

ACTIVIST HUMAN CAPITAL: SKILLS ACQUISITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL MOVEMENT ACTIVISM*

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Social movement scholars have long recognized that participants in one campaign often develop a commitment to activism that inspires continued participation for years, even a lifetime. Scholars have identified a number of factors that inspire the development of commitment, including consciousness raising, empowerment, social ties and the development of a shared collective identity. In this article, we highlight another factor that the movement literature has thus far neglected: skills acquisition. Using data from interviews with participants in the AFL-CIO's Union Summer student internship program, we elaborate on the processes through which participation generates a feeling of empowerment, specifically showing that participants in an intensive movement campaign can learn concrete organizing skills which empower and inspire them to sustain their involvement in activism. In addition, we find that social ties are important not only because of the information and support they provide, but also because they transmit human capital. We demonstrate that those who come to an activist campaign with less experience, and those who participate in a better-organized campaign are more likely to gain activist human capital through their participation.

The persistence of activism over an individual's life course has long captured the interest of social movement scholars. Research convincingly demonstrates the biographical consequences of activism, showing how participation in an intensive movement campaign increases the likelihood of continued political involvement (Corrigall-Brown 2012; Katzenstein 1998; Klatch 1999; McAdam 1988; Taylor et al. 2009; Van Dyke, McAdam and Wilhelm 2000; Whalen and Flacks 1989; Whittier 1995). Indeed, contrary to popular notions of activists "selling out" and abandoning their idealism, experiences like these often inspire participants to continue their activism throughout their lives, as career activists who hold positions in explicitly social change oriented organizations, through more traditional occupations such as social work or education—which nonetheless allow them to pursue social influence consistent with their activist values—or by volunteering their free time to support social movement events.

Research on the biographical consequences of activism identifies consciousness raising, empowerment, collective identity, and ties to other activists as factors that facilitate a deep commitment to activism (Fantasia 1988; Gamson 1991; Hirsch 1990; McAdam 1988; Taylor 1996). While the literature is convincing regarding the importance of these factors, it suffers from an important limitation: the failure to more fully explore the dynamics that influence the development of feelings of empowerment, and the role that social ties play in fostering commitment. Although McAdam (1988) describes how the 1964 Freedom Summer voter registration participants applied the tactical and organizational lessons they had learned on the

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campaign to other movements, social movement scholars have largely ignored how learning the nuts and bolts of organizing influences the development of commitment. We argue that the acquisition of activist-relevant skills and knowledge, what can be thought of as activist human capital, plays an important role in empowering activists and inspiring a commitment to sustained activism.

We take up this issue with rich qualitative interview data from activists who participated in an intensive labor-organizing internship, the AFL-CIO's Union Summer program. Observers note the considerable success of the program in spurring young people to bring labor activism back to campus and their community. Both historical accounts and quantitative studies demonstrate the program's far-reaching impact on spin-off movements and protests across campuses nationwide, including the anti-sweatshop movement and campus labor organizing (Bunnage 2002; Featherstone and USAS 2002; Dixon, Tope, and Van Dyke 2008; Van Dyke, Dixon, and Carlon 2007). By analyzing how participants made sense of their experience and how it shaped their willingness to engage in future activism, our study helps flesh out processes underlying activist commitment that remain underdeveloped in the literature.

DEVELOPING A COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINED ACTIVISM

The literature has identified a number of factors that help foster the development of a commitment to activism among participants, including what scholars have termed collective empowerment, consciousness raising, social ties, and collective identity (Barr and Drury 2009; Friedman 2009; Gamson 1991; Hirsch 1990; Klandermans 1984; Klatch 1999; McAdam 1988; Taylor et al. 2009).¹ Individuals who participate, especially in an intensive activist experience, frequently find that the experience increases their understanding of the issues and increases their empathy toward individuals who have been affected by a social situation. Increased understanding and empathy often motivate them to continue their activism. The experience may also be empowering for them, making them feel like their efforts can have meaningful effects, and this too can inspire subsequent activism. Finally, by participating in protest, individuals come to share a sense of solidarity and common purpose, a shared identity with other participants, which also motivates continued action.

While this literature has gone a long way in helping us understand how individuals become committed to social activism, we argue that it has failed to fully explore the processes that foster commitment. First and foremost, the literature has underemphasized the importance of activist-relevant skill and knowledge acquisition—what can be thought of as activist human capital—to commitment development. Scholars of various stripes have alluded to the importance of skills as resources for individuals and activist organizations (Cress and Snow 1999; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Yet, as we describe below, organizing skills acquired through activist participation may also foster a feeling of empowerment. In addition, the literature has failed to consider all of the ways that social ties may matter in fostering commitment. We suggest that human capital is important here as well: social ties, or social capital, promote the development of human capital. Finally, we explore who is more likely to gain human capital while participating in a protest campaign. Both the past experience that the activist brings to the campaign as well as characteristics of the campaign itself, including the sponsoring organization(s), may influence the extent to which an individual gains activism-relevant capital through their participation. We explore each of these issues in more detail below.

