Where We Learn to Organize:
Considering If/How U.S. Colleges and Universities Educate Community Organizers

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I would like to acknowledge the movements and movement makers that make studies like mine possible. This thesis is dedicated to you: the organizers, scholars, and visionaries *doing the work* in the past, present, and future.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"No…Organizers learn on the ground. They don't learn in the classroom." This was how Carlos[1] (he/him), a community organizer from central Massachusetts, responded when I asked him whether or not his university classes prepared him to become a community organizer. I had heard this response once already from Daniel (he/him), a community organizer from Downstate New York, and I would hear it again from Avery (they/them), a student organizer from the District of Columbia. Over and over again during my research, participating organizers expressed skepticism over whether or not U.S. colleges and universities prepare their students to become community organizers. At the same time, an estimated 78.7% of U.S. community organizers hold a college degree (Zippia, Inc., 2021). This is compared to an estimated 32.1% of U.S. residents with the same degree (McElrath and Martin, 2021). Together, Carlos' claim and Zippia's statistic beg two important questions: 1) where do aspiring community organizers learn the skills and qualities they need to organize effectively, and 2) do they learn these skills and qualities at U.S. colleges and universities? This thesis asks the latter question. Through interviews with community organizers, student organizers, and college/university educators, I consider if and how U.S. higher education prepares its students to become community organizers and why professional community organizers like Carlos remain skeptical of its influence.

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I first became interested in whether or not U.S. colleges and universities effectively educate their students to become community organizers when I arrived at Vassar College as a freshman in 2018. I had just concluded an internship on a local political campaign in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where I had watched in awe as community leaders manipulated power

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[1] Carlos is a pseudonym for a community organizer in this study. The names, organizations, and institutions of all research participants are pseudonyms.

and mobilized constituencies around me. The experience left me fascinated by a simple question: *how did they learn to do this*? In an attempt to find out, I began carrying a thick red notebook with me everywhere, filling it with lessons and observations in a range of pen colors. Advice like "don't build power in the past" and "feedback is the best gift someone can give you" still stand out in yellow highlighter on the book's cream-colored pages. Nonetheless, three months and sixty-eight pages of notes later, I did not have a concrete answer. Instead, I was headed off to Vassar College with two suitcases and the hope that I might find an answer there.

This thesis is the product of four years of asking. What began as a personal curiosity has mixed with the theories of Paulo Freire, Saul Alinsky, Jane McAlevey, and more to create a broader skepticism over whether or not U.S. colleges and universities can and should produce effective progressive changemakers. Ask Carlos or Daniel, and the answer is no. Ask my professors, and the answer is maybe. This thesis is *my* attempt to answer this question. I want to find an answer, and I believe academia should too if it is to realize the vision of critical pedagogy.

Research Question

This thesis combines progressive community organizing theory, critical pedagogy, and personal experience with participant interviews to consider if and, if so, how U.S. colleges and universities educate community organizers. The research question that guided this work is: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** This question focuses on higher education institutions and considers both formal and informal learning spaces because preparation can occur within and without the classroom (Webb et al., 2008). I specifically chose to recognize informal spaces in my research question because they are

often under-recognized and under-researched despite being equally valuable and occasionally more valuable learning spaces for community organizers (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010; Alinsky, 1971). I found that U.S. colleges and universities *do* offer means for some students to prepare to enter the community organizing profession in the form of direct and indirect preparation in formal and informal learning spaces. However, this conclusion is complicated by two equally important findings: 1) the format, extent, and accessibility of preparation vary by institution, and 2) some organizers are skeptical that higher education prepares its students to organize because they witnessed or experienced harm that was caused or exacerbated by an individual/institution at their college or university. I term this second finding university/organizer preparation dissonance. Altogether, my conclusions indicate that U.S. colleges and universities *do* prepare some students to become community organizers; however, they can and should do more to offer direct preparation, support indirect preparation, and reduce university/organizer preparation dissonance if they are going to produce more representative and effective community organizers.

All this said, these conclusions simultaneously beg two important questions. First, to whom am I referring when I say U.S. colleges and universities can and should do more; and second, do U.S. colleges and universities *want* to produce representative and effective community organizers? The answers to both questions are complicated and depend on personal educational philosophy. I will share *my* answers by explaining the objects of my critique and the significance of my study.

Objects of Critique

As I will expand on in Chapters 5 and 6, my research concludes that U.S colleges and universities can and should do more to prepare their students to enter the community organizing

profession. I reached this conclusion through a combination of my research and my subscription to Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy – an educational philosophy that argues for schools to be places where critical thinking is developed and power is questioned. I will expand on this theory in Chapter 2, but it is because of critical pedagogy that I believe higher education, and education in general, should always be striving to produce better, critical thinkers. This is why I conclude throughout this thesis that colleges and universities across the spectrum of effective preparation can do more. They always can.

However, in addition to this broad critique, there will be instances throughout this thesis where I critique the work or harm being done by specific individuals/institutions that operate under the umbrella of U.S. colleges and universities. For this reason, I would like to briefly clarify who and what I am critiquing.

Colleges and universities are vast networks encompassing students, professors, staff, alumni, administrators, donors, and more. For this reason, a total condemnation of college and university preparation is both impossible and undesirable. The system is too complex, too varied. Some professors are implementing brilliant preparation in their classrooms. Others are not. Some administrators are funding effective programming. Others are not. Some parties are perpetuating harm. *Others are not.* For this reason, I will attempt to be specific in my critiques throughout this thesis and clearly identify whom or what I am referring to when leveling my concerns. I will recognize where some members of colleges and universities, be they students, professors, administrators, etc., are preparing students to organize and where others are failing. What I will not do is condemn the whole of higher education because good work is being done here, and great work could be done here in the future. So I will be critical, but someone can be critical with

love and without condemnation. I ask that academia and its readers remember what I learned in 2018: "feedback is one of the greatest gifts someone can give you."

