Part of the “Establishment”? Fostering Positive Campus Climates for Student Activists

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Abstract
Using data from the Wabash National Study, authors examine how students’ perceptions of campus climate influence growth in students’ social and political activism. The goal of this article is to determine to what extent, if any, students’ perceptions of the campus environment affect their orientation toward social/political activism over 4 years of college and to what extent, if any, these effects are mediated by involvement in cocurricular activities. With the recent resurgence in student activism, understanding of campus protesters has again become a needed skill for campus administrators and student affairs professionals. Additionally, as campuses commit to promoting civil discourse and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, improving the campus climates for an important segment of their student population, that being student activists, must be a part of that commitment.

Student activists have always been a part of American higher education. From the days of the original colonial colleges, when students revolted against the quality of the food, to the campuses in the 1930s that experienced student strikes against warfare, American colleges have witnessed a range of activism (Cohen, 1993; Novak, 1977). The tumultuous decade of the 1960s brought about what many consider the climax of campus protests as student activists directed their attentions against a myriad of causes (Heineman, 2001). After that transformative decade, some observers claimed that student activism declined (Rhoads, 1998). Various reasons were given, such as the revival of conservatism in the 1970s to a general apathy by college students for societal problems. Such an assessment of the demise of campus activism is not completely accurate. In the decades following the 1960s, students throughout American higher education have engaged in activism to make their voices heard from the widespread demonstrations by students in the 1980s to end apartheid to advocacy for multiculturalism in the 1990s (Loeb, 1994; Rhoads, 1998). As students in the 21st century have continued this long tradition of engaging in campus activism, issues such as the current wars in the Middle East, rising tuition and fees, bullying on campus, and the rights of the LGBTQ community have become prevalent concerns for today’s students.

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Student activists, both historical and contemporary, have a desire to enact social change (Altbach, 1989; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Rhoads, 1998; Vaccaro, 2009). There is some cause, from broader societal and political issues to local campus regulations, that spurs their actions. While such causes are often equated with liberal ideologies, such as support of multiculturalism, the rights of immigrants, affirmative action, and the defense of the LGBT community (Rhoads, 1998), conservative student movements, including support of the Second Amendment and prolife causes, are a growing, albeit comparatively small, component of campus activism (Hyers, Cochran, & Schaeffer, 2011; Munson, 2010). The methods used by student activists in their struggle for social change are varied. Nonviolent tactics are the most prevalent and include participating in sit-ins, marches, teach-ins, and rallies; occupying buildings; picketing; fundraising; boycotting classes; filing law suits; and engaging in street theater (Anderson, 1996; Heineman, 2001; Rhoads, 1998; Vellela, 1999). In rare instances student activists have employed violent and disruptive tactics, such as vandalism, disruption of educational activities, threats of physical violence, and even the firebombing of buildings (Heineman, 2001). Student activists have increasingly utilized volunteerism as a method to express their social awareness (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Loeb, 1994; Munson, 2010; Rhoads, 1998). Additionally, the popularity of social media websites has provided students an innovative forum to share their voices and organize their activities (Biddix, 2010).

With increased media attention given to student demonstrations in the 21st century, it has become increasingly important for administrators to understand the needs of student activists. The recent images of pepper-sprayed students at the University of California-Davis are not only powerful reminders that student activists still represent a viable presence on campus, but also illustrate that campus administrators need to better understand the needs and views of those students (Maira & Sze, 2012). Furthermore, as campuses commit to promoting civil discourse and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, improving the campus climates for an important segment of their student population, student activists, must be a part of that commitment. The goal of this study is to examine how students’ perceptions of their campus climate influence their level of social and political activism in the fourth year of college. With this goal in mind, we identified the following research questions:

- To what extent, if any, do students’ perceptions of the campus environment affect their orientation toward social/political activism over 4 years of college?
- To what extent, if any, are these effects mediated by involvement in cocurricular activities?