Empowerment and Human Capital

While the literature convincingly demonstrates that feelings of empowerment that individuals develop through their participation influence commitment formation, it has taken a fairly

shallow and one-sided view of empowerment, failing to fully theorize the processes through which empowerment is developed. Hirsch (1990) discusses empowerment as a psychological phenomenon, emphasizing a “bandwagon effect” whereby people come to believe that change is possible by witnessing large numbers of people protesting (see Lichbach 1995 for a rational choice application).² Others, such as McAdam (1999) and Barr and Drury (2009), similarly highlight how activists may come to feel more optimistic about their chances of success over time, and that this optimism can inspire subsequent action (see also Fantasia 1988). These scholars do not fully consider the factors that help create this positive emotion and sense of optimism. We argue here that the acquisition of activism-relevant skills is an important aspect of empowerment that has largely been neglected in the commitment literature. Receiving training in collective action and participating in protest events can provide people with skills and knowledge that empower them to be more effective in their action.

Resource mobilization scholars have long recognized that skills are crucial resources for a social movement (Clemens 1997; Cress and Snow 1996; Ganz 2000; McAdam 1988; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Nepstad and Bob 2006; Voss and Sherman 2000), and others convincingly demonstrate that individuals often take the knowledge and skills they learn on one campaign or social movement and put them to work for other movement campaigns (McAdam 1988; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Voss and Sherman 2000).

Political scientists have shown that individuals who possess civic skills are more likely to participate in the political system (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Civic skills are organizational and communication skills that individuals may learn through either paid employment or work with voluntary organizations. Schussman and Soule (2005) extend this reasoning to social movement participation, arguing that individuals with civic skills are more likely to engage in protest. Similarly, Klandermans and his colleagues (2008) suggest that participation in voluntary associations can foster further participation in politics because participants may gain knowledge of how political institutions work.

Other work is more suggestive of a connection between skills and empowerment (Friedman 2009; Shriver, Miller, and Cable 2003). For example, Shriver and colleagues’ (2003) analysis of the Gulf War Illness Movement demonstrates how women felt empowered by learning to do things they previously thought were male tasks. Friedman’s (2009) study of Chinese labor mobilization identifies the building of organizing skills among local activists as key to community empowerment and, ultimately, insurgency. While useful for our purposes here, because these studies do not explicitly focus on the development of commitment, they do not fully explore the type of skills that matter or how they are developed.

It is clear from this literature that skills matter, either conceived in very general terms of resources or more specific understandings of political issues and institutions. Some longitudinal studies of activists (e.g., Klatch 1998; McAdam 1988) suggest that these skills can help generate sustained activism, but the commitment literature has for the most part failed to recognize the link between skills acquisition and empowerment. Indeed, what is missing from this discussion is the potential role of activist-relevant human capital in generating the feeling of empowerment that fosters sustained activism. This requires a closer inspection of the ways in which skill development figures into the activist experience. We conduct one such exploration here, showing how participating in activism may not only make people come to see that efforts for change can have an impact, but may also provide people with useful tools for working to make that change. Individuals who possess these skills feel more empowered to engage in activism because they know that they can make valuable contributions, and they find it rewarding to do so.

Social Ties Facilitate Activist Human Capital

Activist skill building and the development of a commitment to activism does not occur in a vacuum. Research on social movement recruitment demonstrates that ties to other activists and organizations can help draw individuals into activism (Almeida 2005; Blee 2002;

Dixon and Roscigno 2003; Gould 1993; McAdam 1988; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olson 1980; Taylor 1996). This is probably one of the strongest and most consistent findings within the social movement literature, with study after study finding that the strongest predictor of protest attendance is having ties to other activists. These social ties are important because they can provide others with crucial information about an event so that they are aware of it and can attend (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Schussman and Soule 2005), and because social ties provide support for activist identities. McAdam and Paulsen (1993) found that the strongest predictor of participation in the Freedom Summer project was having ties to organizations and other individual activists that provided support for the individual's activist identity. Others (e.g., Taylor 1996; Taylor et al. 2009) suggest that the development of a collective identity, which often occurs during participation in protest, fosters sustained activism.

