roles also encourages members to volunteer for various roles, even roles with unfamiliar responsibilities, at any given point in time. "Being aware of each other's capacities is something that we do. Also, everything is volunteer based," said one participant as she described how members in her organizations gladly step up when others have unexpected issues or particularly busy school and work weeks (Participant 14). This teamwork mechanism was described consistently by participants. One spoke about the power of multiple people that she perceives as an "outreach ambassador" for a domestic and sexual violence organization, "I don't like to go and talk to people by myself, because they're not likely to listen, even if they do agree with me, but if you have a group, it's psychologically proven that people will listen to you and think that you're right" (Participant 7).

Finally, activists mentioned specific *tools* that make activism easier to accomplish. One mechanism that was mentioned repeatedly by many study participants was *technology*; “The internet is very important for learning what’s happening and learning what’s going on and how to act” (Participant 15). More specifically, this same participant mentioned how social media posts “give [activism] a lighthearted feel to it.” Other mechanisms listed by participants included general marketing, petitions, and posters.

### ***Mechanisms at the University Administrative Level***

An important mechanism at the University administrative level was *support from University leadership*, along with support from faculty members (n=3). One activist-survivor described an important turning point in the recent student-led movement against sexual violence when a University vice-president agreed that some items on the list of demands “were some changes that really need to be addressed” (Participant 14). Participants were grateful for the support from this administrator.

### ***Mechanisms at the Community/Societal Level***

Participants mentioned one mechanism at the wider community/societal level: *media coverage*. The two activists in the new organization for sexual violence survivors spoke about the local and national news coverage they received at the height of the student-led movement and how this spotlight attracted University community members and fueled the movement.

## Findings for Research Question 2: Barriers to Student Activism

### *Barriers at the Individual Level*

Participants spoke about the challenges of student activism. Individual level challenges/barriers include those that hinder one's own ability to participate in student activism. Participants discussed *time-related burdens* imposed by student activism (n=2). "I don't have time to go write up policy changes, you know?" a graduate student commented (Participant 11). Time-related burdens can develop into more serious *stress* and even *burnout* (n=3). One talked about how she conversates with people that have opposing opinions as a form of activism, "I do that sometimes; it takes a toll" (Participant 11). Another participant (Participant 14) went further to explain how she tries to scale back before activism-induced stress can develop into something more serious:

We're busy trying to get a degree, and activism is a really big time commitment...I've thrown myself into it really hard, but then there's sometimes where I need to remind myself to take a step back and take care of myself and then get back into it, because it can be a lot, and I would choose activism over my schoolwork a lot of the time, and so definitely being cognizant of your own capacities and other people's capacities is something I really care about.

Finally, student activism, especially when motivated by a traumatizing personal experience, can be *retraumatizing*. Both activist-survivors of sexual harassment/violence described how painful it is to share, over and over again, what happened to them during one of the worst periods of their lives. One activist-survivor spoke about the burden of telling others about her sexual harassment experience, "It's hard, I know. It's really hard

to talk about it, but just protecting someone from the same thing you went through, by talking about it, is something that helps” (Participant 2).

### ***Barriers at the Community/Societal Level***

Pressure and burnout are also barriers at the community/societal level (n=2). One participant repeatedly stressed the danger of people being *overexposed* to student activism, particularly overexposed via social media: “I personally know that if someone *only* uses their technology, their social media, for activism, it tends to get dropped out” (Participant 15). She spoke about her activist friend who is a member of two on-campus activist organizations and is constantly promoting their events on social media:

In that, you’re promoting a lot of events. You’re saying, ‘Come to our board game night, come to this, come to that,’ but after a while, someone scrolls through their Facebook, [and] that’s all they see. They’re going to ignore it... We just blast people constantly, over and over again. It will help raise awareness, but people will be less likely to come just because they see it over and over again.

Additionally, overexposure can cause a movement to lose momentum. “I feel like [movements] come and go; so the ‘#MeToo’ was a big movement, and everybody was talking about it, and then it went away” (Participant 8).

On the other hand, *underexposure* can have a similar effect. For people to participate, they have to be aware of the movement and somewhat endorse its importance. “I think some of the big barriers, especially at [the University], is [lack of] awareness: what’s going on, what’s going on at our school, and then, how we can take

action” (Participant 15). Later, this same participant described how this *lack of awareness* stems from *disconnectedness* within the commuter University:

People feel very disconnected, because you can come here and just leave, and you have nothing to do with [the school]...[The University] has failed as a student body in that it fails to connect the grad students, the teachers, and the students in a coherent way so that they all work together and know about each other...It always ends up in this continuous loop of unknowing-ness...I think that’s the hardest part, and a lot of people I talk to, when I tell them about the things going on for the public, they’re like, ‘Wow, that’s crazy. I can’t believe I haven’t heard of that.’ Like, exactly.