**Literature Review**

In the past few decades, scholars have searched for the influences on student activism. These scholars have found that a number of outside factors are associated with increased student activism, including being enrolled as social sciences and humanities majors, coming from a familial background that is drawn from a higher socioeconomic status, having highly educated parents, and performing above-average academically in high school (Altbach, 1989; Astin, Astin, Bayer, & Bisconti, 1975). While adherence to liberal political ideologies is often associated with student activism, this aspect is not always completely true because conservative movements have always been a part of campus activism, even in the 1960s (Hyers, Cochran, & Schaeffer, 2011; Munson, 2010). Finally, identifying as a Person of Color and/or woman, coupled with having beliefs that come from a marginalized background and developed by taking courses related to social justice, can impel in students the need to become activists (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). Linder and Rodri-
guez (2012) found that these students felt the need to speak for others of their race or gender who were silent in the face of hostile campus climates.

Beginning in the 1990s, students who were committed to social activism and improving society also began turning their attention to volunteerism (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Loeb, 1994; Munson, 2010; Rhoads, 1998). Both volunteerism and service learning can be viewed as forms of activism, especially when connected to issues of social justice where students are encouraged to go beyond simply addressing the results of a social problem and actually trying to solve that problem (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). Though much of this increased connection of volunteerism with social activism relates to liberal student-movements, conservative students are also engaging in volunteerism to further the causes they support (Munson, 2010).

The very nature of the campus environment can affect student activism. For example, higher education institutions value intellectual and independent thought while college life often allows much free time for various campus activities and organizations (Altbach, 1989). Campuses themselves encourage extracurricular activities by providing funds and space for student organizations. Having these social networks available for students on campus, such as student organizations dedicated toward issues of social justice, can foster increased activism (Swank, 2012). In the absence of such organizations, student activists are sometimes compelled to form their own organization on campus while leadership in such organizations can serve as a catalyst for continued explorations of student activism (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Renn, 2007). Additionally, Cress and Sax (1998) found that negative campus climates can be buffered by positive social networks. Groups that perceive negative climates can better overcome these climates by having a supporting peer group, such as fellow student activists.

Perceptions of the campus climate can impact increased student activism (Horowitz, 1987; Julius & Gumport, 2003; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Vaccaro, 2009). For broader social issues, the most tangible reminders of the injustices students fight against are on their own campuses. Dating back to the 1960s, student activists have targeted ROTC buildings, low minority enrollment, low representation of female faculty, and financial investments in controversial nations as evidence of tacit support of war, institutional racism, and sexism (Anderson, 1996; Heineman, 2001; Rhoads, 1998). For student activists, such symbols on campus further illustrated that higher education was simply part of a larger system of social injustice and forged negative perceptions of their campus climate. Because of their perceived role as gatekeepers of this greater power system in higher education, a system that many student activists are attempting to change, campus administrators may be viewed by activists as opponents and enemies (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). Chesler and Crowfoot (2010) found that students, as temporary members of a campus community, can view themselves as subordinate members of the power structure in higher education. These feelings of marginality can provide students with the drive to organize and attempt to change such power structures. Such feelings and negative perceptions of their campus climate can be particularly strong among groups that feel marginalized or exploited (Hurtado, 1992; Julius & Gumport, 2003; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Renn, 2007; Vaccaro, 2009).

**Conceptual Framework**

A feature of college impact theories is the assumption that attending college ought to influence students’ learning and development (see Astin, 1977, 1993/2012; Pascarella, 1985). A critical component of such theories is the understanding that students’ background characteristics and precollege experiences should be
accounted for if one is to isolate the impact of college attendance or experiences on learning and development. In the present study, we used Astin’s (1993/2012) I-E-O (Inputs, Environment, Outcomes) model as a conceptual framework. In particular, we accounted for a host of students’ background characteristics (e.g., Inputs) in investigating the extent to which students’ perceptions of the campus environment and involvement in particular college experiences (e.g., Environment) influenced students’ level of social/political activism in the fourth year of college (e.g., Outcomes).