Significance of this Study

Critical pedagogy is also behind the significance of my study. As a subscriber to Paulo Friere's theory, I believe that education has the never fully realized potential to be humanity's best means of recognizing and resisting oppression; if this is true, then it is *essential* that our nation's colleges and universities be able and interested in producing critical, representative, and effective community organizers. In other words, this thesis assumes that U.S. colleges and universities *should* want to prepare community organizers because this goal aligns with the mission of critical pedagogy.

With this assumption in place, my research becomes significant as a study of critical pedagogy in action at U.S. colleges and universities. My work identifies where community organizers, major players in the resistance of oppression, learn the skills they need to do their work well and how U.S. higher education helps and hinders them along the way. By understanding both, academia gets closer to actualizing education's potential as a tool for social change.

However, my research is also significant because its findings complicate the application of critical pedagogy by describing the cognitive dissonance that occurs among community organizers when effective critical pedagogy coincides with harmful educational experiences. Despite being a critical pedagogue, there were moments in my research process when I questioned whether or not colleges and universities should play a role in preparing young people to enter the community organizing profession. After all, as Anne (she/her), a professor at North Adams University in the District of Columbia, bluntly explained: "students that are in university

pay a boatload of money in tuition and housing and all of that. What kind of community are they going to organize?" My hesitation, and possibly Anne's, is based on the privilege and harm that has been perpetuated and perpetrated by some individuals and institutions in higher education. Is it possible, I asked myself, for U.S. colleges and universities to teach their students to organize against issues that these same institutions sometimes exemplify? On many days, I was not sure.

However, this study helped me realize that 1) not only am I not alone in my confusion, but 2) this confusion is itself a finding. Nearly all of my research participants questioned, contradicted, or critiqued their *own* assertions of whether or not colleges and universities prepare students to organize in their interviews. For this reason, the cognitive dissonance necessary to credit U.S. higher education as both a means to resist oppression and an oppressor (what I call university/organizer preparation dissonance) is a primary finding of my study. So, in addition to furthering the application of critical pedagogy, this study is significant because it uniquely identifies the challenge of reckoning academia's positive and negative aspects as both a organizer and a researcher.

By identifying 1) where community organizers learn the skills they need to do their work well, 2) how U.S. colleges and universities can and do support them along the way, and 3) the challenge of reckoning this preparation with negative experiences, my study brings academia that much closer to actualizing Paulo Friere's vision of critical pedagogy.

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Over the following six chapters, I will conclude that U.S. colleges and universities *do* offer means for some students to prepare to enter the community organizing profession despite the hurdle of university/organizer preparation dissonance. Chapter 2 will outline how progressive organizing, critical pedagogy, and personal experience impact my thinking and research. Chapter 3 will review what existing academic literature says about community organizing, community

organizing preparation, and higher education and define key terms. Chapter 4 will detail my research methodology, including site and participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods. Chapter 5 will present my primary findings by detailing the extent to which colleges and universities offer direct and indirect preparation to students in both formal and informal learning spaces. Chapter 6 will explain and provide evidence for the existence of university/organizer preparation dissonance and explain its causes. And finally, Chapter 7 will conclude with a summary of my findings and my thoughts on their ramifications.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

"A word about my personal philosophy. It is anchored in optimism."

- Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals

I am not a community organizer. I am a student of community organizing. This is a necessary distinction. I do not write with the knowledge or experience of someone who has mobilized a community in the face of oppression. Instead, I write with the knowledge of someone who has invested time and love into studying community organizing pracice and theory. This thesis is shaped by *that* perspective. My goal is to help *academics* understand how *academia* succeeds and fails to educate community organizers so that we can make our education system better. I do not intend to tell community organizers how to do their job. Ultimately, my research is informed by progressive organizing theory, critical pedagogy, and my own personal positionality. This chapter will briefly explain each and its influence on my research.

Progressive Organizing Theory

As I will explain in Chapter 3, I define community organizing as a means of mobilizing a discrete group of people in resistance to oppression. This definition is purposefully broad because, in practice, the term can apply to a range of organizational forms across various political methodologies (Fisher and DeFillipis, 2015). It can be conservative or liberal, moderate or progressive. This thesis, however, will judge the effectiveness of U.S. college and university preparation on the basis of *progressive* community organizing theory.

Progressive community organizing theory is an umbrella term for the theories put forward by progressive community organizers. These are organizers whose actions and values align with modern American progressivism – a political ideology that calls for racial and

economic equality, workers' rights, restrictions on free-market capitalism, environmental justice,

and more. Some of these organizers, like Eric Mann or Jane McAlevey, enumerate their

progressive methodology in texts and theory (Mann, 2011; McAlevey, 2016); this is what I refer

to when I say progressive organizing theory, and it is what shapes my perception of the

community organizing profession.

My research is a product of progressive organizing theory because it recognizes the work

of progressive organizers, specifically Saul Alinsky, as foundational to the profession. As I will

explain in Chapter 3, community organizing has a rich and storied history, often described as

beginning during the settlement house era and developing alongside social work philosophies

(Fisher and Romanofsky, 1981). Nonetheless, the history of the community organizing

profession is typically credited as beginning with progressive community organizer Saul Alinsky.

Though I question aspects of Alinsky's approach, I recognize his work as foundational to the

field. In doing so, this thesis legitimizes progressive values and methods as worthwhile and

fundamental to the community organizing profession. Specifically, I echo Alinsky's argument

that any distinction between the "Haves" and the "Have-nots" can be undone through grassroots,

power-focused mobilization and that it is possible to educate community organizers in the skills

necessary to achieve that mobilization (Alinsky, 1971). In fact, this is the organizational and

educational ideal at the core of my research. For this reason, I argue that my work both

subscribes to and adds to progressive organizing thought by producing useful research for

progressive educators and organizers.

This said, my research is not Alinskian, meaning I am not a subscriber to Alinsky's

methods *alone*. Instead, my work is the product of many progressive organizing theories.

Specifically, my understanding of conflict is influenced by multiple contradicting authors,

including Alinsky, feminist scholars Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, anti-racist scholar Rinku

Sen, and labor organizer Jane McAlevey. My research exists somewhere in the middle.