After activists manage to make the student body aware of their work, they have to convince the student body of the importance of their work. Three participants listed difficulty *conveying importance* as a barrier to their student activism. “I think the main challenge is to get people to come and to convey the importance of these topics to a student, because I think we only use resources when we are in need of them” (Participant 5).

An undergraduate junior expressed how this failure to convey importance results in *inactivity* (n=2): “Just getting people to do something is the hardest part” (Participant 15). For example, “Everyone talks about how important Title IX is, but I don’t think a lot of people have actually taken action [to improve] it, you know?” said an undergraduate male (Participant 6). Another participant commented, “Often, even if people know what’s going on, they’re like, ‘Well, I specifically can’t do anything about it’” (Participant 15).

Students have this powerless mentality, because *misconceptions* surround activist work (n=2). One activist leader (Participant 14) explained:

Activism can be really intimidating, especially for new people. I know it was for me, and people kind of feel like if they're not exactly politically aligned with everyone, then they can't really join or don't have a place. It just isn't true.

Another participant, who described herself as new to activism and still learning, commented on the misconceptions about student activism, "It might seem to other people like you have an agenda, but no, [activism] is just my life, you know?" (Participant 15). She recounted a time when her friend suggested they counter-protest anti-abortion protesters on campus:

Activism doesn't always have to be. My friend saw me [advertising] on Snapchat...She was like, 'We should protest those people that do the anti-abortion signs or whatever.' I was like, 'I don't think you understand the point of a protest.' There's a lot of people that just think activism, quote unquote, is doing a protest or a march.

Notably, four participants listed *conflicting opinions* as a barrier to activism and, more specifically, a contributor to inactivity. For example, one participant said of working with other activists and campus community members, "Coalition building is really awesome, which is really hard to do at [the University]; there's just so many people, so many things, it's hard to get everyone on the same page in the room" (Participant 14). When asked about the barriers to student activism, another participant responded, "Closed-

minded people; they only like their viewpoint and [think] theirs is the right one, so [they're] hard to talk to, like a closed door" (Participant 7).

The last barriers to student activism listed by participants included *lack of diversity* within organizations and *exclusion* based on physical ability (n=2). Illustrating this first point, Participant 14 said:

Definitely we need to work on diversity a lot. Both of our organizations are mainly White, and we do have some amazing people of color that are organizers with us, but I can see for other demographics how that can be not really a space they want to be in; it's a bunch of people who don't have the same experiences as them.

Further, another participant spoke about the University's lack of accessibility for individuals with physical disabilities, "If someone who needed a wheelchair wanted to participate in a rally, it would be pretty difficult, and I think the groups make things as accessible as possible, but because groups are so small, sometimes it's hard to open up the ability" (Participant 15).

### ***Barriers at the University Administrative Level***

Strong or subtle *opposition* from University leadership was a major barrier to student activism (n=4). One participant spoke about the importance of getting administration onboard with student-led movements, "That's the most important part; they can stop you from doing stuff, and then they can also, if you want to make a change, they can prevent that from happening in general" (Participant 13). Another described a real scenario in which University administration disregarded sexual violence activists'

demand to remove the newly hired faculty member from their position, “We opposed [the hire] so hard, and [administrators] were just like, ‘Nope, it stands. We can’t do anything about it. It’s not our fault’” (Participant 14). One activist-survivor, an international student, even experienced strong opposition from faculty and staff in her department, despite them believing her claims of being sexually harassed by a University employee. She stated, “My department said that whatever I went through I should forget about, you know, and not really [tell others about it and be] so expressive with so many emotions” (Participant 2).

An activist leader (Participant 15) that has met with University administration on behalf of her organizations spoke about more subtle opposition from University administration:

Administration is basically a barrier to a lot of activism literally all the time. Even in a little sense, like the events not being promoted. For example, faculty senate meetings, which are important, and we learn a lot going to them, they’re at 3 P.M. on Thursdays, which is primetime class time, and they put it there for a reason, so that students can’t come.

She and another participant specifically pointed out subtle but detrimental opposition from the University president, who just recently left the University, “[He] was president for six years, and he didn’t meet with [our organization] once, never, not once. They asked for six years straight to meet with him, and he never did” (Participant 15). Later, she returned to this matter,

[He's] a great example of the administration just turning a blind eye to discussing things with students. It's less than actively saying, you know, 'We hate this, or we think this'...It's more inaction, which speaks louder than actual actions taken. I think, yeah, the administration stops us because it creates more bureaucracy, more checks, more boxes to check in order for us to do what we need to do.