Thus, there is every reason to expect that the ties formed during the Union Summer campaign influence individuals to continue engaging in activism beyond the end of the internship, and that they do so at least in part by providing support for activist identities. However, we suggest that these social ties also matter because they are a means through which individuals gain skills. Seminal work within the education literature demonstrates that social capital matters in part because it is one of the means through which individuals gain human capital (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1995; Bryk and Schneider 2002; Carbonaro 1998; Coleman 1988; Morgan and Sorensen 1999). We gain a lot of our knowledge and skills from those around us. Thus, as we demonstrate in the results section, Union Summer participants developed human capital, knowledge, and skills not only through the training programs that are part of the internship, but also through the social connections they formed to other activists as they participated. The development of activist social capital facilitates the formation of activist human capital.

Conditions Leading to Gains in Activist Human Capital

While there are good theoretical reasons for thinking that participation in an intensive social movement campaign can generate activist human capital and inspire sustained activism, we would never argue that everyone who participates in a campaign will have the same response to it. Indeed, even two individuals who work next to each other on the same task may have different responses to their shared experience, and certainly within a broad, multi-location campaign participants will have different experiences and reactions. Some individuals may not enjoy the work involved in a particular campaign, in this case labor organizing, and may not be inspired to continue with it in a sustained way. They may not find informing workers about their rights, or collecting signatures, for example, to be particularly gratifying. Thus, in Union Summer, and in any campaign, participants will not have a uniform response to their experience, even if their experience was similar to that of others.

Whether or not an individual perceives that they have gained activist human capital by participating in a campaign is driven by both the individual's past experience as well as the characteristics of the campaign they worked on. Thus, both qualities of the individual and qualities of the organization they work with influence the extent to which the individual gains valuable capital through their involvement. Someone coming to a campaign with limited prior experience has the potential to experience a greater gain in knowledge and skills through their participation. This idea is consistent with research on education that suggests that disadvantaged youth, who often lack both human and social capital, tend to gain more than their relatively advantaged peers from intensive education programs or participation in extra-curricular activities (Heckman 2006; Mahoney 2000; Mahoney and Cairns 1997; Ready 2010). Thus, as we show in the findings section, Union Summer participants with limited knowledge of labor unions or organizing prior to the internship comment more on the human capital they gained through their participation.

In addition, scholars examining the factors that make individuals persist in activism have shown that characteristics of organizations influence individual activist trajectories (Corrigan-Brown 2011; White 2010). Corrigan-Brown (2011) shows that there are multiple trajectories of movement participation, and that the decision of whether or not to continue working with a particular organization is influenced heavily by organizational structures and processes. Bunnage (2002) has noted that Union Summer interns had a range of experiences during the program, and that some of the local labor unions that took on interns were not particularly enthusiastic about their participation. Similarly, as we describe below, we find that Union Summer participants in a well-organized campaign that is eager to have the assistance of volunteers and one that provides a range of interesting activities for them gain more activist human capital than they would have had they participated in a poorly organized campaign with leaders who had limited interest in their participation.

In this article, we use qualitative interview data with young adults who participated in the AFL-CIOs Union Summer internship program to explore the factors that influence empowerment, the relationship between social ties and human capital acquisition, and who is more likely to report gains in activist human capital. After describing our data and methods, we use our rich qualitative data to elaborate on the development of a commitment to activism.

THE CASE: UNION SUMMER

The AFL-CIO launched its Union Summer program in 1996 in an effort to mobilize college students and recruit them to be union organizers through an intensive, month-long internship on an active labor campaign (Bunnage 2002). Between 1996 and 2007, more than 3,000 American college students had participated in the summer program (AFL-CIO 2009). The primary goals of the Union Summer program are to “(1) build union power by providing activists to assist on campaigns, (2) attract and commit new organizers to the labor movement (including more white women and people of color), and (3) instill a pro-labor sentiment among interns” (Bunnage 2002: 92). Union Summer was modeled explicitly on the Freedom Summer experience. Students typically participate in a one-week training session in a central location such as Chicago, and then spend four weeks working on labor-organizing projects at different sites across the country. Common activities include conducting home visits with workers, coordinating and staging protest events, and engaging in political advocacy to advance worker causes.

Both historical and quantitative research evidence demonstrate that the Union Summer program has fostered sustained activism on the part of its participants. First, the historical record shows a direct link between the program and the campus-based anti-sweatshop movement of the late 1990s. One of the participating unions in the summer program—UNITE, which represents apparel workers and has a vested interest in combating sweatshops—helped initiate a campus campaign by having its summer interns research connections between sweatshops and collegiate apparel. It was one of these Union Summer interns, Tico Almeida, who organized the first student anti-sweatshop campaign at Duke University in the fall of 1997 (Featherstone and United Students Against Sweatshops 2002). The movement spread from there, with further involvement of Union Summer graduates. Moreover, quantitative analyses of whether the Union Summer program has been successful at inspiring labor activism on college campuses provide consistent results. Using quantitative data on the schools from which interns were recruited and a dataset of all four-year colleges and universities in the U.S., we found that the presence of Union Summer graduates on campus was associated with: (1) the presence of United Students Against Sweatshops chapters; (2) student labor protest of all types; (3) graduate student union organizing campaigns (Dixon, Tope and, Van Dyke 2008; Van Dyke, Dixon, and Carlon 2007). Thus, the program appears to have been quite successful in achieving the goal of inspiring sustained student labor protest.