As noted, I define community organizing as a means of mobilizing a discrete group of

people in resistance to oppression. This understanding is conflict-based – i.e., one group is

resisting another – and is also very Alinskyian. Saul Alinsky considered conflict a fundamental

piece of effective organizing, writing: "Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract

world can movement or change occur without the abrasive friction of conflict" (Alinsky, 1989, p.

20). However, Alinsky's argument was quickly complicated by the work of scholars like Stall,

Stoecker, and Sen, who argue that his approach is incorrect because it fails to recognize the

validity of the non-conflict-based methods used more often by communities of women and

people of color (Stall and Stoecker, 1998; Sen, 2003; Schutz and Sandy, 2011). As Stall

explained: "the Alinsky model and the women-centered model begin from different starting

points - first, the rough and tumble world of aggressive public sphere confrontation and second,

the more relational world of private sphere personal and community development" (Stall and

Stoecker, 1998, p. 737). For this reason:

> Alinsky's emphasis on conflict runs counter to the many successful women's
> organizing efforts that emphasize cooperation and compromise to generate
> neighborhood improvements. In part because many women-centered organizing
> efforts often looked like and led to the service provision, organizers in Alinsky's
> tradition of conflict would not recognize them as organizing, even though they
> also involved regular people in fighting for institutional change. (Sen, 2003, p. v)

Alinsky's conflict-based model of community organizing ignores the rich history of

non-dominant identities creating meaningful social change through less masculinized and white

methods. For this reason, it is important to complicate Alinsky's model with other scholars and

judge the ability to create/navigate conflict as only one measure of an organizer's preparation

and skill.

Additionally, Alinsky's emphasis on conflict overemphasizes the public sphere, thereby relegating less comfortable[2] topics to the private sphere. Sen writes:

> The pragmatism that Alinsky espoused came to characterize community organizations; it determined the path of internal conflicts about class, race, and gender, and eventually those about immigration and sexuality. If a particular issue was bound to divide a community or was difficult to address entirely in the public sphere, most community organizations did not address it. (Sen, 2003, p.vi)

In other words, Alinsky's community organizing model demands a united front, and, as a result, the potentially divisive topics of identity and intersectionality are not a priority. However, an awareness of oppression and intersectionality is fundamental to the community organizing profession. This is inspired by Jane McAlevey's theory of whole-worker organizing which argues that the most effective labor organizer fights for a better life in addition to a better contract.

> Whole-worker organizing begins with the recognition that real people do not live two separate lives, one beginning when they arrive at work and punch the clock and another when they punch out at the end of their shift. The pressing concerns that bear down on them every day are not divided into two neat piles, only one of which is of concern to unions. At the end of each shift, workers go home, through streets that are sometimes violent, past their kids' crumbling schools, to their often substandard housing, where the tap water is likely unsafe. (McAlevey, 2012, p. 14)

The same is true of community members and community organizers. Community organizers should be committed to the advancement of their constituencies in *all* areas and not be confined by conflict or comfort. A *solely* Alinskian model would deprioritize progress for the sake of both. So, while Alinsky may have been the first to give us the terminology we needed to describe the community organizing profession, he should not be the end-all and be-all of theory.

Stall, Stoecker, and Sen's critiques of Alinsky have not caused me to reject conflict entirely, but they have impacted my understanding of conflict and my research methodology.

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[2] When I say "comfortable," I refer to the comfort of dominant American identities (i.e., a white, middle-class, heterosexual, race-averse populace.)

Specifically, their arguments caused me to deprioritize conflict-based language in my data collection and data analysis methods and include interpersonal skills like relationship-building, personality, and family in my coding schema. Sen's book *Stir It Up: Lessons in Community Organizing and Advocacy* and McAlevey's *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* were also the inspiration for adding intersectionality to my coding schema later in the coding process.

Altogether, this thesis is the product of a convergence of multiple progressive organizing theories beginning with Saul Alinsky but extending to thinkers like Jane McAlevey, Susan Stall, Rinku Sen, Randy Stoecker, Eric Mann, Alicia Garza, Cesar Chavez, Steve Jenkins, Rapheal Randall, and more (McAlevey, 2012; Stall and Stoecker, 1998; Sen, 2003; Mann, 2011; Garza, 2020; Chavez, 1966; Jenkins, 2002; Youth United for Change, 2019). Though I have only explained the works of a few of these theorists here, all of these thinkers are valuable resources for aspiring organizers and interested academics.

Critical Pedagogy

While my opinion of community organizing has been defined by a rich collection of progressive organizing theories, my understanding of how organizing should interact with academia is inspired by Paulo Freire's work on critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and theorist renowned for his influential book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which linked education to social justice. As evidenced by my earlier paragraphs on the significance of this study, my research is heavily influenced by Freire's argument that a primary goal of education should be to produce critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Freire believed that by producing critical thinkers, schools can equip their students with the tools necessary to recognize and resist oppression. This belief can then be extended to conclude that the same education

system that is capable of educating individuals to recognize oppression might be able to teach those students the skills they need to organize against it (Freire, 1970). This idea is fundamental to my research; Freire's conclusion suggests that U.S. colleges and universities may have a place in the preparation of students to become community organizers. In other words, his work foreshadowed the works of many, including my own, making critical pedagogy a crucial piece of my theoretical framework.

I also subscribe to Freire's emphasis on community-based programming within critical pedagogy. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* argues that any mobilization or education that responds to oppression "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed" (Freire, 1970). In the case of my research, this means that the 79.7% of community organizers who graduate from colleges and universities each year should be representative of and/or informed by their constituencies if they are to succeed (Zippia, Inc., 2021). In other words, effective community organizing education must not only teach the skills necessary to organize but also serve a diversity of students reflective of the breadth of the United States' communities. This understanding impacted how I coded for community-based learning, privilege, and institutional failures in my data.