### **Findings for Research Question 3: Motivators for Student Activism**

#### ***Motivators at the Individual/Personal Level***

There are many different reasons why students decide to participate in campus sexual violence activism and other types of student activism. Some students, especially violence survivors, participate in activism to find *redemption, healing, and self-empowerment*. One LGBTQ student described her journey to becoming an activist, "I got into activism because I felt so powerless in my own life" (Participant 15). Desiring redemption, healing, and self-empowerment through activism often stems from a negative personal experience in the past. One participant described how past *victimization of loved ones* contributes to her activism. For example, she spoke about her three friends being injured while protesting White supremacy at the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017. "That was a really big turning point for me...All those scary people that...tried to kill my friends and hurt my friends...That was a really big lightbulb in my brain to really dedicate myself to this work" (Participant 14). Likewise, a freshman in the humanities/social sciences said, "I think people really get going when something bad has happened" (Participant 13).

One activist-survivor described life after being sexually harassed by a University employee, “After my entire thing that I went through, I was trying to pick myself up” (Participant 2). The same respondent went on to explain her past and present efforts to “get [her] story heard” on campus and in her department particularly, where she said gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment are accepted and ignored. The two activist-survivors in this study, along with two other activists, noted *sexual violence incidents* as a motivator for their activism (n=4); “Being a survivor is really a call to action for me” (Participant 14). The two activist-survivors wanted their stories heard so that future generations of students can avoid sexual harassment and violence altogether, or at least experience better Title IX-related processes should they need to report an incident. For instance, one of these activist-survivors said, “I don’t want anyone else to go through all the bullshit I went through, cause it really sucks” (Participant 14). Generally, providing a *support system for other students* was a major motivator for activists (n=4), with one goal being to “create community within [the University] and let other survivors know that we’re a resource. We’re not great therapists. We’re not professionals. We’re peers. We’ll support you in whatever you do.”

### ***Motivators at the University Administrative Level***

Participants mentioned the University’s *controversial faculty hiring* decision in 2018 as a direct motivator for their and their organizations’ campus sexual violence activism (n=3). “Everyone was very upset and very angry, so that brought in a ton of people ready to organize,” one participant said about the post-hiring student-led movement against campus-wide sexual harassment and violence (Participant 14).

Similarly, participants spoke about the prevalence of sexual assault on campus but lack of proper *administrative structures* for handling sexual violence as a motivator for their activism (n=3), particularly noting the lack of Title IX employees and poor Title IX policies at the University (n=2). The undergraduate activist-survivor criticized the University's processes for reporting sexual violence, concluding with, "I just definitely don't want anyone else to have to go through those shitty processes" (Participant 14). One participant mentioned the University's failure to inform international students of their rights under Title IX and available on-campus resources: "For us [international students], we think a lot of the [abuses] that happened to us are okay, but it's not. No [University employees have] given us a clear definition of a lot of the things" (Participant 2).

### ***Motivators at the Community/Societal Level***

Another major motivator for activists was their *discontentment with inactivity*—the lack of students and community members taking action to incite change (n=6). "The worst part...is inactivity; just not doing anything" (Participant 15). Two participants listed others' reluctance to do something about issues they care about as a motivator for their activism. Participants then highlighted students' *lack of awareness* as a contributor to their inactivity. When asked what motivates her student activism, a junior in humanities/social sciences responded, "I don't like ignorance, and I feel like there's a lot in your twenties and teens. That's a time when you're most ignorant. I like to enlighten people about different topics" (Participant 7).

### Findings for Research Question 5: Impacts of Activism for Student Activists

Finally, participants were asked about the impacts of their student activism. First, they were asked how their student activism has impacted them personally. Personal impacts of student activism included forming *friendships* and *support systems* (n=3), *learning* more about the campus culture and the activism issue at hand (n=3), *healing* and finding *redemption* and *empowerment* (n=3), and experiencing a feeling of *pride* in their and other activists' accomplishments (n=3). When one participant was asked about the personal impacts of her activism, she responded, "The community of friends that all organize together. We're a really great community of people and a good friend group to have around. We're all really supportive of each other" (Participant 14). Another participant made a similar comment about the *support system* she perceives, "I think it's that interaction with people that gives us a sense of connectedness and social being, instead of being just alone" (Participant 5).

One participant (Participant 15) spoke about the *awareness* and *learning* she gained as a result of immersing herself in campus culture:

[Activism] also makes me feel more aware of what's going on at school, you know. I don't just go to school. I don't just come to this, the ugliest building on campus, and exist here. I learn things, and I engage with my community. It makes me feel more aware in my community.

Similarly, another participant described how being an ambassador for a domestic and sexual violence services organization made her more aware of existing on- and off-campus resources, "I learned a lot of things I had no idea existed." She went further, "I

just didn't know, outside of [the University] too, how many resources existed that are just provided; you don't have to pay to go" (Participant 7). Likewise, one participant said, "If I lead a [mental health discussion], I expose myself to all of this knowledge and different types of [mental health techniques], and, personally, it would affect me" (Participant 5).

