

Student Activism

Resource Handbook

- *Educate!*
- *Organize!*
- *Transform!*

Faculty Mentor Program
Professor Glenn Omatsu, Coordinator
c/o Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)
205 University Hall
(818) 677-4151

*Created For CSUN Associated Students "Week of Activism"
April 2002*

The Power of Student Activism

Today, the world is in great turmoil. Not only do we see war and destruction, but we also see growing poverty and hunger, the emergence of new slavery, and the ravaging of our ecosystem. Some have defined the modern world not in terms of technological advances but in terms of the growing gap between “haves” and “have nots.” This division of the world’s population is not simply economic but also social and political — i.e., a separation of world populations between those with basic human rights and those without. In fact, it is probably more accurate to describe today’s world not as a division between “haves” and “have nots” but rather between “haves” and “disposable people.” Today’s “disposable people” are those who toil for pennies a day in sweatshops for global corporations, those who are kidnapped and trafficked in modern-day slavery, and those without access to basic necessities such as fresh drinking water.

What can be done?

Historically, in times of crisis, student activism has been a crucial force for social change. Students around the world have been at the forefront of movements to promote democracy and human rights. Student movements have toppled powerful dictatorships and military juntas. Student movements have ended wars. And student activism has often served as the conscience for nations, reminding people in times of turmoil of the founding ideals of their countries and the aspirations of all people for justice, dignity, and equality. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the world’s most repressive governments jail and often murder student activists, close down college campuses during times of crisis, and enforce strict guidelines about what can and cannot be taught in school systems. Those in power understand the significance of student movements — often more so than student activists themselves.

In the California State University system, student activism has transformed our campuses and surrounding communities. At San Francisco State University in 1968-69, students went out on strike in order to gain classes and departments in Ethnic Studies. Their strike lasting six months stands as the longest student strike in U.S. history. At California State University, Northridge in the late 1960s, student activists mobilized to create several

important institutions that are a vibrant part of our campus today: the Ethnic Studies departments and the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP). Many of the original ideas advanced by student activists for transforming education at CSUN have now become embraced throughout the CSU system. Some of these ideas — which at one time were viewed as controversial and radical — are service-learning, interdisciplinary instruction, student advisement, student tutorial services provided by peer mentors, and transitional summer programs for entering freshmen.

How do student movements become so powerful? Student movements gain power not because they are composed of militant and dedicated students. Student movements draw their power through the formation of strategic alliances with other sectors of society facing oppression, such as immigrants, workers, racial minorities, women, and peasants and other dispossessed peoples in the countryside. By joining in solidarity with others, student movements gain the power necessary to transform society.

In order to form alliances with other sectors of society, students must educate themselves and others about issues facing these sectors. Thus, student activism is as much about educating and organizing as about engaging in actions such as participating in rallies and marches. Or more accurately, becoming an activist requires a new understanding about the relationship between educating, organizing, and acting. Unlike the traditional academic approach that separates knowing the world from interacting with it, activism requires rethinking the relationship between thinking and doing. “Praxis” is the term that captures this new understanding. Praxis connects knowing and doing, theory and practice. Only in academia are knowing and doing regarded as separate things; in reality, knowing and doing are parts of the same process. In the course of everyday life, we are always simultaneously thinking and acting, and gaining wisdom and maturity is based on training ourselves to reflect constantly about our actions and to carry out actions based on an understanding of consequences and responsibilities. Becoming an activist helps each person become conscious of their role as an agent of historical and social change.

Thus, student activism is about social change and transformation. But is the focus of activists only on changing the institutions of society? No, it is not! Changing society must be done in tandem with changing oneself. Otherwise, activists within their own movements and in the new social

institutions they create will simply end up replicating the same relationships of oppression that they are fighting. Nor can we wait until later — “after the revolution,” after the creation of new institutions, or after “we have gotten into power” — to address serious problems like racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. that plague human relationships. These issues must be addressed as part of our ongoing struggles to change the world. In other words, activism must be viewed as engaging in both social change and personal transformation simultaneously. We cannot change injustices in the world without also confronting and overcoming injustices in our own practices.

