

January 2001

Understanding Student Allies on Campus

John P. Sauter Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sauter Jr., John P. (2001) "Understanding Student Allies on Campus," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 22 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol22/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

Understanding Student Allies on Campus

John P. Sauter Jr.

This paper explores the current gap of research on student allies. Specifically it looks at the definitions associated with being an ally and the difficulties in identifying such students on college campuses. It examines both ally action and developmental models. These models not only illustrate general progressions of development, but are also a springboard for examining the issues facing allies. The paper highlights the roles of student allies on campus and how student affairs professionals and faculty can support and challenge such students.

People of color will always be on the front lines fighting racism because their lives are at stake. How do we act and support them effectively, both when they are in the room with us, and when they are not? (Kivel, 1996, p. 87)

Paul Kivel's question is crucial to understanding the essence of student allies, their motivations, and their importance in higher education. The presence and action of student allies at institutions of higher education is very important to comprehending campus culture, especially regarding issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, able-ness, religion, class, and cultures-of-violence. Examining this lesser known part of the student population can give us new clues about how to address some of the difficult multicultural issues facing higher education today. As Erika Nestor (2000) wrote in *The Vermont Connection: The Student Affairs Journal of the University of Vermont*, "Many in the LGBT [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered] community feel that there will not be any significant change politically and personally unless allies join their fight for equal rights and respect" (p. 165).

While there is a plethora of information on issues of oppression and social justice, there is unfortunately very little literature regarding student allies and ally development. In part, this gap is a result of the difficulties involved in locating and identifying student allies on college and university campuses. Filling this gap can be accomplished by exploring what little literature already exists, particularly that relating to race and sexual orientation, as well as examining our own experiences. Defining the term "ally," examining ally action, reviewing existing ally development models, and factoring in the difficulties of being an ally will enable a better understanding of the role that these students play in college environments and how student affairs professionals can support and challenge them throughout their development.

Definitions

In her article, Nestor (2000) recalled statistics from a 1998 national conference that reported that the LGBT organizations in the Albany, New York area were only able to identify nine allies (p. 161). Beverly Tatum describes a similar situation in regards to racism. She writes:

There is a history of White protest against racism, a history of Whites who have resisted the role of oppressor and who have been allies to people of color. Unfortunately these Whites are often invisible to us... I have had the experience of addressing roomfuls of classroom teachers who have been unable to name even one White person who has worked against racism. (Tatum, 1999, p. 108)

These shocking examples bring up several issues to consider. The first is the subjectivity of the definition. Who defines someone as an ally? Is it a self-proclaimed title or something that is given to the person by an oppressed group? This is a difficult question to answer and one that is open to debate depending on your perspective and criteria. The second issue is whether or not the definitions truly represent the essence of an ally. Are they too limited, too broad, or too inadequate to properly describe allies?

John P. Sauter Jr. graduated in 1998 from Colby College with a bachelor's degree in history. Before coming to The University of Vermont, John spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Maine promoting service-learning, literacy, and volunteer service programs. Currently, he is a second-year HESA student and a Graduate Assistant in the Student Services Office of the College of Education and Social Services.

With these questions in mind, we must begin to examine how allies are defined. Jamie Washington and Nancy J. Evans' (1991) definition of an ally, one of the most comprehensive definitions in the current literature, describes an ally as:

A person who is a member of the 'dominant' or 'majority' group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population. (p. 195)

This definition raises multiple issues relevant to all allies. In using the terms 'dominant' and 'majority' Washington and Evans touch upon the issues of privilege that the members of the majority culture often, knowingly or unknowingly, possess. In addition, it mentions working with the oppressed, or target, population in a collaborative and cooperative manner. Without this continued collaborative element to ally work, misunderstandings could arise between the needs of the target population and the ally offering support. Working with and beside others is essential to advocacy and continued development. Another of the more important words in the definition is 'works,' which denotes action, a key concept that is essential to allies. Lori Barnes and Jeff Ederer (2000) expand on Washington and Evans definition by including an added element of motivation. Their definition states that allies take action "out of a belief that eliminating oppression will benefit agents [those that oppress, knowingly or unknowingly] and targets [those that are oppressed]" (Barnes & Ederer, 2000).