Both activist-survivors spoke about how their student activism has contributed to their *healing*; particularly, taking steps to protect other students from experiencing sexual violence has helped activist-survivors find *redemption* after their harassment/violence experiences. The graduate student activist-survivor described how sharing about her sexual harassment experience with underclassmen impacts her, "This is one of the ways I feel better" (Participant 2). Similarly, the undergraduate student activist-survivor said, "Being able to do [sexual violence-related] activism has been a healing and transformative process for me...It's just been really healing for me to make these changes" (Participant 14). Later, this same participant described her empowerment that developed subsequently:

The public speaking I do is me retelling my story, which is hard sometimes, but I've been able to keep it together and not cry the whole time, which I've definitely wanted to, but I've kind of had the strength to say what I need to say to make people understand the pain I've suffered.

One participant summed up how her activism has empowered her, "Well, I can't fix everything, but at least I'm doing something to fix something. It makes me feel empowered in that way. It literally makes me feel more in control" (Participant 15).

Finally, participants mentioned how *proud* they were of their and others' work. One spoke about the sexual violence survivor organization's petition/list of demands, which eventually received around 15,000 signatures of campus community members in support of the movement; proudly, she acclaimed, "I made that. That just blows my mind. It's awesome" (Participant 14). Participants also spoke about how proud they were to see their friends and other students thriving in activist work. One participant commented, "Seeing people fight for rights has made me have more passion about equality" (Participant 13).

### **Findings for Research Question 6: Impacts of Student Activism for the Campus Community**

Next, participants discussed their perceptions of the impacts of their activism on the campus community, such as providing *friendships* and *support systems* for others (n=3), helping others *heal* and be *empowered* (n=1), sparking *awareness* on campus (n=2), providing additional on-campus *resources* (n=2), and stimulating changes in University *policy and practice* (n=2). Two participants spoke about definitive changes in University *policy and practice* as a result of their organizations' activism. For example, "With [the sexual violence survivor organization's] demands, [the Title IX Office] was able to hire two more employees, which is awesome" (Participant 14). Additionally, "The [University] police promised that they would work with the county to get a female officer [on campus], so it's really good that they did that," the same participant proudly acclaimed. She later returned to these significant impacts and noted additional ones:

Police reform, we got that. We got a little bit of Title IX reform. Student senate passed a resolution. Faculty senate passed a policy, which was really good. We have a bunch of media stories on there, national and local.

Two participants, when asked about the impacts of student activism, responded that their activism has sparked *awareness* on campus. Illustrating this, one participant (Participant 15) spoke about the impacts of two recent rallies on campus, where students protested for increased wages for student employees:

I think both of those rallies did really help in ways and raise awareness and make our campus feel like a college campus where there are people protesting for something, people yelling. It raises people's awareness, and I think that's really sped up the negotiations with the school. Students showing up for those rallies has shown that they care and that they want to support the workers.

Three participants spoke about the support systems and friendships that others have gained due to student activism. Furthermore, participants perceived their activism to empower others; "I think these small topics [in discussion groups for activists] really help people to empower themselves" (Participant 5). Seemingly small changes induced by activism have meaningful impacts for sexual harassment and violence survivors, "The progress we've made and fixing some of these little things, like not having a police officer, changing the little things makes a huge difference for survivors" (Participant 14).

## Summary of the Findings

This study includes mostly females and humanities/social sciences majors, but the sample is diverse in terms of race, sexual orientation, and year in school. Most study participants identified as student activists (n=8); nearly half of the study participants indicated that they are either unsure if they consider themselves activists or not student activists (n=7), even though most of these individuals participated in activism activities in the past. Participants were hesitant to label themselves activists due to their low levels of involvement, avoidance of a political identity, and/or self-serving motivators for participating in activism. Participants were therefore asked what student activism means to them; many participants defined student activism as being passionate about and/or supporting a particular issue (n=6) and raising awareness about that issue (n=3), but several participants said that true student activism also requires action (e.g., advocacy) (n=8) and/or creating change (e.g., policy reform) (n=2). Participants also listed helping others (n=4) and involving young people (n=3) in their definitions of student activism.