The research evidence clearly shows that the program has influenced sustained activism. Yet the quantitative data cannot speak to how and why interns were inspired to continue their labor activism. For this we turn to our semistructured interviews, which we describe in more detail below. We supplement the interviews with ethnographic data gathered by one of the authors (who participated in Union Summer of June, 2001), various program materials, and descriptive accounts of the program experience and influence (e.g., Bunnage 2002; Bunnage and Stepan Norris 2004; Cooper 1996). Thus, interviews are our central data source, and then we triangulate perspectives (Snow and Trom 2002) with our field/ethnographic data.

While the focus on a particular case like Union Summer may undermine efforts towards generalizable conclusions, cases that lend themselves to the development or assessment of theoretically meaningful questions have been crucial for our understanding of important social processes (Ragin and Becker 1992; Reuschmeyer 2003). Our goal here is not to produce generalizable findings regarding the Union Summer experience or the development of a commitment to activism more generally, but rather to better capture the process of commitment development, and to produce findings that others can then further explore empirically. As Snow and Trom (2002) argue, the major strength of case studies is that they generate rich, in-depth information on processes and systems of action, which enable theory development.

The Union Summer case is well suited for these aims for multiple reasons. First, the program bears many similarities to other intensive activist experiences that have been associated with sustained activism, which allows for meaningful comparisons across cases. Second, the program has been remarkably successful in prompting sustained activism among its graduates. Anecdotal as well as statistical evidence underscore the influence of the program in this regard. Therefore, interviews with participants as well as secondary and ethnographic data from the program provide what we think is a good window into the dynamic processes of an activist campaign that can lead to commitment development.

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA

In order to explore the factors that inspired individuals to continue with their activism, we conducted interviews with 23 Union Summer participants from 20 colleges and universities in November and December of 2002. Our interviews included participants from the initial 1996 summer program to the summer of 2002. In addition to the Union Summer participants, we interviewed two Union Summer site coordinators, a program administrator, and an official from the Organizing Institute, which did campus recruiting for the program. We sent a call for participants through the Union Summer alumni listserv, to which a program administrator granted us access. After receiving responses from 38 individuals, we were able to schedule and complete phone interviews with 23 Union Summer participants. We interviewed 12 women and 11 men. Twenty-six percent of our respondents were ethnic or racial minority group members, including 3 African Americans, 2 Latinos, and 1 Asian American. Because the listserv only includes participants of the 1999 and later campaigns, the majority of our participants are from the later years of Union Summer. We were nonetheless able to reach some respondents who participated in the early years of the program (1996–1998) through snowball sampling from our contacts. We have little reason to believe that the experience of earlier participants would have differed substantially from that of later participants.

Fifteen of our 23 participants had prior activist experience, consistent with other research showing that activists often participate in a sustained way. Thirteen respondents went to selective colleges, such as Brown University, the University of Michigan, or Notre Dame. Ten attended less selective colleges, including CSU Fullerton and SUNY Geneseo.³ Fifteen of the participants came from public universities, and the other eight from private.

We conducted semistructured interviews ranging from 45 minutes to an hour in length with each subject. We questioned them about the nuts and bolts of their Union Summer par-

ticipation, including where they were stationed and what campaign they worked on, as well as questions more relevant to our interests. We asked them to describe their experience that summer, how their experience influenced their perception of labor issues and activism, and then asked several questions about their activity following Union Summer.

While interview and survey research run the risk of social desirability bias, we are confident in our interview data and the frank responses of Union Summer participants. Our recruitment script stated that we were conducting “a study of the experiences of Union Summer activists,” so respondents did not know our specific interests. We began the interview by asking participants to describe their experience as accurately as possible. As we show, many respondents indicated that they had a poor experience overall or that their host union failed to find meaningful tasks for them. In addition, we did not ask specifically about whether they acquired skills as a part of the experience, instead letting respondents volunteer this information if they felt it was important. While we recognize that there is the possibility of social desirability bias in these interviews, as there always is, we did not feel that respondents were holding back or trying to avoid making negative statements. In addition, because the respondents had not been informed of the specific elements of our research question, we have no reason to believe that their voluntary statements about skills acquisition were motivated by a desire to satisfy the interviewer.