For student activists in universities, personal transformation requires grappling with the question of privileges that they have as students. In all societies around the world, students who attend universities are a relatively privileged segment. After all, having the time and resources to acquire knowledge and to study and think critically about issues are, unfortunately, privileges in the world today. Privileged status brings a choice: how will a person use these privileges? Will the privileges be used to advance oneself economically and socially, even if it means ignoring oppression and destruction all around and perhaps even helping to perpetuate these conditions? Or will a person use privileges to confront and eliminate the conditions of oppression and destruction? Student activists are those who have seriously pondered these questions and have consciously decided to use their resources, time, and talents to confront social problems.

The pages that follow provide resources for current student activists and more detailed information for others interested in exploring the exciting challenge of student activism. Educate! Organize! And transform society and each of our lives!

Educate!

“Only the educated are truly free.”

– *Epictetus*

“Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.”

– *Malcolm X*

Activism is essentially about raising awareness and promoting education to help liberate and empower our communities. Awareness and education open people to new ways of thinking and new ways of looking at the world around them. New ways of thinking enable people to confront and solve problems in different ways.

What is needed in the current period is a new kind of education — an education for our liberation. On the one hand, this requires activists to expand the content of education by bringing to the forefront issues of globalization, corporate accountability, human rights, racism and sexism, and a host of other topics to help people understand the world.

But developing an education for our liberation goes beyond questions of content. It also requires activists to adopt a new approach to education — an approach that sees education as a process linked to organizing and centered on human interactions. This new approach to education is related to latest insights coming from cognitive scientists and brain-based educational research as well as the wisdom passed down to us by indigenous peoples around the world.

Humans are essentially social beings. According to the latest research focusing on learning and the human brain, the vast majority of people learn through social interactions. In many ways, the latest scientific information about human learning validates the approach to education used for centuries in indigenous peoples’ cultures emphasizing mentoring relationships between children and elders, learning by doing, and a learning environment marked by rich, intergenerational interactions. In contrast, the existing

model of instruction used in most American schools stresses individual learning through lectures and standardized tests, and largely isolates children from “elders” of the community. This standard model of education probably hinders learning for most children. More importantly, it serves as an institution for social control and perpetuation of current hierarchies of power.

Thus, in this period, conceptualizing and implementing a new approach to education — an education for our liberation — is very difficult for activists. It is difficult because it requires activists to address questions of educational content currently outside the scope of today’s education system. And it is even more difficult because it requires activists to retrieve and recreate a new approach to education that is contrary to the existing approach.

In this critical period in world history, we need more people — especially youth — to take up the challenge of becoming activist-educators in our communities. Educate to Liberate!

Organize!

Social change comes from collective action at the grassroots level.

Ideas for social change come from individuals — or, more accurately, they come from individuals through discussions with others. Individuals can turn ideas into action, but truly effective action emerges from collective efforts involving large numbers of people at the grassroots level. In other words, social change hinges on the ability of individual activists to organize with others collectively. This requires not only the reaching of common goals and a common understanding of issues but also grasping the importance of forging new human relationships based on mutual respect and solidarity. Thus, effective activists are essentially political organizers who have devoted time to keenly develop skills in bringing people together through community education and promoting interrelationships based on respect and solidarity.

In previous pages, we've discussed the importance of creating a new approach to education for our liberation. Here we focus on the role of activists as organizers who people together to create political strategies for social change and to forge new human relationships based on respect and solidarity.