Methods

Sample

Institutional sample. The sample in the present study consisted of incoming first-year students at 17 4-year colleges and universities from a variety of geographic regions (e.g., Northeast/Middle-Atlantic, Southeast, Midwest, and Pacific Coast) in the United States selected to participate in the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education (WNS). The WNS is a multi-institutional, longitudinal study of the effects of college experiences on the developmental outcomes theoretically associated with a liberal arts education. The institutions differed in a variety of characteristics including institutional type and control, size, selectivity, location, and patterns of student residence. Using the 2007 Carnegie Classification of Institutions, three of the participating institutions were considered research extensive universities, three were comprehensive regional universities that did not grant the doctorate, and 11 were baccalaureate liberal arts colleges.

Student sample. The individuals in the sample were first-year, full-time undergraduate students participating in the WNS at each of the 17 institutions in the study. The sample was selected in one of two ways. First, for larger institutions, the sample was selected randomly from the incoming first-year class at each institution with one exception; at the largest participating institution in the study, the sample was selected randomly from the incoming class in the College of Arts and Sciences. Second, for the liberal arts colleges in the study, the sample was the entire incoming first-year class. Students were invited to participate in a national longitudinal study examining how college affects students, with the goal of improving the undergraduate experience. Our sample was comprised of 64.0% women (n = 1,372) and 36.0% men (n = 770). Although not ideal, because of the small number of students in each underrepresented racial/ethnic category, we combined all students of color into one category to allow for a statistically meaningful comparison. To that end, 21.2% of our sample identified as students of color (n = 453) and 78.8% identified as white (n = 1,689). In addition, students in the sample represented three different types of institutions: 14.7% attended regional institutions (n = 315), 26.0% attended research institutions (n = 557), and 59.3% attended liberal arts colleges (n = 1,270). Liberal arts colleges were purposely oversampled in the WNS because the original focus of the national study was liberal arts experiences.

Data Collection

The initial data collection occurred in the fall of 2006, with 4,193 students participating from the 17 institutions. This first data collection lasted between 90–100 minutes, and students were paid a stipend of $50 each for their participation. Data collected included a WNS precollege survey that sought information on student demographic characteristics, high school experiences, life/career plans, and family background. Students also completed a series of instruments that measured dimensions of cognitive and personal development.
theoretically associated with a liberal arts education such as critical thinking, moral reasoning, need for
cognition, psychological well-being, and others.

The follow-up data collection was conducted in spring 2010 (approximately 4 academic years after
the initial data collection). The follow-up data collection took approximately 2 hours, and students were
paid an additional stipend of $50 each for participating. Two types of data were collected: data on students’
college experiences using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the WNS Student Expe-
riences Survey, and posttest data using the series of instruments measuring aspects of students’ intellectual
and personal development. ACT, Inc. (formerly the American College Testing Program) administered and
conducted the data collection.

Of the original sample of 4,193 students who participated in the initial fall 2006 data collection, 2,212
participated in the spring 2010 follow-up for a response rate of 52.8%. We developed a weighting algorithm
to provide some adjustment for potential response bias by sex, race, academic ability, and institution in
the samples analyzed. Using information provided by each institution, 2010 follow-up participants were
weighted up to each institution’s fourth-year undergraduate population by sex, race (Students of Color/
White), and ACT (or equivalent) quartile. While applying weights has the effect of making the samples
more representative of the institutional populations from which they were drawn by sex, race, and ACT
score, this procedure cannot completely adjust for nonresponse bias.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study was a nine-item scale patterned on scales used in previous research to
measure orientation toward social activism/agency. However, because it stressed political as well as social
activism, it was termed “orientation toward social/political activism.” Students were asked to indicate the
personal importance of each of nine activities or endeavors that included such things as influencing social
values, volunteering in one’s community, influencing political values, promoting racial understanding, im-
proving understanding of other countries and cultures, and the like. The internal consistency reliabilities for
the social/political activism scale were 0.81 for the precollege data collection, 0.84 for the end-of-first-year
data collection, and 0.75 over 4 years of college.