When the interviews were complete, they were transcribed and then studied for emergent themes. Once relevant themes were identified, we content coded each interview on relevant points, including whether the individual had engaged in activism prior to the internship, what tasks they were assigned as part of the internship, whether they considered their experience to be positive or not, whether they explicitly mentioned skills, and so on. The two sets of codes were compared to ensure at least 90 percent agreement on all items. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Illustrative quotes were identified during the coding.

RESULTS

The vast majority of the people we talked with were continuing to participate in activism after spending part of their summer in a paid labor-organizing internship (N=21/23). For many of our respondents, this meant participating in campus groups upon their return in the fall. Many of them were involved in labor movement campaigns, while others were working with other progressive movements, such as opposition to the death penalty and animal rights. Four of the 23 Union Summer participants we interviewed had full- or part-time jobs as labor organizers at the time of the interview, and another two had paid positions working as organizers in progressive politics. Thus, as has been found in past research, participation in one intensive campaign did influence the vast majority to persist in their activism beyond the end of the campaign.

Empowerment and Activist Human Capital

Consistent with past research, our research with the Union Summer volunteers suggests that consciousness raising, empowerment, and new social ties all played a role in fostering an increased commitment to labor activism on the part of participants. In addition, we find support for our argument that skills acquisition played a role in generating feelings of empowerment.

Consciousness raising, or increased knowledge of labor issues, occurred through educational training workshops, interns' day-to-day work assignments, and through conversation with other participants, program leaders, and labor activists. Project organizers strategically designed the program to educate student interns about labor issues. During the intensive sessions, interns live together and typically work 50 hours a week or more with unions,

workers, and activists. Students go through a weeklong training prior to placement in an organizing project. The training session has a specific educational component, providing background on the union movement, organizing, labor law, and the specifics of the campaign at issue, as well as more concrete activist training on basic organizing and leadership skills. Although some interns did not have an entirely pleasant experience during the internship, with many local unions failing to provide meaningful tasks for everyone, all but two of the participants we spoke with (N = 21) reported that the program changed their understanding of labor issues.⁴

However, the knowledge participants gained involved more than an increased awareness, or consciousness, of labor issues. Union Summer interns learned concrete labor-organizing skills, which played a critical role in producing a feeling of empowerment. Three-quarters of our subjects mentioned empowerment, skills, and knowledge as influencing their continued activism.⁵ Through their day-to-day experiences many interns not only came to see the promise of labor organizing for affecting social change, they also learned concrete skills, which enabled them to make contributions toward that change. The program imparted organizing skills through both formal training and informal interaction on site. Some strategy sessions were geared toward a specific campaign, as detailed by this intern active at the beginning of the Students Against Sweatshops movement:

While I was on my Union Summer site, someone from UNITE came and we did a day of action against Guess. And we did an action in a mall and it was a great experience. . . . So I went back to my campus and I actually got some information from the UNITE person that was there about [university] apparel that was being made in sweatshops. So I did a Guess Day of Action on campus and then I started getting into the sweatshop thing and we started a sweatshop committee in our Progressive Student Alliance. And that's how things got started. (telephone interview, December 2002)

The UNITE/Guess Day of Action example was a specific attempt to launch a campus-based campaign. Other sessions were on more broadly applicable aspects of organizing, but no matter how specific or general the training, it was geared toward providing knowledge and skills that interns would put to use through continued activism. The campaign that one of the authors participated in devoted part of an afternoon to a discussion with a representative from the Organizing Institute, during which interns were asked to provide details regarding how they will put their new skills to work on return to campus.

A participant on a nurses' organizing campaign in Philadelphia describes the skills she gained through another training session:

I credit Union Summer with every organizing skill I have, and Union Summer is basically the reason that I am active in political organizing and things like that. . . . I remember one thing that really helped was we had a seminar where two college students—I think, part of some action network—came in and kind of went through with us very step by step how you run a campaign. . . . I think organizing can be so hard because you have all of these huge things you want to accomplish and, what that did for me is that it really broke it down into these really manageable steps. It's something that has just helped me enormously with, really, everything I've done. (telephone interview, December 2002)

As this quote illustrates, gaining skills is an important aspect of the empowerment that can occur during a protest campaign, and one that has been neglected by the social movement literature. The literature has tended to emphasize the psychological nature of empowerment while failing to highlight the fact that this positive psychological state can come about through the learning of concrete skills, which give people the tools they need to work effectively.