Strategies for political change are strategies for political organizing. Although each political situation is unique and must be appreciated for its uniqueness, all organizing strategies share several things in common. First, they help people to analyze power relations in society and provide insights into how unequal relations can be changed. Second, they focus on uniting all who can be united around common goals and new human values. Third, they help people to connect specific political issues with broader issues; in other words, they enable people to understand the interconnections and interrelatedness between issues. Fourth, they emphasize the active involvement of people in the decisions that affect their lives; in other words, they enable people to discover the power within themselves to change their lives and to change society. In short, social change is not made by individual activists who devise strategies for manipulating or acting upon others. Social change occurs when activists through interactions with others

enable people collectively to find the power within themselves to become active agents making their own history.

Where do organizing strategies come from? Do they emerge fully developed from the minds of geniuses? Are they found in books (or, today, on websites) of experienced activists? No! Organizing strategies develop from intense and ongoing discussions at the grassroots level among people striving to reach a common understanding of critical issues facing them and seeking to create a path for their own liberation. There are no magical shortcuts in this often difficult process, although people can draw from the accumulated wisdom of past generations and contemporaries around the globe involved in similar movements for social change.

It is fairly common in all grassroots political movements to hear some activists complain about apathy in their community. “The people just aren’t interested in fighting for justice. They don’t care. They don’t want to become involved.” Remarks like these should serve as warning signs to activists. They are warning signs that point not to the state of one’s community but about the thinking of the individual activists themselves. They point to problems in not only particular organizing strategies but, more fundamentally, in the basic understanding particular activists of the overall process of organizing for social change.

Fighting for social change involves both organizing grassroots power to change the institutions of society and mobilizing one’s own courage to change oneself. Activism must be both institution-transforming and self-transforming simultaneously. In the final section that follows, we examine why this is so important, especially in this critical period of world history.

Transform!

“We must be the change we wish to see in the world.”

– Ghandi

World history is littered with tragic stories of social movements for reform and revolution that after gaining some power transformed into institutions of oppression no different from the very forces of evil that they were opposing. Why does this happen? Why do ideals for movements for social change become the basis for rationalizing new societies based on oppression?

Common explanations focus on “human nature,” such as the corrupting influences of power (i.e., “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”) and the degeneration of new leaders when faced with the realities of power. Similarly, some argue that oppression and exploitation are embedded in all human societies and cannot be eliminated; the best that can be done is to change the position of oppressors and oppressed, victimizers and victims. Still other explanations tend to rationalize corruption in social movements as a necessary stage in eradicating the old order. Behind all of these common answers is the belief that real social change is impossible and that oppressed peoples should simply accept their conditions of exploitation because the alternatives are no better.

However, the political degeneration of activists involved in social movements for reform and revolution is hardly inevitable. Truly committed activists recognize that participation in movements must be accompanied by a genuine dedication to transforming their own lives, their values, and their aspirations. We cannot wait until “after we have gained power” to deal with issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia. We cannot decide to set up a hierarchy of oppression and address only what we consider the most important ones. We must realize that promoting a revolution in values and thinking is as critical for the process of social change as gaining power over the institutions that influence our lives.

In this period of world history, activists in America face a special responsibility: that of not only engaging in our own self-transformation in the course of fighting for social change but also promoting the

transformations in values and thinking of other Americans. The late Martin Luther King, Jr., best understood this special task. In the last two years of life, he called for a radical reconstruction of society and a radical revolution in values. He believed that activists in America could play a leading role in making this happen.

“The profit motive, when it is the sole basis of an economic system,” he said, “encourages a cut-throat competition and selfish ambition that inspire men to be more I-centered than thou-centered. Equally, communism reduces men to a cog in the wheel of the state. . . . The good and just society is neither the thesis of capitalism nor the antithesis of communism, but a socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism.”

“A true revolution of values,” he continued, “will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies” and to “see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look overseas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, ‘This is not just.’ The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just. A true revolution of values will . . . say of war, ‘This way of settling differences is not just.’”

Thus, as we, as activists, participate in rallies and militantly oppose the oppressive old world order, we must not push into the background the importance of transforming our own values. In this post 9-11 period, especially, we must recognize the critical significance of spiritual values like compassion, generosity and community as “weapons” to combat militaristic world visions and corporate-driven material consumption.