Independent Variable

The independent variable of interest in this study was the supportive campus environment scale. This six-
item scale was collected through the NSSE survey that all participants in the WNS took during the follow-
up data collection. The supportive campus environment scale measured the extent to which participants’
institutions provided support to them. Examples of constituent items included “To what extent does your
institution emphasize providing the support you need to help you succeed academically?,” “To what extent
does your institution emphasize helping you cope with your nonacademic responsibilities (work, family,
etc.)?” (response options include very little, some, quite a bit, very much), and “Mark the box that best rep-
resents your quality of relationship with faculty members” (response options ranging from 1 = unavailable,
unhelpful, unsympathetic to 7 = available, helpful, sympathetic). The internal consistency reliability of the
supportive campus environment scale was .76 in the WNS.
Control Variables

A methodological strength of the WNS is its longitudinal nature (Astin & Lee, 2003; Pascarella, 2006). This design permitted us to introduce a range of statistical controls for the following background characteristics:

- **Pretest.** We employed a parallel precollege measure for the social/political activism scale. According to Pascarella (2006), one of the most powerful ways to account for selection bias is through a longitudinal research design employing pretests.

- **Sex** (coded as 1 = male, 0 = female).

- **Race** (coded as Students of Color = 1, White = 0).

- **ACT score** (or equivalent).

- **Average parental education** (computed as the average of the respondent’s parents’ education provided the student gave a response for at least one parent).

- **Precollege political views.** This variable was a single item that asked participants how they characterized their political views (coded 1 = far left, 2 = liberal, 3 = middle-of-the-road, 4 = conservative, 5 = far right).

- **High school involvement.** This was a 7-item scale with an internal consistency reliability of .58 that measured involvement during high school. Examples of items include the following: “During your last year in high school, how often did you study with a friend?”; “During your last year in high school, how often did you talk with teachers outside of class?”; and “During your last year in high school, how often did you participate in extracurricular activities?” Response options were very often, often, occasionally, rarely, or never. Scores on the scale were obtained during the initial data collection in fall 2006.

- **Institutional type.** This was operationally defined as a dichotomous variable representing attendance at a liberal arts college (coded 1) compared to attendance at research universities and regional universities (coded 0).

- **Completed social justice-related coursework.** This item asked students “In how many courses focusing on issues of equality and/or social justice have you participated or taken part during college?” Response options were 1 = 0 courses, 2 = 1 course, 3 = 2 courses, 4 = 3 courses, and 5 = 4 or more courses.

Potential Mediating Variables

In order to explore the extent to which the impact of a supportive campus environment on students’ levels of social/political activism was facilitated by other campus activities, we employed three potential mediating variables in the present study. These potential mediating variables included participating in community service, holding a leadership position in a student organization, and number of hours per week spent involved in cocurricular activities.
Analyses

We conducted the analyses in three stages using ordinary least squares regression procedures. In the first model, we regressed the social/political activism scale (the dependent measure) on the above listed control variables. In the second model, we regressed the social/political activism scale on all of the control variables in model one plus the supportive campus environment scale to estimate the total effect of student perceptions of a supportive campus environment. In the third stage of our analyses, we estimated the direct effect of a supportive campus environment on the dependent measure by considering the potential mediating effect of particular campus activities. In model three, we regressed the social/political activism scale on the three potential mediating variables (holding a leadership position, participating in volunteer activities, and time spent involved in cocurricular activities) and all predictors included in the total effects model (i.e., all control variables plus the supportive campus environment scale).

We also conducted additional analyses to explore any conditional effects of students’ perception of a supportive campus environment. We created three cross-product terms between supportive campus environment and gender, supportive campus environment and race/ethnicity, and supportive campus environment and institutional type to determine if the magnitude of the effect of the environment on social/political activism was different for different groups of students. We added the cross-product terms to the above specified direct effects model.