First, participants were asked about the *mechanisms* that enable their student activism; at the activist organizational level, participants spoke about the importance of careful planning/organizing (n=2), organizational structure and member roles/responsibilities (e.g., voluntariness, taking time off) (n=5), and tools (e.g., technology) (n=4). At the administrative level, support from University leadership was listed as a crucial mechanism (n=3). Finally, at the community/societal level, participants described how recent media coverage aided their activism (n=2). Second, participants were asked about *barriers* to activism; individual level barriers included time-related

burdens (n=2), stress and burnout (n=3), and activism being retraumatizing for activist-survivors (n=2). Community/societal level barriers included pressure/overexposure and burnout (n=2), difficulty conveying importance of the issue at hand (n=3), inactivity (n=2), misconceptions about activism (n=2), conflicting opinions (n=4), and exclusion/lack of diversity (n=2). Lastly, strong or subtle opposition from University leadership was a major barrier at the University administrative level (n=4).

Third, participants were asked about what *motivated* their activism; major motivators included sexual harassment/violence incidents (n=4), helping other students/community members (n=4), the controversial faculty hire in 2018 (n=3), the University's mismanagement of sexual violence (n=3), and discontentment with inactivity and ignorance on campus (n=6). Fourth, participants discussed their *approaches* to student activism, including planning or participating in informal discussion groups (n=5), informal events (e.g., gathering trash on campus) (n=3), formal events (e.g., rallies) (n=2), and social media and other marketing campaigns (n=2).

Finally, participants described individual level and perceived community level *impacts* of their activism. Individual level impacts, those that affect activists personally, included increased knowledge (n=3), friendships and support systems gained (n=3), healing, redemption, and empowerment (n=3), and a feeling of pride in their and other activists' accomplishments (n=3). As for community level impacts, participants perceived their activism to provide friendships/support systems for others (n=3), awareness on campus (n=2), changes in policy and practice (n=2), and additional on-campus resources (n=2).

## CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Through qualitative interviews with student activists, activist-survivors, and nonactivists at one Mid-Atlantic university recently experiencing a surge of sexual violence activism, this master's thesis aimed to answer the following research questions about student activism:

- **RQ1:** *What are activists' most effective mechanisms for reaching today's students and campus communities?*
- **RQ2:** *What are the barriers that make activism goals challenging to achieve?*
- **RQ3:** *What factors motivate activists and activist-survivors to engage in activism against sexual violence?*
- **RQ4:** *How do sexual violence activism and identity interact?*
- **RQ5:** *How does sexual violence activism impact activists' healing and empowerment?*
- **RQ6:** *How do sexual violence activists perceive their activism to impact the campus community?*

In this discussion section, I incorporate previous literature, new social movement, intersectionality, and redemption theoretical frameworks, and the evidence from this study to answer these six research questions and provide recommendations for activism organizations and University administrators.

## **Discussion for Research Questions 1 and 2: Mechanisms for and Barriers to Activism**

This study revealed many individual level and activist organizational level mechanisms that help activists lead successful student movements. Participants also described several barriers to activism, many of which can be circumvented.

Unfortunately, some mechanisms can backfire and act as barriers, which is why mechanisms and barriers are discussed in tandem.

### ***Marketing via Social Media: A Mechanism and Potential Barrier***

Previous studies found social media to be an important tool for advocacy/raising awareness of activism issues, mobilizing the current generation of young people, giving a voice to populations that have been categorically silenced, and connecting these activist voices (Forenza & Germak, 2015; Linder et al., 2016). Therefore, I predicted social media to be a powerful tool for connecting individual activists and smaller activism organizations on campus. Findings from this study support this prediction; activists and activist organizations use social media to market their events and spread their ideas.

However, in my attempt to get a more detailed understanding of the routine use of social media as a mechanism, I found that technology can develop into a barrier if overused.

While using social media is an efficient way to advertise to thousands of people with the click of a button, this method can quickly backfire if, for example, an activist posts five “tweets” in a row about five different activism events. Social media messaging is ineffective, and can even become annoying, if the campus community is overexposed to these ads. This can damage the reputation of the entire activism community, not just the

individual organization prone to perpetual advertising. Therefore, activism organizations should rethink how they use social media, careful not to cross the line into overexposure. Otherwise, their messages will be drowned out, ineffective, and may even decrease activism participation and support from the campus community.

***Structuring Organizations: Coalition Building and Member Roles***

According to new social movement theory (NSMT), contemporary activism groups prioritize collective action rather than competition over limited resources (Buechler, 1995). Individual activism groups with limited but specific resources and unique niches pool them to achieve collective movement purposes (Forenza & Germak, 2015; Levitksy, 2007). Similarly, collective action and resource pooling reduce activism-related burdens (effort, material, and time) and increase participants' satisfaction (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013). Therefore, I predicted resource pooling and partnerships between small student activism organizations at the University to serve as important mechanisms. A small number of dedicated student activists were found to lead multiple activism organizations at the University under study. These known activists and groups work together to reach common objectives. While this "coalition building" can be "a really awesome approach," it can also hinder the activism community's ability to get "outsiders" involved. Activism is all about spreading a message far and wide to stimulate change, which is not possible if the activism community is an exclusive bubble of outspoken leaders. Rather, growing the group would expand its mission and success. Organizations should welcome newcomers and give them leadership responsibilities to

(1) make newcomers feel valued and (2) take some pressure off of the few activist leaders at the University.