Know Your Political Rights

According to the U.S. Constitution, people have the right to advocate for change in the U.S. Specifically, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects the rights of groups and individuals who advocate changes in laws, government practices, and even the form of government. People have the right to join together with others (i.e., freely assemble) through rallies, demonstrations, picketlines, and meetings. People have rights protecting them from “unreasonable search and seizure” by government agents and police. And people have rights of “due process” when charged with violating laws.

Yet, it’s important to remember that while these rights are fundamental and basic, they also frequently come under attack, especially in times of crisis. Usually, the targets for attack are the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as racial minorities, new immigrants, and youth. For example, during World War II 110,000 Japanese Americans — two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens — were imprisoned in government internment camps. The U.S. Constitution did not protect the rights of Japanese Americans during that period. Similarly, in the wake of 9-11 and the passage of new, anti-terrorism legislation, the rights of legal immigrants — i.e., legal permanent residents in the U.S. — have been curbed and limited.

The National Lawyers Guild and the American Civil Liberties Union — two organizations that have long been at the forefront of protecting our Constitutional rights — advise activists involved in political protests to know their rights and to also understand the difference “between politics and law.” According to the National Lawyers Guild’s handbook on political protests, “We try to help you understand the legal process to some degree so you can make informed choices, but the most important thing is for you to think through everything ahead of time and decide what you want to do in any given situation before it happens.”

We should also remember that the best way to protect our rights is to use them and to educate others about their importance. We should also always strive to expand human rights in the world. Two good models to follow are

the United Nation's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and the People of Color "Principles of Environmental Justice."

The following websites provide important information for activists engaged in political protest and movements for social change.

"Exercising Your Rights of Political Protest" — National Lawyers Guild, Washington, D.C. chapter

<http://www.nlg.org/>

"Exercising Your Rights of Political Protest" — National Lawyers Guild, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. chapters

<http://www.nlg.org/>

"Know Your Rights! No More Victims!" — American Friends Service Committee

<http://www.afsc.org/nomore/rightseng.htm>

"Know Your Rights!" — extensive list of links relating to rights under federal and state laws

<http://www.harbornet.com/rights/states.html>

Rights of Students — American Civil Liberties Union

<http://www.aclu.org/students/>

Rights of College Students — Illinois Student Government, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

<http://www.knowyourrights.uiuc.edu/main.html>

"Know Your Rights, A Legal Guide to Survival in Post 911 America" — National Lawyers Guild and Counterpunch Magazine

<http://www.rense.com/general20/91.htm>

United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

People of Color "Principles of Environmental Justice"

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrajzer/nre/whatis.html>

Web Resources

Educate, Organize, and Transform!

Common Dreams News Center: Breaking News & Views for the Progressive Community
Highly recommended — contains perspectives and ideas not found in mainstream press and TV news, such as viewpoints from around the world on U.S. bombing of Afghanistan and visions for creating a new world free of terrorism.

www.commondreams.org

James & Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership

Focus on the vision of community building as a strategic focus following the events of 9-11. Read especially the four-part newspaper column (from *Michigan Citizen*) written by Grace Lee Boggs on the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., for responding to terrorism, war and global oppression today.

www.boggscenter.org

Civil Rights and Human Rights on the Net

An extensive list of links to civil rights and human rights organizations.

<http://www.ibt.ku.dk/www/law/krim/index/rights.htm>

Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Culture Links

An extensive list of web links to sites focusing on issues relating to race, ethnicity, gender, and culture.

<http://www.oxy.edu/%7Emaeda/multicult.htm>

Asian American Student Activism

College students have the power to create their own classes relating to activism. This is an example of one such class focusing on Asian American student activism.

http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/aasc/classweb/spring00/webmag_197j/index.html

Dan Tsang's Alternative Research

A comprehensive list of important research resources, including alternative and progressive media, on world events and U.S. communities for political activists.