Allies' motivations vary and it is important to be aware of limitations in these definitions and the need for flexibility in defining allies. Members of oppressed groups may also be allies for those who suffer from different types of oppression. For example, an able heterosexual African American male student can be an ally to female students, LGBT students, differently abled students, and students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds. Such issues may vary according to the demographic region and diversity of each campus, as more distinctions among groups are made in more multicultural areas than in less diverse areas such as predominantly white colleges and universities. These intersections of identity help keep the definition of allies flexible and make collaboration possible among different oppressed groups.

Types of Ally Action

Action plays a prominent role in the way in which allies react to social injustice and is symbolic of their dedication to end oppression. Support, advocacy, intervention, and education by members of the dominant culture are important. Washington and Evans (1991) point out that "the impact and effect of such activity are different on the dominant group, and are often more powerful when the supporter is not a member of the oppressed population" (p. 195). In reviewing the literature and my own experiences, three distinct levels of ally action are apparent in higher education: personal action, academic action, and activism. These different responses account for a portion of the ambiguity associated with defining allies.

Many student allies act and react to oppression on a personal or interpersonal level. Allies on this level can socialize or have friendships with students of targeted populations. They can interrupt offensive jokes or bring up issues of oppression on a personal level. Some students carry ribbons, pins, and bows for various causes upon their bags and coats. These personal acts are important as they affect student culture on campuses in ways that institutionally sponsored programming or student affairs professionals may not be able to reach. Their actions, role modeling, and understanding of the issues help to create safe spaces in day to day life and raise awareness on campus. In "A Far Better Place: Institutions as Allies," Elisa Lucozzi (1998) recalls how her resident assistant's personal actions against homophobia helped to keep her in college. She describes, "It is people like Mary who remind me how important an ally can be to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students whether they are struggling with their identity or with others' homophobic responses" (pp. 47-48).

John P. Sauter Jr. graduated in 1998 from Colby College with a bachelor's degree in history. Before coming to The University of Vermont, John spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Maine promoting service-learning, literacy, and volunteer service programs. Currently, he is a second-year HESA student and a Graduate Assistant in the Student Services Office of the College of Education and Social Services.

On an academic level, student allies act by taking a stand on issues of oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, able-ism, and other issues that may surface within the classroom. They can act in support of someone facing oppression, a student of color singled out to respond for his or her race for example. Allies also react to such issues, even when a member of the targeted population is not present. In addition, many student allies seek out courses, professors, or workshops that deal with issues of diversity, oppression, awareness, and social justice. These courses can aid in their own education, developmental processes, and understanding of oppression. Employment or work environments may parallel this level outside of academia.

Students in the activist stage are probably the most visible and involved allies on college campuses. These students take a proactive role in the fight against oppression, by attending rallies or marches, organizing events or programming, and participating in other activities focused on social justice and multiculturalism. Student ally activists often can be found participating in student groups based on social justice, multiculturalism, religion, or women's issues. White Students Organized Against Racism (WSOAR) is one such group at the University of Vermont. I attended a Social Protest Art Festival that they held in the spring of 2000 to raise awareness about oppression. The students I spoke with strongly identified themselves as allies and activists and displayed many articles and literature, resources on racism, multiculturalism, and white identity.

Each of these levels illustrates how allies can take action. As Kivel (1996) notes, "there is no one correct way to be an ally" (p. 86). Student allies make a choice not to remain inactive. Their actions at any of these levels allow them to make a difference in the world and move beyond a simple awareness of the issues and develop their own skills and competencies in fighting oppression.