Another intern, who worked on a healthcare campaign in Los Angeles, also remarked on how gaining skills made him feel empowered *and* enabled further activism:

I think the knowledge and skills I got at the beginning of the summer made me feel confident and responsible for doing something or taking action of some sort. . . . Knowing the process of unionizing and also of getting a contract, a better understanding of how unions fit into a better and more just world made me feel more comfortable and just the fact that I had gained knowledge of organizing, cold canvassing, and signature gatherings, and networking—since I had those skills and wasn't really using them made me feel like I should be using them. (telephone interview, December 2002)

The following intern, who participated in a Justice for Janitors campaign in Oakland and was working part time with the SEIU at the time of the interview, further illustrates the connection between gaining human and social capital and experiencing positive emotions:

It was really educational and also a lot of fun. It definitely interested me in a career in union organizing. I learned how to make a campaign plan, strategy, corporate campaign, basically, starting where the workers are, leadership development, how to build an organizing committee. One thing that was really fun for me was traveling a lot and seeing how all the campaigns and activities all over the state fit together. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Another intern, who worked on a Justice For Janitors campaign in Baltimore, similarly remarks on how both the human and social capital he gained made him feel empowered. When asked how he would describe his experience at Union Summer, he replied:

I'm going to go with AWESOME! It was an interesting opportunity to try out something that I had thought about doing but didn't have any expertise in it. I had no experience in union organizing—hadn't even interacted very directly with unions. . . . Actually dealing with workers that the campaign focused on and seeing victories come out of that within the span of the time I was working there, was really satisfying. It was a chance to explore new tactics and try out my own skills and learn a lot from the people I was with. It was exciting I guess. (telephone interview, December 2002)

When we asked another intern, who participated in an SEIU healthcare campaign in Los Angeles, what factors influenced his decision to participate in labor activism after the summer, he said, "I think the knowledge and skills I got at the beginning of the summer made me feel confident and responsible for doing something or taking action of some sort." Thus, many of the interns spoke of feeling empowered, more confident, or encouraged by the skills they gained during the internship.

As quantitative research shows (Bunnage 2002; Dixon, Tope and Van Dyke 2008; Van Dyke, Dixon and Carlon 2007), the Union Summer program was very effective in spurring spinoff protests at campuses nationwide. Our qualitative interview data illustrate that the program was successful at inspiring commitment to activism in part because it provided interns with human capital in the form of education and skills training. Many interns found the acquisition of new organizing skills to be empowering. Thus, empowerment involves not only a psychological component—a feeling of uplift and new possibility, as emphasized by the movement literature—but also the acquisition of concrete skills that make people feel more able and qualified to engage in activism. This empowerment through skills acquisition inspired many Union Summer activists to continue engaging in activism after the internship ended.

How Social Ties Facilitate Gains in Activist Human Capital

Consistent with the social movement literature on sustained activism, our research also suggests that social ties and identity support facilitate the formation of a commitment to labor issues. We also found that the social ties formed during the campaign facilitated the development of activist human capital. The intensive setting of the Union Summer program is ripe

for interpersonal exchanges of activist experiences and strategies, and for the development of lasting friendships, all of which are important for developing a commitment to labor-related causes. Similar to comments made by other interns, a participant with multiple local unions in Wisconsin remarked:

I think the fact that I had made all of these wonderful friends in this experience, and that we all kept in touch and this was something that kept us kind of bonded and united. . . . It really kept me motivated knowing that they were doing the same things and coming up against the same obstacles that I was facing, so in that way I felt not only a mandate, but almost like peer pressure in that I need to stay involved, and this is really important. (telephone interview, December 2002)

While these results are consistent with past research, scholars have not highlighted how these social ties can be important not only in providing identity support, but also by conveying concrete knowledge on how to organize. The intern who participated in a Justice for Janitors campaign in Oakland illustrates the connection between social and human capital when she says:

The group was really nice and really fun. We would work really long hours, but then we would go back to the dorm and talk about our experience and talk about social justice issues and organizing strategies, and so we had some time to reflect on what was going on, so I think that's another way I learned a lot—just from the people I worked with in the program. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Similarly, an intern who participated in a Justice for Janitors campaign in Baltimore says, “It was a chance to explore new tactics and try out my own skills and learn a lot from the people I was with. It was exciting.” An intern who worked in Philadelphia on a nurses’ campaign echoes this sentiment when she says:

The other people that I did Union Summer with were really incredible and I learned a lot from them, because a lot of the people I worked with were much more politically active than I had been. So I got to learn about what they did, and how they became involved, and they were my age, so it was sort of inspiring to see people my age doing these really exciting things. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Even some of those who did not have a very good experience on their campaign remarked positively on the people they had met and things they learned.

Every single intern who brought up social capital during their interview also discussed the skills and/or knowledge they gained through their participation (16/16 respondents). Their new contacts were valuable at least in part because of the knowledge and information they shared, consistent with the research on education that demonstrates that social capital can be important to educational attainment because of the human capital gains that accompany it.

Who Gained Activist Human Capital?