Altogether, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy answers Professor Anne Yair's question of, "what kind of community are [university students] going to organize?" If aligned with critical pedagogy, education should be a means by which individuals of all identities and experiences can recognize and resist oppression. The problem is that is not *today's* education system. Instead, the relationship between colleges and community is complicated by the former's historical service to privileged identities and tendency to perpetuate harm. In their article, "Community-Engaged Research as Enmeshed Practice," authors Jennifer L. Bay and Kathryn Yankura Swacha argue that colleges and universities frequently exploit vulnerable populations in

their pursuit of hard data (Bay and Swacha, 2020). Rather than building trust or working in partnership with a given community to reform oppressive systems, academia instead deepens divides between colleges and communities by dehumanizing participants and exacerbating research fatigue (Bay and Swacha, 2020). This is antithetical to critical pedagogy, which calls on schools to dismantle systems of power rather than perpetuate them, and will come into play in the manifestation of university/organizer preparation dissonance. However, while modern U.S. colleges and universities have much-needed room to grow in their application of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire's theory remains an essential guide to understanding why and how education is a necessary but complicated means to educate future changemakers in the values of progressive organizing. As a result, critical pedagogy is a foundational aspect of my research.

Personal Positionality

My research's final influencing "theory" is my own personal positionality. This encompasses my identity as well as my background, politics, personality, and privileges. I am a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, middle-class woman who attended an independent K-12 school in Worcester, Massachusetts, for thirteen years before attending an elite liberal arts college. These identities carry enormous privileges. I navigate and benefit from a world and an education system that caters to the majority of my thought processes and experiences as a white American. This, combined with my familial financial stability, love of learning, and parents who are teachers themselves, meant that I grew up believing that a college education was not only valuable and possible but probable. In this way, I am a product of American academia. I believe in its power and potential as an unrealized means of social mobility and social change and therefore extend it a great deal of deserved and undeserved respect. Today, my research will

undoubtedly reflect this belief and the privileges that helped create it even as my opinion of higher education has become more complicated through research and experience.

Politically, I identify as progressively liberal, a fact that strongly affects how I engage with and think about community organizing. I believe that American systems are not broken; they simply were never intended to work for all residents. Instead, they grew and profited from the labor and oppression of people of color. I am a student of Saul Alinsky, Eric Mann, Jane McAlevey, Alicia Garza, and more because I share their beliefs that American institutions were established to serve a small, rich, white, male portion of the population, but that social change demands the work of *all* residents regardless of race, religion, color, or creed. This latter point is my inspiration for not only this thesis but also my involvement as a volunteer, staff member, and campaign manager in political campaigns in New York and Minnesota. Nonetheless, I am not an organizer. I am an academic, and I use my knowledge, experience, and beliefs in my research. For this thesis, that means research that is progressive, pro-union, anti-capitalist, feminist and favors grassroots mobilization.

Finally, my research is heavily influenced by my atheism and my optimism. Despite great-grandfathers who were ministers in small-town Illinois and Ohio, religion has never been a part of my life. Instead, I identify as an agnostic atheist. I recognize the real and meaningful power of religion in the lives of those around me but would be remiss to describe it as having influence over my life. Accordingly, I have dedicated less time in my research to the examination of the rich and storied practices of religious community organizing, which have been particularly prevalent in the American South and during the American civil rights movement. To do so, I believe, would be in ignorance of the defining aspects of this practice. As such, I have currently left this topic to scholars more learned and devout than myself. Lastly, my research is

inextricable from my optimism. Community organizing is inherently optimistic in that it believes change is possible. I believe that not only is a just and equal future achievable but that the education of competent, community-based changemakers is the most effective way to actualize that future. As such, my research is grounded in a fierce determination that the study of the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession is valuable work in the pursuit of a noble mission.

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Ultimately, all of these factors and theories have meant that this research project was deeply personal as it hinges on my beliefs and interests. I began asking questions in 2018 because I was curious how *I* could learn the skills necessary to organize effectively while attending Vassar College. Now, I am attempting to offer answers while looking forward to graduation and a post-graduation job as a political campaign manager in Minneapolis, Minnesota. So, in some ways, this thesis is my attempt to understand my journey. I am not an organizer, and I still will not be once I graduate, but I nonetheless find myself asking whether or not Vassar prepared me to mobilize community. I do not know yet, but I am excited to find out.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

"First, we learned what the qualities of an ideal organizer are; and second, we are confronted with a basic question: whether it is possible to teach or educate for the achieving of these qualities."

- Saul Alinsky, Rules for Radicals

As previously stated, this thesis responds to the research question: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** In this chapter, I will review what existing literature says about this question and its relevant subject areas in order to define key terms, provide context for my research, and further acknowledge the texts that shape my methodology. Specifically, I will outline my academic understanding of community organizing, the community organizing profession, U.S. higher education, and formal and informal learning spaces.

Community Organizing

Community organizing is, at its core, a means to resist oppression. It refers to a "method of engaging and empowering a community of people with the purpose of increasing the influence of communities historically underrepresented in [the] policies and decision-making that affect their lives" (Gittell, 2016, para. 1). Noticeably, this definition offers few specifics on *how* an organizer is to engage and empower that community. This is because community organizing is an umbrella term that can apply to numerous methodologies, including labor organizing, political organizing, civil rights organizing, and more (Schultz and Sandy, 2011). The method has been used by suffragettes, students, union workers, LGBTQIA+ activists, immigrants, and countless others "to refer to various purposeful activities aimed at helping develop communities, challenge

unjust systems and policies, and promote interconnectedness among community members"
(Brady and O'Connor, 2014, p. 212). This breadth means that there is no one "single definition"
of community organizing (Szakos and Lyang Szakos, 2007, p. 1). Instead, scholars apply the
term based on three factors: being the product of a community, being useful to various political
methodologies, and not being defined by one organizational form (Fisher and DeFillipis, 2015).
In other words, community organizing is definitionally broad; it is not linked to one ideology or
identity but must be "developed on a community-level basis" (Brady and O'Connor, 2014, p.
223). Given this breadth, my research considers multiple methodologies, including labor
organizing, issue organizing, and political organizing, to be forms of community organizing so
long as their work is based on the needs or wants of a community and in resistance to oppression.
I, therefore, consider a range of individuals to be community organizers. All this said, it is
important to distinguish community organizing from three terms with which it is sometimes used
synonymously.