We report standardized regression coefficients, or effect sizes, for all analyses. All analyses we report are based on the weighted sample estimates adjusted to the actual sample size to obtain correct standard errors. Because our data were collected across 17 institutions, we run the risk of bias due to the fact that students within institutions are more likely to be similar than those from different institutions; this is referred to as nesting or clustering (Groves et al., 2004). We employed statistical measures to account for the nesting effect of this complex survey design.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the regression analyses for the net effects of student perceptions of a supportive campus environment on the social/political activism scale over 4 years of college. After applying statistical controls for a host of precollege confounding influences, our total effects model revealed positive, significant total effect of perceiving a supportive campus environment on social/political activism ($b = .158$). Further, adding the supportive campus environment scale to the model of control variables significantly increased the amount of variance explained by the model ($R^2 = .380$). Next, even after adding the potential mediating experiences (e.g., holding a leadership position, participating in community service, and time spent in cocurricular activities) to all the variables in the total effects model, the supportive campus environment scale remained significant ($b = .142$). In other words, we found a significant direct effect of student perceptions of a supportive campus environment on the social/political activism scale. Although the addition of the mediating variables did not reduce the significance of the supportive campus environment scale to nonsignificance, the mediating variables did decrease the magnitude of the effect of the supportive campus environment scale. Put another way, holding a leadership position, participating in community service, and time spent involved in cocurricular activities partially mediated the effect of students’ perceptions of a supportive campus environment on social/political activism. Similar to the total effects model, the addition of the mediating variables in the direct effects model significantly increased the amount of explained variance in the social/political activism dependent measure ($R^2 = .398$).
We ran additional analyses to explore the possible conditional effects of sex and supportive campus environment, race and supportive campus environment, and institutional type and supportive campus environment. No significant conditional effects were found for any of the three cross-product variables.

**Discussion and Implications**

We found a significant total effect of student perceptions of a supportive campus environment on their 4-year scores on the inclinations towards social and political activism measure. This finding contradicts the bulk of the literature, which suggests that increased student activism is connected to negative perceptions of the campus climate (Horowitz, 1987; Julius & Gumport, 2003; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012; Vaccaro, 2009). Student activists often view campus administrators as representatives of the greater power system of higher education that contains elements they are struggling to change. From the view of student activists, these administrators, because of their positions, could either help or hinder the activities of student activists. Students engaged in social activism view positively those administrators who are supportive of activism and the campuses they lead (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). For example, university leaders can, by committing to social justice or diversity, which are causes often supported by student activists, improve climates for those students (Chesler & Crowfoot, 2010; Hurtado, 1992). Chesler and Crowfoot

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**Table 1**

*Estimated Effects of Environmental Perception on Social/Political Activism over 4 Years of College*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Social/Political Activism Scale(^a) (n = 1,918)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 Control Variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (vs. Female)</td>
<td>-.105(^*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color (vs. White)</td>
<td>.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Education(^+)</td>
<td>.075(^**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT Score(^+)</td>
<td>-.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Involvement(^+)</td>
<td>.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre College Political Views(^+)</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretest(^+)</td>
<td>.459(^***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts College (vs. Other Institutions)</td>
<td>.068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took a Social Justice-Related Course</td>
<td>.189(^***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Perception Scale(^+)</td>
<td>.158(^***)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held a Leadership Position on Campus</td>
<td>.113(^*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in Volunteer/Service Activities</td>
<td>.252(^**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Hours Involved in Co-curricular Activities</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>.357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Indicates variable has been standardized.

\(^*\) \(p < .05\), \(^**\) \(p < .01\), \(^***\) \(p < .001\).
further found that campus administrators’ actions can “help created climates of fear or of hope, of concern or of disregard, of open discussion or of secretive conversation, of positive change or of negative retreat” (p. 948). The findings of this study could indicate that the included campuses exhibited a commitment to support students’ fight for social change and, by following their examples, point to a way to foster positive campus climates for activism.