The most debilitating individual level barriers to activism included time-related burdens leading to stress and burnout for activist leaders. However, activists whose organizations prioritized careful planning/organizing and implemented a “horizontal structure” with voluntary member roles and responsibilities were able to avoid stress and burnout, for the most part. Still, only a handful of members *take charge* of responsibilities. With the weight of the organization on their shoulders, they neglect all other responsibilities (e.g., schoolwork) and personal wellness. To avoid stress and burnout, eager activist leaders should set personal limits to their activist work. If organizations notice the same few leaders doing all of the work, organizations ought to assign member roles, especially to new members.

At the same time, organizations must not pressure new members to take charge of major events straightaway, like leading a group to lobby at the state capitol, for example. Particular responsibilities associated with student activism, such as reforming policy, can be intimidating for newcomers and other students entertaining the idea of activism engagement. Attracting new activists can be challenging due to this false reality that activists must achieve certain milestones. Organizations should make it known that all are welcome, despite their previous activism experience and regardless of their motivators and goals. Likewise, some students incorrectly assume that they must have a particular political identity to participate in activism. Activism organizations should therefore avoid over-politicizing their messages in order to increase student participation. At the

University under study, the new organization for sexual violence survivors should remember that sexual violence is a bipartisan issue and should encourage students from both sides of the aisle to participate in campus sexual violence activism. Presenting a united front against campus sexual violence is likely to make a much bigger stamp on it.

***University Administration as a Barrier to Student Activism: Recommendations for University Leadership***

According to a recent study by Forenza and Germak (2015), managing external relationships was challenging and time-consuming for activism organizations. Similarly, this thesis examined activists' ability to navigate potentially challenging interactions with administrators, professors, and other staff at the University; I predicted "red tape" and discouraging interactions with University administrators to hinder organizations' activism goals. This was true, and participants also perceived administrators' strong and subtle opposition (e.g., avoiding meetings with organizations) to student activism as "a barrier to a lot of activism literally all the time." University administrators should schedule and follow through with meetings with student activists. In these meetings, administrators should engage in open-minded dialogue with students, whom are much more policy-savvy and proactive than they are given credit for by University leadership.

The following examples demonstrate why University administration should consider student activists' suggestions for policy and practice reform: activists recognized the disproportionate number of Title IX investigators compared to the large student body of nearly 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students at the University; student activists pointed out that there were zero female police officers on campus for female victims to

report to; and student activists drew attention to the issue that faculty senate meetings are held precisely when the highest volume of classes take place, restricting most students from attending and commenting during the senate meetings. Student activists are also proactive and have found success at the national level; student founders of the “Know Your IX” campaign were called on to lay the foundation for the Obama Administration’s *White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault* (Jessup-Anger et al., 2018; Linder et al., 2016; Suran, 2014). Countless examples demonstrate that student activists are attentive to unacceptable policy and practice and aware of what students need, and their demands should be thoroughly considered. The University organization for sexual violence survivors lists their unfulfilled demands online. University administrators should review these requests, which include more on-campus resources, such as “a sufficient number of full-time clinicians” at counseling/psychological services and affordable STD/STI testing; additional police reform, such as “requiring police officers to inform survivors of their right to a free Advocate”; and additional Title IX policy reform, such as an “opt-in restorative justice track for survivors” as an alternative to formal investigations.

### **Discussion for Research Question 3: Motivators for Student Activism**

Activist-survivors in this study are compared to Maruna’s (2001) “desisters,” those that are motivated to make meaning of their painful past experiences, such as sexual violence. Similarly, NSMT holds that contemporary activists are motivated by a desire for autonomy and self-determination. Therefore, I predicted activist-survivors to be driven by a desire to gain freedom (i.e., healing, redemption, and empowerment) from

sexual violence. This was true, and even participants that had not been personally victimized were motivated to help others be free from sexual violence. Activists and activist-survivors alike were dissatisfied with and motivated by the prevalence of sexual violence at the University. Participants specifically addressed the University's mismanagement of sexual violence as a motivator, and several participants mentioned the controversial faculty hire in 2018 as an act of betrayal and the tipping point for student mobility. These findings support my predictions that activists would be driven by *institutional betrayal* and dissatisfaction with the University's response to sexual violence but belief that the University can do better (Linder & Myers, 2018). The latter half of this prediction—that students would have some faith left in the University—was supported by participants' optimism about recent support from a few University administrators. Participants were extremely appreciative of these open-minded, approachable administrators helping to move the needle on expanding Title IX-related policy and practice.