The AFL-CIO started the internship program with the explicit goal of interesting college students in a career in labor organizing as well as with the goal of inspiring more labor protest on college campuses. As our results indicate, the program was successful in many cases. However, the program was not effective with all interns. While there are limited differences between those interns who developed activist human capital and those who did not, two factors stand out. First, those who came into the campaign with a limited amount of previous experience or knowledge of labor activism found the program to be more beneficial and were more likely to say that they gained valuable knowledge and skills. These were more often individuals from less selective colleges, which is not surprising since less selective schools

tend to have fewer student protests and less of a culture of activism (Van Dyke 1998). Individuals from these settings were likely to arrive with less activist experience and fewer activist social connections. For example, one intern who attended a small liberal arts college in the Midwest remarked:

Well, I think getting to go out to a couple of the worksites impacted me. Just getting to see different working conditions, and getting to talk to workers that way. . . . I think, before that I went to a small private college and grew up in a small town. So I think I've had some experiences [at Union Summer] that sort of got me past sort of the sheltered experience growing up that I had. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Another intern agreed that because of living in a small town, she had limited knowledge of labor issues. She stated, "I think it affected it quite a bit because the labor movement is not really something that students know a lot about in [city name] which is a small town." Other interns also remarked on how, because they came from "a privileged background," the internship really opened their eyes to a lot of issues.

A second factor that influenced who gained valuable human capital through the program was the organization with which the intern worked. Those who participated in poorly run internships were less likely to say that they gained valuable skills as a part of the campaign. One intern, who worked on a Justice for Janitors campaign in Chicago, remarked:

I have mixed feelings about the campaign we worked on for a couple of reasons. The majority of our work . . . had already been done once, and we were doing it again, and then they told us that the next wave would be doing it again. I really felt like they were wasting our time. . . . They probably could have put us to use doing more important things that would get their campaign rolling a lot faster than that. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Another intern who worked on a retail workers' campaign in Buffalo remarked that, "I felt like I was doing something important. I never doubted that the workers would be better off." Nonetheless, he was not satisfied with the experience, and was not sure he would ever want a career as a labor organizer:

I learned a lot about the mechanics of organizing. But the local didn't do a good job of making sure we had things to do. I liked the other interns and most of the organizers. But I'm critical of how the union conducted business. . . . I hope the AFL-CIO does a better job of making sure locals present a plan so the interns have something to do. After the first two weeks I was just sitting. . . . I'm not sure that labor organizing is something I would do. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Thus, both individual's past experiences and qualities of the campaign, largely determined by the organizing union, influenced the experience of individual interns and the likelihood that they would feel that they gained valuable skills.

Some interns who learned a lot about a potential career as a union organizer through their experience in the internship did not find it so appealing. The career development literature suggests that early work experiences can influence career development by teaching people what they *do not* want to do in addition to what they want to do (Johnson and Mortimer 2005). People may respond to the same experience differently, depending on their values and prior expectations (Belcher and Achison 1976; Kahn 1972). One intern, who worked on a health care campaign in Seattle, remarked:

One thing for sure is that I realized how much activism is just kind of sucky sometimes. It's long, lots of drudgery, lots of boring work, lots of people who don't care to hear what you want to say and aren't supportive of you. It's hard, but that is a necessary part of it. I think a lot of students including myself who were there kind of thought it would be like all exciting

and sexy.... It made me realize that activism is a lot more of a sacrifice than I thought it was. I don't really have the right kind of personality to necessarily be a union organizer, but I definitely want to be involved in the movement in some way. (telephone interview, December 2002)

Thus, for some activists, participating in the summer internship provided them with valuable information in that it helped them figure out what they do not want to do. As noted previously, we would not expect every activist participating in a particular campaign to react to it the same way.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research we have presented here highlights a factor that the movement literature has failed to recognize as being important to fostering sustained activism: skills acquisition. Though the literature has long recognized that activist-relevant skills are an important resource for social movements (Clemens 1997; Cress and Snow 1996; Ganz 2000; McAdam 1988; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Nepstad and Bob 2006; Voss and Sherman 2000), and studies of individual participation find that civic skills make activism more likely (Klandermans, van der Toorn, and van Stekelenburg 2008; Schussman and Soule 2005), our findings shed light on the process through which skills and knowledge influence participation. It also demonstrates how these skills and knowledge—what we term activist human capital—are developed during participation, and considers who is more likely to gain activist human capital through their participation.