Historically, student activists have viewed positively those campus administrators who adhere less to authoritarianism and are supportive of students expressing their voice (Altbach, 1989; Heineman, 2001). When this support occurs, student activists have a tendency to work within the system as opposed to directly challenging it (Renn, 2007). Administrators should welcome activism as a show of support for student voice and democratic discourse. By doing so, they would help create a campus climate that welcomes discourse and that can help forge a sense of community among groups that feel marginalized (Biddix, Somers, & Polman, 2009). The need to improve campus climates and create safe environments for learning and growth for all groups within higher education is apparent (Strange & Banning, 2001). As higher education has helped students develop their various identities (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) (Linder & Rodriguez, 2012), surely it can actively support students as they cultivate their identity as agents of social change.

In addition, we also found a significant direct effect of students’ perceptions of campus environment on their 4-year scores on the social and political activism measure. In other words, taking into account experiences that might facilitate students’ level of social and political activism did not alter the significance of the effect of perceiving a supportive campus environment, but it did slightly change the magnitude of this effect. Of the three potential mediating variables included in the analysis, participation in community service and holding a leadership position in a student organization were significant predictors of students’ levels of orientation toward activism over 4 years of college. In contrast, the number of hours per week students spent involved in cocurricular activities was not a significant predictor of their orientation towards activism in the fourth year of college. With volunteerism and service activities partially facilitating students’ orientation toward activism, campuses could incorporate activism into the courses with service learning elements to encourage and allow students to engage in social justice actions. To avoid increased negative perceptions of campus climate, students should determine the focus of the activism and not the instructor (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002). Similar to Renn’s (2007) findings, the present study uncovered a positive relationship between holding a leadership position on campus and a student’s inclination to explore activism. Increasing opportunities for students to assume leadership positions on campus, and therefore becoming active on their campus, could support an improved climate for student activism.

The results of this study partially contradict some of the outside factors long-believed to be associated with increased activism (Altbach, 1989; Astin et al., 1975). While all three models confirmed the impact of parental education on a student’s orientation towards activism, such precollege background characteristics as an above-average academic performance in high school, evidenced in this study by ACT scores, political views, and high school involvement, were not significantly associated with an increased orientation towards activism. While majoring in liberal arts has often been correlated with student activism (Astin et al., 1975), this study found that attending a liberal arts college did not significantly impact a student’s orientation towards activism, though taking a course on social justice did. A possible explanation is that courses focusing on issues of social justice, traditionally more common among social sciences and humanities majors that are overrepresented at liberal arts colleges, have gained in popularity within other disciplines. As various disciplines have expanded their curriculum and mission to include more elements of social justice, students oriented toward activism and social justice have greater opportunities to pursue such interests at a wider
range of campuses today. Campuses that wish to foster student activism could increase these opportunities by developing a greater array of courses related to social justice (Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Linder & Rodriguez, 2012). Further, the experiences of various subgroups of students (e.g., African American students, LGBT students, first-generation students) are likely different across groups. Unfortunately, in the present study, we were unable to fully parse these relationships. For example, the representation of students across a variety of racial and ethnic groups is not large enough in this data set to explore these relationships in a quantitatively meaningful way. However, because students likely experience campus climate differently depending on their own unique intersection of identities, we believe future researchers should explore the nuanced relationship between various underrepresented groups and social/political activism.

Student activism can have a profound impact on not only change within higher education, but transforming American society itself (Altbach, 1989). The restless energy of student activists to improve conditions within campus and country has helped shaped the direction of higher education. The increased access to higher education for traditionally marginalized groups, not to mention such curriculum changes as Black Studies and Women’s Studies programs, stem from the struggles of student activists in the 1960s (Davis, 1991; Van Deburg, 1992). When student activists in the 1980s, disgusted with apartheid, demanded their campuses divest in South Africa, 60% of campuses that experienced student protests complied; only 3% of those with no protests divested (Martin, 2007). As student activists take up the mantle of social change in the 21st century, for such important causes as ending bullying, the rights of undocumented students, and gender/sexual equality, higher education needs to empower them by fostering positive campus climates.

References


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