Ally Development

While little information solely focused on student allies exists, many researchers have explored the themes of ally development as they pertain to different oppressions. The following theories are helpful in examining progressions of ally development, especially to student affairs administrators and faculty members who can help support and challenge students in development. There is a slight danger of viewing each of these theories in a linear or hierarchical way. In light of my own experiences, I view ally development as a more continuous and cyclical process in which action and experience build upon themselves, influencing a person's perspective and future actions. Seen this way, ally development is something in which one is constantly engaged, rather than a process to be completed. In describing Autonomy, the final stage in Janet Helms' white identity model, Tatum (1999) mentions how "racial identity development never really ends. The person at this level is continually open to new information and new ways of thinking about racial and cultural values" (p. 112). As one of Tatum's students writes, "without support it would be too easy to give up, burn-out, become helpless again... [support] is the only way to keep moving forward" (p. 110). Understanding and utilizing ally development theories can encourage these students to remain actively involved in diversity efforts.

Gordon Allport (1979) suggests that contact is the key to better understanding of oppression. He states in *The Nature of Prejudice* that "prejudice (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals" (p. 281). This is particularly applicable to college students, especially those in their first year of study or those studying abroad. Such students may not have much experience with issues of diversity or multiculturalism (Nestor, 2000). Gary Howard describes such an exploration. Prejudices formed within his family traditions did not disappear "until my college years when I was immersed in a rich multicultural living situation" (Howard, 1993, p. 37). This example illustrates Allport's theory by showing how exposure to diversity within his college environment helped to break down Howard's prejudices.

Barnes and Ederer (2000) present a more comprehensive Y Ally Model. They describe ally development as a gradual personal process that culminates in a point of decision to become an ally and to take action, rather than a knowing or unknowing agent of oppression. The stages through which they progress toward action are Foundation, Education, and Transformation (Barnes & Ederer, 2000). At the Foundation level, students begin

John P. Sauter Jr. graduated in 1998 from Colby College with a bachelor's degree in history. Before coming to The University of Vermont, John spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Maine promoting service-learning, literacy, and volunteer service programs. Currently, he is a second-year HESA student and a Graduate Assistant in the Student Services Office of the College of Education and Social Services.

to build up an awareness of oppression based upon their own values and experiences (Barnes & Ederer, 2000). The second level, Education, builds upon that foundation with information. In this level, one begins to reflect upon one's own experiences and values, enters into conversations regarding the issues with others, and, through questioning, begins to develop different views on issues of oppression (Barnes & Ederer, 2000). The third stage, Transformation, leads to the decision to become an ally and to take action. Students reaching this stage begin to build up self-confidence and develop skills to interact with issues of social justice (Barnes & Ederer, 2000). Similarly, Washington and Evans' (1991) model of ally development includes four levels: Awareness, Knowledge/Education, Skills, and Action. Both of these models gradually build upon initial awareness through education until the person decides to take action and become an ally.

The issue of white identity and privilege is particularly relevant to ally development on issues of race and ethnicity, especially on predominantly white campuses. Janet Helms' (1993) research revealed six stages of white identity: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy. These stages mark a transition that involves both an "abandonment of racism and evolution of a non-racist White identity" (Helms, 1992, p. 24). The first stage, Contact, is marked by naïve inexperience with racial issues through which many "often perceive themselves as color-blind, completely free of prejudice, unaware of their own assumptions about other racial groups" (Tatum, 1999, p. 95). In the second stage, Disintegration, they become aware of racism and prejudice in their personal lives and experience discomfort based on the "incongruence between what society teaches...and what the individual observes and experiences" (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 78). Such feelings of discomfort and guilt can lead them into Reintegration, which is marked by the acknowledgment of their own unexplored white racial identity, often including feelings of superiority, fear and anger toward people of color (Helms, 1993, p. 60). The Pseudo-independent stage begins to redefine their own identity by questioning beliefs of white privilege and superiority, intellectualizing their feelings about racism, and associating with people of color (Helms, 1993). People at this stage are in neutral territory in regards to racism. While they have made the choice to reject ideas of superiority and inferiority, their inexperience with racism makes them "view racial differences through a white standard while expecting blacks to explain and seek solutions to racism" (Evans, et al., 1998, p. 79). The Immersion/Emersion stage describes the search for a more positive white identity through interaction with other whites, education, and involvement in "consciousness-raising groups... [that help them to] confront and fight against various forms of racism and oppression" (Evans, et al. 1998, p. 79). The last stage, Autonomy, includes the integration of the more positive non-racist white identity into one's own identity in which one "feels a kinship with people regardless of race, and seeks to acknowledge and abolish racial oppression" (Helms, 1993, p. 68). The establishment of a healthy identity, sometimes a painful process, is important to ally development. It provides people with a foundation upon which to interact with the issues and an understanding of how privilege, guilt, and oppression influence others as well as themselves.