<http://sun3.lib.uci.edu~dtsang>

Yes! The Magazine of Positive Alternatives

Read the ways that visionary thinkers in the U.S. and around the world believe that we can respond to the challenges of today's world: terrorism, globalization, the growing gap between rich and poor, and the ferment desire of people around the globe for peace, justice, democracy, and human rights.

<http://www.futurenet.org/>

Starhawk's Activism Page

Commentaries by a poet-activist on strategies for political organizing in the post 9-11 period; read especially her essay, "Only Poetry Can Address Our Grief."
<http://www.starhawk.org/activism/activism.html>

Z Magazine

This political magazine provides progressive perspectives on issues facing activists worldwide and provides a forum for discussion of organizing strategies.
<http://www.zmag.org/>

ColorLines magazine

Writers in this magazine color issues affecting communities of color and discuss organizing strategies relating to direct action.
<http://www.arc.org/>

Free the Children International

Child labor and international trafficking of children have emerged as new forms of slavery in the modern world, driven by the globalization and the corporate economy. This organization responds to these problems.
<http://www.freethechildren.org/>

IGC's Internet Progressive Gateway

Web links to progressive organizations nationwide.
<http://www.igc.org/igc/gateway/index.html>

Web Links to Progressive Organizations

A web portal to anti-war, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic organizations worldwide.
<http://www.neravt.com/left/>

The Economic Democracy Project

This project provides valuable resources on issues relating to organizing around economic exploitation and the struggle to expand democracy.
<http://www.economicdemocracy.info/index.html>

Activism in Schools: K-12 and Within Communities

This website, created by educational activists, provides resources for those interested in organizing to reform schools and empower children and youth.
<http://www.teachingforchange.org>

Community Education: Youth Empowerment

This student-initiated class shows what can be done to address problems in schools, such as low reading skills among elementary school children; for this class, college students worked with children at an inner-city elementary school.
<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/aasc/classweb/fall01/aas197j/>

Global Exchange

Resources for respond to corporate globalization.
<http://www.globalexchange.org/>

United for a Fair Economy
Valuable resources for understanding economic issues and how to organize them.
<http://www.ufenet.org/>

Web Links on Student Activism

Student Activism Web Links
<http://www.nd.edu/~akreider/psalinks.htm>

Student Activism Web Links
<http://www.neravt.com/left/student.htm>

Student Activists in the Labor Movement
<http://www.aflcio.org/articles/studentactivism/>

Speak Out! Institute for Democratic Education and Culture — Youth and Student
Activist Web Links
<http://www.speakersandartists.org/Topics/YouthStudentActivism.html>

Listserves on Student Activism
<http://www.studentaffairs.com/lists/activis.html>

Youth/Student Activism Handbook
<http://www.cee-ane.org/topics/activism.html>

California State Student Association
<http://www.csustudents.org/>

United Students Against Sweatshops
<http://www.usasnet.org/>

Union Summer, AFL-CIO
<http://www.aflcio.org/unionsummer/>

United States Student Association
<http://www.usstudents.org/>

Los Angeles-based Activist Organizations

Los Angeles Activism Network

<http://www.actionla.org/>

Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates

<http://www.kiwa.org>

Bus Riders Union

<http://www.busridersunion.org>

Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking

<http://www.trafficked-women.org/>

Multicultural Collaborative

<http://www.mcc-la.org/>

Liberty Hill Foundation

<http://www.libertyhill.org/>

Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE)

<http://www.laane.org/>

“The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor’s goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors.”

– Paul Freire, *Mentoring the Mentor: A Critical Dialogue with Paulo Freire*

Faculty Mentor Program
Professor Glenn Omatsu, Coordinator (glenn.omatsu@csun.edu)
c/o Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)
205 University Hall
California State University, Northridge
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330-8366
(818) 677-4151