Community organizing is sometimes incorrectly conflated with activism, advocacy, and
political campaigning. However, each of these areas is distinct from community organizing in
methods and goals (Schutz and Sandy, 2011; McAlevy, 2016; Jenkins, 2002). Nonetheless, I will
detail each and how it differs from community organizing to illustrate the factors I considered
when labeling work as community organizing.

First, activism. Activism refers to direct action taken to promote or impede social reform.
It can look like protesting, picketing, social media posting, and more, but is distinct from
community organizing in that it often lacks "a coherent strategy, a coherent target, a process for
maintaining the fight over an extended period of time, and an institutional structure for holding
people together" (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 33). Based on the definition already established,

several of these factors, including an organizational form, are required to be community organizing. This is affirmed by scholars who have described each factor as necessary to the field (Schutz and Sandy, 2011; Alinsky, 1989; Mann, 2011). Activism is not synonymous with community organizing because the former is less intentional and often more individual than the latter.

Second, advocacy. Advocacy refers to action taken on behalf of an oppressed group to promote or impede social reform. It is distinct from activism because advocacy is sustained over a period of time and often has an organizational form. Nonetheless, the term is also not synonymous with community organizing because speaking on *behalf* of a group means that the effort is not community-based. Instead, advocacy or advocacy organizations are "controlled by professionals who are not usually representative of, or accountable [to], the people for whom they are speaking" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 2). Community organizing must be both. After all, as theorist Paulo Freire argued: any truly liberatory practice must be created by and for the oppressed (Freire, 1970).

Finally, political campaigning. Distinct from political organizing, political campaigning refers to the process of running *a candidate* for elected office. Unlike ballot question campaigns, candidate campaigns are dependent on term limits, election cycles, and candidate credentials and not necessarily on community. Again, this contradicts our earlier requirement that community organizing is community-based. Altogether, these definitions of activism, advocacy, and political campaigning distinguish each from community organizing while also clarifying the attributes I use to define the field. Community organizing can *intersect* with activism, advocacy, or political campaigning, but it is not synonymous with any of these terms. Altogether, community

organizing is best described as a diverse field distinct from activism, advocacy, and political campaigning and defined by its organizational structure and community foundation.

While we can narrow our definition of community organizing somewhat by distinguishing the term from activism, advocacy, and political campaigning, the definition remains broad due to the breadth and complexity of the subject's history. In fact, a comprehensive history is difficult to summarize. Authors Aaron Schutz and Marie G. Sandy devote a chapter to the history of American community organizing in their book *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing*, and still, they write that their summation remains "oversimplified" and unable to account for the "cross-fertilization" of America's numerous social movements and campaigns (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 47). Nonetheless, the method is generally described as beginning with the U.S. labor movement in the late-1800s and spanning the settlement house movement, women's rights movement, civil rights movement, black power movement, second-wave feminism, anti-Vietnam movement, and more (Schutz and Sandy, 2011). Along the way, the term and its tactics have been used, defined, and redefined by organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), United Farm Workers of America (UFW), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), and Association of Community Organizers Reform Now (ACORN) (Fisher and Romanofsky, 1981; Schutz and Sandy, 2011). There is knowledge to be gained from this expansive, if incomplete, history. First, community organizing is a diverse discipline useful to multiple constituencies. Second, no movement is "monolithic;" different communities can resist oppression via incredibly different paths. And third, while there might not be one history of community organizing, the community organizing *profession* has a much clearer beginning.

Ultimately, while the breadth of the community organizing definition is indicative of the discipline's diversity, it offers little guidance on what the practice should look like on the ground or how U.S. colleges or universities might prepare students for it. For this, we must instead look at the literature on the community organizing profession.

Community Organizing Profession

I use the term "community organizing profession" to describe paid professional community organizers or people who devote significant time to community organizing. That said, much like community organizing, the profession *in action* is not easy to define. Instead, it is as diverse as the individuals who, at one time or another, have organized against oppression: individuals like Ella Baker, Dolores Huerta, Mary Lease, John Muir, Sylvia Rivera, or Barack Obama. The diversity of these practitioners and their communities is what gives community organizing its breadth and complexity. Interestingly, however, credit for transforming public understanding of the practice into a recognized *profession* is frequently given to a man we have already highlighted: activist, organizer, and so-called "father of community organizing," Saul Alinsky (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 93).

A co-founder of the influential Back of the Yards Council in Chicago and the author of the revered and reviled community organizing handbook, *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky is lauded by many as the creator of modern community organizing. "Saul Alinksy was not the first community organizer," write Schutz and Sandy, "In Alinsky's hands, [however,] community organizing became a coherent field of action and 'community organizer' became a job description" (Schutz and Sandy, 2011). Saul Alinsky affirmed community organizing as a career path and, perhaps most importantly, he enumerated his perception of the skills and qualities necessary to be successful in the profession (Schutz and Sandy, 2011; Alinksy, 1989).

Specifically, Alinsky's model was revolutionary for its analysis of power, acknowledgment of self-interest, emphasis on conflict, commitment to organization creation, and value of relationships; these attributes have since come to define the community organizing profession (Alinsky, 1989; Reiztes and Reiztes, 1982; Schutz and Sandy, 2011; Mann, 2011).

The transformation of community organizing into a profession and the subsequent enumeration of its attributes are of particular importance to my research. I am considering how colleges and universities prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession; for this reason, it is essential that I understand where the job came from and what it entails. As the recognized founder of the profession, it is logical to begin with Alinsky's work. Alinsky's theories of conflict, power, and relationship building influenced how I developed my research question and identified what an aspiring community organizer might need to know to find success. In Chapter 2, I detailed my approach to Alinsky's model of conflict with the help of Stall, Stoecker, and Sen. In the following paragraphs, I will outline how Alinsky's theories of power and relationship building impact the community organizing profession and my research.