Finding one's voice on issues of oppression is very important to ally development. Tatum (1999) describes some of this struggle by quoting Ruth Frankenberg who writes, "I was terrified to speak in gatherings that were primarily of color, since I feared that anything I did say would be marked by my whiteness, my racial privilege" (p. 106). Erica Nestor (2000) clearly articulates this point when she brings up the idea of "coming out" as an ally. Perhaps the difficulties in defining and identifying student allies on campuses is due to the fact that although many may be developing and acting as allies on different levels, they may not have visibly "come out" on their campus. This is important for creating dialogue on campuses.

Difficulties of Being an Ally on Campus

Being a white ally to people of color means to be there all the time, for the long term, committed and active. Because this is hard, challenging work, we often look for ways to justify not doing it. Rather than finding ways to avoid being allies, we need to look at what gets in our way. Where does it get hard? Where do we get stuck? (Kivel, 1996, p. 100)

Being an ally is not easy. Student allies must contend with many challenges due to their beliefs and actions. These challenges are an everyday part of their lives and must be considered in order to understand their

John P. Sauter Jr. graduated in 1998 from Colby College with a bachelor's degree in history. Before coming to The University of Vermont, John spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Maine promoting service-learning, literacy, and volunteer service programs. Currently, he is a second-year HESA student and a Graduate Assistant in the Student Services Office of the College of Education and Social Services.

motivations to take action. Allies often walk a fine line in between two cultures, for they can often pass in the majority and gain the benefits of privilege, unlike many oppressed groups who cannot distance themselves from the issues surrounding them. On the other hand an ally often deals with controversial issues, which may lead to alienation, hostility, discrimination, and association (Washington & Evans, 1991). This can be an issue particularly for students whose family members “hold narrow and prejudicial attitudes about cultural differences” (Howard, 1993, p. 37).

Allies also face difficulties in being accepted by the group that they support. Often mistrust of the dominant group develops due to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other oppressions (Kivel, 1996), which can make it difficult for acceptance to develop with an ally from the majority group. Washington and Evans (1991) note that LGBT allies face “subtle pressure... to come out or at least to consider the possibility of a non-heterosexual identity” (p. 202). In addition, they mention that student allies can feel out of place in the culture to which they are allied, or may even have their motives questioned (Washington & Evans, 1991).

Allies face another stumbling block, which includes guilt and anger at the oppressive systems or groups to which they belong. This can be potentially disabling to students who may be struggling with their own identity development and issues of privilege. Howard (1993) describes white American guilt as “a collective sense of complicity, shame, or guilt” that evolves from belonging to a privileged majority group associated with past and present oppression (p. 39). Nevertheless, while it is important to understand one’s background and how it shaped one’s beliefs, it must not be allowed to prevent one from taking action. Feeling guilty is not an excuse to remain silent in the fight against oppression. A sign at Barnes and Ederer’s (2000) ally workshop stated, “know that the past is not your fault, but the present and the future are your responsibility.” This is an important message to relate to students who may be struggling to move past their own feelings of guilt or shame.