#### **Research Question 4: Activism and Identity**

##### ***Improving Title IX Training and Discrimination/Violence Response for International and Graduate Students***

Activists in Marine and Trebisacci's (2018) study reported that White-centered leadership structures prohibit non-White students from feeling equally well-served. Similarly, I predicted non-White, LGBTQ, and international student activist-survivors to (a) have a harder time accessing on-campus resources (e.g., counseling/psychological services), (b) have a harder time navigating official reporting processes (i.e., the Title IX

Office), and (c) feel less supported by the institution. The international student activist-survivor discussed international students' unfamiliarity with Title IX and exclusion from University resources. This University and others should immediately and substantially expand culturally competent Title IX-related training for international students. *All* students should be armed with information regarding when and where to report *all* types of discrimination and violence. Students should never be under the impression that reporting to their specific department within the University is the only option, especially graduate students that likely have little interaction with the rest of the University outside of their department. Unfortunately, however, this was precisely the situation for one graduate student who had experienced sexual harassment and was instructed by her department within the University to stay silent and forget about what had happened to her. The survivor's department discouraged her from pursuing an official investigation with the University's Title IX Office. This response from her department is opposite of the reaction students should receive when they notify a university employee of campus-related discrimination/violence. Universities must take responsibility for connecting *all* students to *all* available resources upfront, and confidential sources should be distinguished from those with mandatory reporters.

***Meaning-Making: The Process of Overcoming a Victim Identity to Embrace an Activist-Survivor Identity***

As discussed above, this thesis applies Maruna's (2001) "redemption scripts" to understand the process of activist-survivors overcoming a victim identity. Similarly, Hannagan (2017) found that labeling military sexual assault survivors as victims reduced

them to vulnerable and weak victims/sufferers/patients, even though the women never self-identified as victims; rather, they viewed themselves as warriors, soldiers, mothers, wives, political leaders, feminists, and heroes. They overcame the victim label to “make meaning of their experience and (re)construct their identity” (Hannagan, 2017, p. 638). I predicted the same for young activist-survivors—that they would have somewhat separated themselves from a victim identity to embrace an activist identity.

Unfortunately, I was unable to collect much data on this transformational process since only two activists identified as activist-survivors. However, these two activist-survivors never referred to themselves as victims and spoke with pride about *regaining their voices*, in large part due to their sexual violence activism. Still, future research should examine this transformational process of making meaning of sexual violence victimization.

#### **Discussion for Research Question 5: Activism Impacts for Student Activists**

Activists in previous studies experienced long-term psychological empowerment, positive cognitive functioning, a sense of control over the social environment, increased self-esteem, and increased self-confidence due to their activism (Forenza & Germak, 2015; Marine & Trebisacci, 2018). These findings combined with Maruna’s (2001) redemption theory and Hannagan’s (2017) support for meaning-making post-sexual violence led to my predictions that activists would experience personal healing and have a more optimistic view of their future, all due to their involvement in student activism. Activists were quick to list healing and empowerment as important impacts of their activism. Even more frequently, though, activists listed friendships and support systems gained as the most meaningful impacts. Activists were also proud of the friendship and

support that they provide other students and campus community members through activism. Advancing previous research on this topic, these data suggest that relational impacts may be more meaningful than goal-oriented ones like changing policy and practice. In this sense, what students appreciate most about their activism organizations is that they act primarily as support systems. Therefore, activists should warmly welcome, or even seek out, violence survivors in need of friendship and support. Being surrounded by people that understand their painful past experiences may be the best remedy for survivors' healing and empowerment.

#### **Discussion for Research Question 6: Activism Impacts for the Campus Community**

The majority of previous literature on sexual violence activists explores how their activism impacts them personally, while little research examines activists' perceptions of how their activism impacts the broader campus community. Therefore, the final research question in this study asked participants about how their activism has impacted the University community. As discussed previously, activists were most proud of the friendships and support systems they provide for other students. Activists also perceived more awareness on campus, additional on-campus resources, and important changes in policy and practice. Student activists can help and have helped reduce universities' mishandlings of sexual violence cases and disregard for survivors. To reiterate, leadership at this particular University and at universities across the country should: engage in open-minded dialogue with student activists and activist-survivors to understand their perceptions; follow student activists' lead in continuing to reform Title

IX-related policy; and partner with these student leaders to develop and evaluate discrimination and violence prevention programs, training/education, and services.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study includes a diverse sample in terms of race, sexual orientation, and year in school, but the sample is small (n=15), especially the sample of self-identifying student activists and activist-survivors. A small and specific sample only provides so much data to analyze and interpret. More data from activist leaders and activist-survivors would have allowed for a much deeper discussion about (a) the impacts of student activism on activists' identities and (b) how relationships between activism organizations contribute to their setbacks and successes. Future studies should include larger sample sizes of student activists and activist-survivors, in particular. Further, the sample mostly includes females and humanities/social sciences majors. Future research should target groups that are underrepresented both in this master's thesis and in the larger literature on campus sexual violence, including Black and Latinx student groups, male students, and students majoring in STEM and Business. Finally, this study should also be replicated at smaller colleges and universities and at colleges and universities in other regions with different social and political beliefs and values. Examining a more diverse geography would provide a better understanding and great comparison of how students in the Midwest or on the West Coast, for example, use and are impacted by student activism.