To Saul Alinsky, there were several necessary attributes to be a successful community organizer, beginning with an understanding of power (Alinsky, 1989). According to Alinsky, power was not something to be feared but rather something to be *pursued* as it can shift influence from the oppressor to the oppressed or from the "Haves" to the "Have Nots" (Alinsky, 1989). It follows that power analysis, or the decoding of who or what has power in order to shift that power elsewhere, is a necessary skill for any community organizer (Alinsky, 1989). This idea has since been underscored by various organizing authors (McAlevey, 2016; Garza, 2020). In her book, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, author and union organizer Jane McAlevey writes:

> What is almost never attempted is the absolutely essential corollary: a parallel careful, methodical, systematic, detailed analysis of power structures … Liberals and most progressives don't do a full power-structure analysis because, consciously or not, they… assume elites will always rule. … An elite theory of power for well-intentioned liberals leads to the advocacy model; an elite theory of power for people further left than liberals - progressives - leads to the mobilizing model … People to the left of both liberals and progressives have a different theory of power: different because it assumes that the very idea of who holds power is itself contestable. (McAlevey, 2016, p. 27, 28-29)

In other words, true systemic change demands not only the acceptance that power exists and is "contestable" but that the contesting of power is necessary to do more than advocate or mobilize (McAlevey, 2016, p. 29). Contesting power is how you *organize*. By mobilizing a constituency with the potential to hold systems accountable, you shift power away from the oppressor and toward the oppressed. It follows, therefore, that any competent organizer must learn to recognize, respond to, and ultimately claim power for their community. Accordingly, I consider whether or not learning spaces teach students to analyze, question, or contest power when considering the usefulness of formal and informal community organizing preparation in my research.

In addition to power awareness, Alinsky and numerous other organizers consider relationship building a necessary component of successful organizing (Alinsky, 1989; Chavez, 1966; Mann, 2011; McAlevey, 2016; Schutz and Sandy, 2011). Relationship building refers to developing interpersonal community networks based on trust, communication, and understanding. As I noted earlier, community organizing must be community-based; therefore, successful community organizers must be either part of or deeply in tune with the community being organized. As Alinsky put it:

> The foundation of a People's Organization is in the communal life of the local people. Therefore the first stage in the building of a People's Organization is the understanding of the life of a community, not only in terms of the individual experiences, habits, values, and objectives, but also from the point of view of

collective habits, experiences, customs, controls, and values of the whole groups - the community traditions. (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 98)

In other words, it is the responsibility of community organizers to understand community experience if they are to be successful, and this requires relationship building to be done right. Experienced relationship builders are the organizers that can recruit and turn out members because they are known, trusted, and can tap into individuals' self-interest (Mann, 2011; Alinsky, 1989). Consequently, skills like effective communication, recruitment, and a dedication to building relationships *in community* became a second characteristic I looked for in my research when judging the potential effectiveness of community organizing education.

Altogether, Alinsky's theories of power and relationship building impacted how I measured community organizing preparation by affecting how I created and categorized codes. This particularly influenced the skills and qualities I identified as necessary for the community organizing profession (*See Chapter 4 and Appendix D*).

Since Alinsky wrote his first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, in 1946 and *Rules for Radicals*, in 1971, countless organizers and academics have published their own work about the community organizing profession and the skills or qualities necessary to find success within it. Scholars have offered input and advice on how to get members to turn out, navigate internal tension, and identify the roles that every campaign requires (Organizing Upgrade, 2020; Youth United for Change, 2019; Mann, 2011). But undergirding this work is the fundamental notion that "the job of an organizer is to build a base and… force those in power to do something they would not otherwise do" (Mann, 2011, p. 1). To achieve this, regardless of whether or not you subscribe to the specifics of his methods, demands an understanding of the Alinskyian principles of power and relationship building. As such, Alinsky remains the basis of the modern community organizing profession and, by extension, my research. Indeed, power analysis and relationship

building are the foundation from which we will begin to look for and consider the effectiveness of modern community organizing education within U.S. higher education in Chapters 5 and 6.

U.S. Higher Education

This study, however, is not about community organizing or even the community organizing profession. It is of the extent to which *U.S. colleges and universities* prepare their students to become community organizers. For this reason, we must also consider the literature that defines the operation and intention of U.S. higher education.

The term higher education describes any "education provided beyond the secondary level," typically "by a college or university" ("higher education," 2022). In the United States, this applies to approximately 3,982 degree-granting institutions and the academic level completed by 32.1% of U.S. residents ages 25 and older (Moody, 2021; McElrath and Martin, 2020). This scope is indicative of America's decentralized and pluralistic approach to higher education, over which the U.S. government has limited control (Rueda, 2022). Today, the U.S. higher education system is made up of a range of public and private, nonprofit and for-profit institutions serving numerous identities and geographies (Rueda, 2022). However, this kind of variety was not always been available.

U.S. colleges and universities originated as predominantly religious institutions intended to elevate white middle- and upper-class men from the American colonies to the social rank of "gentleman" (Geiger, 2015). In subsequent decades, this goal of social mobility combined with Jeffersonian ideals of freedom of expression to create institutions that valued critical thought within clear institutional and social hierarchies. In time, and often as a result of protest and/or financial incentives, U.S. colleges and universities slowly expanded to serve women and people of color (Miller-Bernal, 2006; Griffen and Daniels, 2006; Schwager, 2004). For my research, this

history is valuable for understanding both the potential and embedded privilege within American higher education systems. Unlike community organizing, early U.S. colleges and universities were not developed to engage or empower oppressed peoples. Nonetheless, these same institutions can be credited with educating a majority of American community organizers (Zippia, Inc, 2021). Therein lies the contradiction that inspires my research question. For a potential answer, we must look explicitly at what colleges currently do and do not offer by way of community organizing education.

Community Organizing Education

In addition to providing us with a foundation from which to judge the quality of modern community organizing education, Saul Alinsky is useful to my research in another regard. He is representative of the contradiction that inspired my research question: Alinsky was both highly critical of the usefulness of academia to community organizers and a product of American higher education.