Student Allies & Higher Education

Student allies are a valuable resource to campuses struggling with diversity, multiculturalism and other issues of oppression. Unfortunately, it is relatively difficult to identify student allies on campus. Part of this is due to definitions that highlight action against oppression as one of the key elements of being an ally. The intensity of these definitions may intimidate some students from “coming out” as allies. This is not a reason to water down the ally definitions, but must be matched with information on ways in which students can take action on a personal level, in the classroom, or as an activist. These levels of action allow student affairs professionals and faculty to engage students in discussions of ally development, give them frameworks for where they may fit on issues of being an ally, and challenge them in new directions.

The issues of contact, awareness, education, identity, finding one’s voice, “coming out” as an ally, and taking action are all crucial steps in that continual process. According to Kivel (1996), “being an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done” (p. 86). Seeing ally development as a process in which students can take action at any level along the way is significant since many models tend to portray an ally at the pinnacle of action, identity, and moral development. In addition, we must also be aware of the struggles that allies face related to identity, guilt, and personal responsibility as they walk in between the majority and minority cultures. This can be a very lonely process for many students struggling with these issues. This isolation represents the internal struggles and personal nature of ally development, as well as the difficulty of identifying allies who can be mentors to these students and help them through the process.

The lack of literature regarding ally development may contribute to this loneliness, making an understanding of ally development theory important for student affairs professionals and faculty members working with students. It is important, as Tatum (1999) points out, to connect students with other allies “who are further along in the process and can help show him [or her] the way” (p. 107). Other allies’ examples can help these

John P. Sauter Jr. graduated in 1998 from Colby College with a bachelor's degree in history. Before coming to The University of Vermont, John spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA at the University of Maine promoting service-learning, literacy, and volunteer service programs. Currently, he is a second-year HESA student and a Graduate Assistant in the Student Services Office of the College of Education and Social Services.

students realize that they are not alone and that other people have been through similar struggles (Tatum, 1999).

Now that we have examined the definitions, actions, development models, and difficulties associated with being an ally, we must turn to how they affect campus culture. Although not always identifiable, student allies are important because of their actions in support of multiculturalism and social justice. As members of majority groups, their voices and actions may have a unique impact on issues of diversity. In April 2000, I co-presented a multiculturalism and ally development training and workshop session at a Vermont State AmeriCorps* conference. After our session a student of color came up to me and thanked me for my involvement in the session, as it was the first time she had witnessed a white person actively involved in diversity work. Her comments and the reactions of the other people in the room illustrated to me the importance of “coming out” as an ally, participating in diversity work, and being a role model for other allies.

Similarly, student allies can become advocates and models of action and social justice for other students. This modeling aspect is significant for several reasons. Not only does it show how one can take action on issues of oppression, but it also gives other students a venue to discuss issues of oppression, identity, social justice, and ally development with which they may be struggling. In this way, student allies can help to change attitudes and campus cultures. No longer can we place the responsibilities of educating our community on the shoulders of those suffering from oppression. We need to work with those populations and promote multiculturalism, diversity, social justice, and the development of student allies within our own communities.

References

- Allport, G. W. (1979). The nature of prejudice. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Barnes, L., & Ederer, J. (2000, April). From agents to allies: Active citizenship in our multicultural communities. Workshop Presentation at the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Conference, Washington, DC.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Helms, J. E. (1992). A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a white person or understanding the white persons in your life. Topeka, Kansas: Content Communications.
- Helms, J. E. (Ed.). (1993). Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Howard, G. R. (1993, September). Whites in multicultural education: rethinking our role. Phi Delta Kappan, 36-41.
- Kivel, P. (1996). Uprooting racism: How white people can work for racial justice. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Lucozzi, E. A. (1998). A far better place: Institutions as allies. In Sanlo, R. L. (Ed.), Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators. (pp. 47-52). Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Nestor, E. L. (2000). My "coming out". The Vermont Connection, 21, 159-173.
- Tatum, B. D. (1999). 'Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?' and other conversations about race. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Washington, J. & Evans, N. J. (1991). Becoming an ally. In N. J. Evans & V. Wall (Eds.) Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus. Lanham, MD: American College Personnel Association.