As we noted earlier, social movement scholars have documented how participation in activism can provide individuals with a feeling of empowerment, which then inspires sustained activism. The literature has primarily focused on the psychological-uplift aspect of empowerment, while failing to recognize that the acquisition of tangible skills relevant to activism can make people feel better equipped to continue their movement activity. Thus, many scholars discuss empowerment as a feeling of optimism that change is possible (Barr and Drury 2009; Hirsch 1990; McAdam 1999). Others (Friedman 2009; Shriver, Miller, and Cable 2003) identify skills acquisition as important, but do not fully explore the types of skills that are important or how these skills are developed. The research we have presented here demonstrates that the development of activist human capital is an important element of the empowerment that often inspires sustained activism. Many of our respondents described various abilities they developed while participating in Union Summer, and their statements include adjectives that describe a positive emotional reaction to finding that their skills were effective at producing positive results. They talked about how learning the nuts and bolts of organizing made them feel better able to take action, and how valuable they found their new abilities. Thus, we suggest that the literature on commitment needs to recognize the importance of activist human capital development on empowerment and commitment development.

This study also adds to the literature on social movement commitment by demonstrating that the social ties that the literature has shown are crucial to movement participation are important in part because of the knowledge and skills that these connections often impart. While the movement literature has long known that social ties matter, the literature has focused more on the support these ties provide for an activist identity rather than on the human capital they help build. Activist human capital is developed in part through training programs or workshops, but much of it occurs more informally through interaction with activists and organizers. The Union Summer activists talked about gaining valuable information through training sessions and workshops, but they also describe how they learned a great deal from casual conversations with other activists and the organizers involved in their campaign. As education scholars have long known, social capital facilitates the development of human capital.

Of course we acknowledge that not all participants in an intensive program acquire valuable human capital. A single campaign will be more useful to those with less exposure to the issues facing a particular movement and those with fewer of the skills needed to mobilize for change on behalf of the movement. Many of our respondents, all of whom were college students when they were recruited to Union Summer, mentioned how being from either a small town or a privileged background limited their knowledge of the issues facing labor before entering the program. These individuals found the experience to be especially eye-opening—they learned more as a part of the program than did others. In addition, those who came in with limited activist experience were more likely to gain skills as a result of participating in the six-week campaign.

How much participants learn from a particular campaign also has to do with the design and organization of the campaign. Some protest campaigns or experiences may in fact make individuals *less* likely to persist in their activism or turn it into a career (Fisher 2006; Walker 2009). As the career development literature suggests, early experiences may expose an individual to the tasks involved in a line of work, and they may realize that it is not the career for them (Johnson and Mortimer 2002). Those Union Summer participants who felt that their local union was disorganized or did not provide them with enough challenging work were more dissatisfied and reported fewer gains in terms of their skills. The canvassing work studied by Fisher (2006) is another example where the activist-related work was unrewarding and ultimately led to burnout on the part of participants. Certain activist experiences are more likely to facilitate the development of activist human and social capital than others. McAdam and Brandt (2009: 967), in their study of youth service, likewise emphasize the need to understand which broad types of experiences may foster long-term engagement, noting “the wide variation in the nature of service/activist experience . . . argues against generic effects.” Even on a single campaign, individual experience may vary, and some may develop these forms of capital while others do not.

The primary limitation of this manuscript is that the research was not done with a comparison sample of individuals that participated in other types of campaigns. We do know that Union Summer has been successful in fostering sustained activism across college campuses. Yet, our sample does not include activists that engaged in a less intensive campaign, for example, by working as a canvasser like the subjects of Fisher’s study (2006). However, the intent of our work was to flesh out important processes that remain under-developed in the literature, not generalizability. Our results suggest that characteristics of the campaign and sponsoring organization influence the extent to which participants develop valuable activist skills. The extent to which different activist experiences produce different levels of human capital remains a question for further study.

Our research on Union Summer participants strongly suggests that activist-relevant human and social capital, what we call *activist capital*, foster the development of a commitment to activism. These two distinct forms of activist capital are built up from intensive campaigns that individuals carry over into subsequent campaigns. A better understanding of activist capital and the processes underlying activist commitment is critical for social movement theory. Indeed, these capital-wielding activists may be essential to sustaining subsequent social movements by introducing their skills and networks into related campaigns and by transferring their acquired organizing assets to other incipient movement participants, helping sustain entire social movement industries or sectors (Isaac and Christiansen 2002; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Voss and Sherman 2000).

NOTES

¹ Research also suggests that emotions may play an important role in generating individual commitment to activism around a particular issue (Jasper 1997; Taylor 1996). Data limitations do not allow us to examine the influence of emotions on commitment processes in this study.

² The development literature discusses women's empowerment a great deal, usually defining empowerment as a transfer of social, economic, or political power to women (Batiwala 2007).

³ Based on the Gourman rankings of colleges and universities.

⁴ A smaller portion (N=16) indicated that they had participated on a "good campaign."

⁵ Eighteen of the 23 people we interviewed specifically mentioned skills and knowledge acquisition. Seventeen of the 18 continued their activism beyond the end of the Union Summer campaign.

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