Before he was an organizer, Saul Alinsky was an undergraduate and graduate student at the University of Chicago, where he studied sociology with a focus on urban communities and learned from some of the discipline's most notable "luminaries" (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 94). Some scholars have credited this experience with giving him the ethnographic skills necessary to organize so effectively (Schutz and Sandy, 2011). However, Alinsky himself became a staunch critic of higher education later in life. He is well known for assertions such as "the word 'academic' is synonymous for irrelevant" and his preference for aligning himself with "the common man" (Schutz and Sandy, 2011, p. 94). However, one would be remiss to conclude from these statements that Alinsky was opposed to education entirely. Toward the end of his life, Alinsky began training programs with the goal of educating the next generation of changemakers

(Alinsky, 1989; Schutz and Sandy, 2011). Not tied to a specific college or university, several of Alinsky's organizations still exist today and have been joined by modern organizer training programs like Training for Change and Arena Academy. However, my research is not on the extent to which these *non-academic* programs prepare their attendees to become community organizers; my research is on academia and, more specifically, higher education. Because, despite Alinsky's skepticism, many community organizers follow his footsteps to college and university.

As I have highlighted, community organizers, overall, are a highly educated group. Though academic literature on the subject is limited, the job site Zippia estimates that 78.7% of community organizers have a bachelor's degree or higher (Zippia, Inc., 2021). This is in sharp contrast to the percentage of U.S. residents, 32.1%, with the same level of education (McElrath and Martin, 2021). In other words, like Alinsky, a majority of community organizers are entering the profession from the upper echelons of academia. This begs the question: what are colleges and universities doing to prepare their students to become community organizers when a degree statistically distinguishes them from the communities they seek to serve? Or, as our research question asks: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** At present, I have yet to find concrete academic research that answers this question. Nonetheless, a review of U.S. higher education institutions and curricula reveals two main trends.

First, there is no standardized major for the community organizing profession at the undergraduate level. In fact, based on my research, many U.S. colleges and universities do not offer degrees or even classes in "community organizing." It is not uncommon to find classes on

community organizing *adjacent* subjects such as power, advocacy, or social change as part of Sociology, Political Science, and American Studies departments, but, by my review, specialization in community organizing itself appears less often. As I will discuss more fully in Chapter 4, this makes the process of identifying community organizing relevant coursework difficult because it does not necessarily share common terminology. Nonetheless, this may explain why the community organizing profession pulls from a wide array of majors. The most common majors among community organizers are Political Science, Business, and Psychology, but 63% graduate with another major entirely (Zippia, Inc., 2021). This range shows that there is not a standardized curriculum for the profession in the same way that, for example, the medical profession demands that aspiring doctors study biology. Therefore, it can be concluded that a majority of community organizers are either not learning what they need to enter the profession, learning what they need in non-specialized academic classes, or learning what they need somewhere else entirely.

Second, community organizing specialization appears more often at the graduate level. Even though only 12% of community organizers have a master's degree or higher, it is at this academic threshold that my research suggests community organizing becomes a more common and explicit area of study (Zippia, Inc., 2021). Based on my review of the literature, when community organizing classes or degrees are offered, they are often contained within graduate schools of social work or, more specifically, the discipline of macro-social work. However, while these opportunities exist at the highest levels of academia, there is little research on the extent to which they prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession. In other words, academia has not proven through study whether or not these programs do what they claim. This, in part, is the goal of this thesis. To begin, however, we need to not only understand the

community organizing profession and the status of modern community organizing education but also where learning occurs on the small scale.

Formal and Informal Learning Spaces

It appears that U.S. colleges and universities are producing a majority of American community organizers despite a limited formal curriculum for community organizing; what is less obvious is where, if at all, this preparation *is* occurring. Educational theorist Paulo Freire described pedagogy, or "the art, science, and profession of teaching," as "an instrument for [the oppressed's] critical discovery" ("pedagogy," 2022; Freire, 1970, p. 74). This frames teaching and learning as something that can occur intentionally and unintentionally within a plethora of formal and informal spaces. For this reason, I chose to label both formal and informal learning spaces as places of inquiry within my research question. After all, given Freire's definition, a college could be teaching its students to become community organizers through a combination of formal and informal experiences ranging from classroom teaching to extracurriculars and more.

To understand why formal and informal learning should be viewed as equals in the development of a community organizer, it is best to turn to John Dewey's "theory of experience," in which the renowned theorist argued that learning and growth are the products of experience, continuity, and interaction (Dewey, 1938). In other words, learning by doing is equivalent, or even preferred, to educational methods of lecture, recitation, or test-taking. Dewey advocated for the practice of experiential, or hands-on learning, in which learning is "a process … [and] results from synergetic transactions between the person and the environment" (Kolb and Kolb, 2005, p. 194). In combination with Freire, it can be concluded that meaningful community organizing education might occur in a diversity of spaces through a diversity of experiences and without the involvement of a formal teacher. For example, an internship with a local nonprofit or experience

speaking at a protest might teach someone as much, if not more, than reading academic literature on the same subject. As a result, it is necessary to affirm both formal and informal learning spaces within my research question. The process of defining what constituted formal and informal spaces on a college or university campus, however, remained.

Within the realm of higher education, formal and informal learning spaces can be hard to quantify as they vary by school and by student; what is meaningful to one individual might be unfamiliar to another. In their 2015 Philosophy dissertation, author Ngoc Thi Bao Vo defined both formal and informal spaces for us when they wrote: "formal learning refers to educational ladders from preschool to graduate studies. Informal learning, however, is not institutional [nor] involve a prescribed curriculum. In other words, informal learning does not require a teacher, an award of qualification, or a structured framework" (Vo, 2015, p. 18). For this study, I am taking inspiration from both Vo's definition and author Peter Jamieson to define formal learning spaces as instances of learning involving classroom teaching, theory, academic literature, or a teacher in a formal capacity, and informal spaces as instances of learning that occur outside of these four areas (Vo, 2015; Jamieson, 2009). I will discuss how both definitions impact my research in Chapter 4.