### **Conclusion**

The impact student activists have had on advancing sexual violence policy and expanding prevention programs and resources has been largely overlooked (Krause,

Miedema, Woofter, & Yount, 2017). Few violence prevention researchers have focused on campus violence activists and activist-survivors in the recent years following an increase in the number of survivors coming forward and student activists banding together to expose campus-wide sex- and gender-based discrimination and violence (Krause et al., 2017). How student activists “do activism,” how they overcome particular barriers to activism, how they are personally impacted by activism, and how they perceive their activism to impact the campus community are all understudied topics. Therefore, this study attempted to fill gaps in the literature by speaking directly with student activists and activist-survivors about their activism-related experiences and outcomes. This case study of student activists and activist-survivors took place at a Mid-Atlantic university that is experiencing a surge of sexual violence activism since 2018. Specifically, this master’s thesis used qualitative one-on-one, in-person interviews with 15 undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom are student activists, to explore the following five research questions (RQs):

- **RQ1:** *What are activists’ most effective mechanisms for reaching today’s students and campus communities?*
- **RQ2:** *What are the barriers that make activism goals challenging to achieve?*
- **RQ3:** *What factors motivate activists and activist-survivors to engage in activism against sexual violence?*
- **RQ4:** *How do sexual violence activism and identity interact?*
- **RQ5:** *How does sexual violence activism impact activists’ healing and empowerment?*
- **RQ6:** *How do sexual violence activists perceive their activism to impact the campus community?*

This master's thesis applied new social movement theory to predict *how* (mechanisms) and *why* (motivators) activists and activist-survivors do activism. It applied the concept of intersectionality to predict how compounded identities impact survivors' and activist-survivors' abilities to navigate campus resources and University leadership structures. Finally, this master's thesis uniquely applied Maruna's (2001) redemption theory to understand how victimized individuals can embrace an activist-survivor identity, make meaning of their sexual violence experiences, and experience healing and empowerment in return. Future studies can apply a similar theoretical framework to examine perceptions of a larger number of student activists and activist-survivors, particularly those that are non-White, male, LGBTQ, and international students. Such studies that are conducted during a time of heightened social activism, local or national, can produce the most fruitful findings about the intricacies and impacts of student activism.

Interviews with the 15 activists, activist-survivors, and nonactivists produced important findings at the activist organizational and University administrative levels. Successful activism organizations were those that (a) carefully planned when the organization was first founded, (b) did not *demand* a certain level of involvement from members, and (c) advertised via social media but did not overexpose the campus community to their marketing campaigns. Nevertheless, participants discussed a wide variety of barriers that challenge their activist abilities. Individual level barriers included time-related burdens and stress and burnout; community level barriers included

misconceptions about activism and closed-mindedness; and strong or subtle opposition from University leadership was a major barrier at the university administrative level. Activists were motivated to eliminate widespread sexual violence at the University, and they were further motivated by the University's mismanagement of sexual violence cases and decision to hire a controversial new faculty member.

Hearing participants proudly discuss the impacts of their activism was heartening. Activists were very thankful for the friendship and support they gained and provided other students through activism. Activist-survivors, in particular, also experienced healing, redemption, and empowerment that helped them overcome their sexual harassment/violence experiences. Finally, activists were very proud of the additional on-campus resources and policy and practice reform that resulted from the University's recent wave of sexual violence activism. One participant and activist-survivor summed this up, "The progress we've made and fixing some of these little things, like not having a police officer, changing the little things makes a huge difference for survivors." Overall, relational and policy-related impacts suggest an optimistic future for student activism and a more positive college experience for students, which may be enhanced by university leadership following activists' lead and considering their suggestions for further policy and practice reform.

## **APPENDIX**

1. Do you consider yourself a student activist?
2. What does it mean to be a student activist?
3. What motivates you to be a student activist?
4. What are the mechanisms (strategies) of your/your group's student activism?
5. What are the barriers (challenges) to your/your group's student activism?
6. How has your/your group's student activism impacted you personally?
7. How has your/your group's student activism impacted the campus community?

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Pallie Koehn graduated from Southeast of Saline High School, Gypsum, Kansas, in 2014. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Kansas State University in 2018.