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Ultimately, a review of academic literature in the subjects of community organizing, the community organizing profession, U.S. higher education, community organizing education, and formal and informal learning spaces reveals community organizing to be a diverse discipline that sometimes runs counter to the goals of American higher education. This, in part, explains why renowned organizers like Saul Alinsky have openly questioned the extent to which academia has a place within the profession, even though a majority of community organizers are college or university educated. In turn, U.S. colleges and universities continue to sell messages of civic

engagement and education without the research to back up whether or not their teaching is preparing students to make change. I am hopeful that this thesis might explain these contradictions by responding to my research question: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?**

Chapter 4: Methodology

"Organizing at its best is as difficult as brain surgery - it's much easier to get it wrong than to get it right."

- Eric Mann, Playbook for Progressives

The preceding two chapters described how existing academic theory and literature influenced my research; in this chapter, I will discuss my research methodology, including site and participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and limitations.

Site Selection

The first step in my research process was identifying where and how to conduct my research. As previously noted, my research question is: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** This means that my focus was on the operations and offerings of U.S. higher education institutions. Off-campus locations, such as community organizations and campaigns, were also included in my research but only in relation to college and university students or community organizing preparation on college or university campuses. Accordingly, my research sites were the six colleges and universities attended by my research participants. As I will explain later, I found my sites through my participants but restricted them to schools in the Eastern and Midwestern United States.

In order to analyze my research sites, I split my research up into three categories that are either part of U.S. higher education or necessary to define community organizing preparation (*See Figure 1*). These were 1) formal learning spaces, 2) informal learning spaces, and 3) the community organizing profession. As I explained in Chapter 3, formal learning spaces describe

instances of learning that involve classroom teaching, academic theory, academic literature, or an educator in a formal capacity. Meanwhile, informal learning spaces describe instances of learning that occur outside of these areas, such as within student organizations or as a result of lived experiences. Finally, the community organizing profession refers to the field itself, as defined in Chapter 3. By focusing my research around these three categories, I could measure and compare what schools are doing inside and outside the classroom to what the profession requires.

Figure 1: Research Categories and Their Relationship to the Research Site
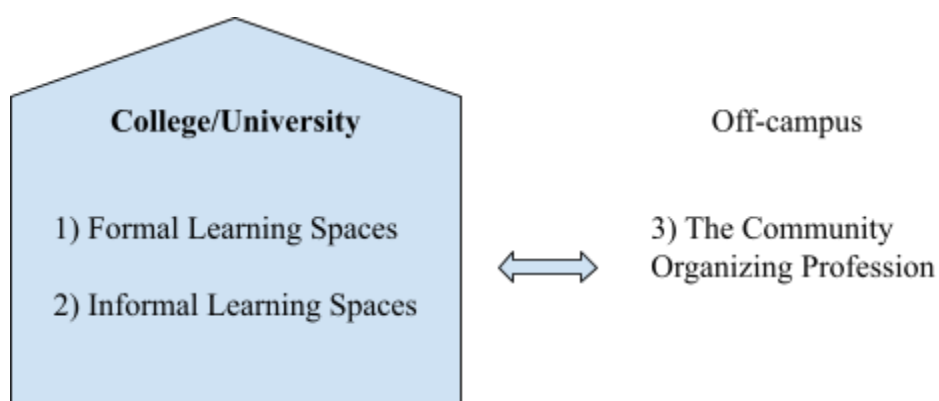
In order to study formal learning spaces, informal learning spaces, and the community organizing profession, I conducted, coded, and analyzed interviews with twelve participants who are or were attendees of the research site (i.e., a U.S. college or university) and were experienced leaders in one of my three research categories. Formal learning spaces were represented by college or university educators, informal learning spaces were represented by student organizers, and the community organizing profession was represented by community organizers. I felt that limiting my research to participants whose leadership was indicative of a research category was necessary to ensure a balance of institutional and organizational perspectives. My analysis would

later show that most participants had experience in more than one of these categories, but I chose to recruit them based on their *current* leadership area. Altogether, the voices of college/university educators, student organizers, and community organizers offer perspectives on how U.S. colleges and universities are cultivating community organizing preparation in or in relation to formal learning spaces, informal learning spaces, and the community organizing profession.

Participant Selection

To recruit community organizers, educators, and student organizers indicative of my three research categories and who attended college/university (my research site), I pulled from my personal networks, and cold-emailed/messaged relevant individuals. My plan was to recruit four community organizers from my own network who attended four different colleges and universities in the Eastern and Midwestern United States. I chose to recruit from these geographic areas because this is where my own social networks exist. Then, I would recruit one educator and one student organizer from each of these four institutions through cold-emailing/messaging techniques for a total of twelve participants (*See Figure 2*). I did this so that I could easily compare data between participants who attended the same school. I chose to begin with community organizers because I assumed that they would be the most difficult to recruit without a pre-existing relationship because of the enormity of school alumni networks and the fact that their contact information is less readily available online. However, and as I will explain in more detail later, I chose to adapt this methodology somewhat based on the limited availability of community organizing-specific classes.

Figure 2: Participant Recruitment Strategy

Recruited Community Organizer

College/University

Recruited Educator

Recruited Student
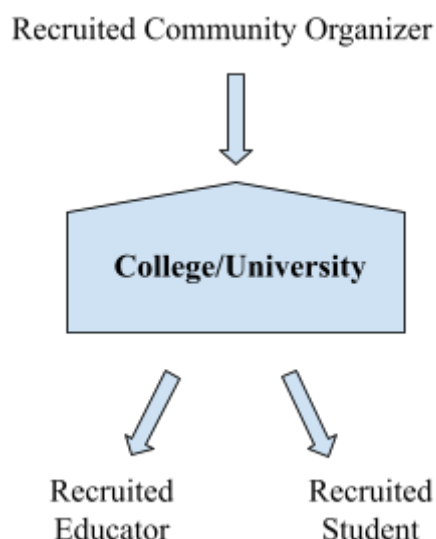
In practice, recruitment began with compiling a list of possible community organizers from my personal network. I then contacted these organizers by email, or text if I did not have their email address, and asked them to participate in my research (*See Appendix A*). I initially contacted three community organizers but held off contacting a fourth because I was waiting for a referral from a friend. All three organizers I contacted agreed to participate, and I followed up with each via email with further details, including interview times and consent forms (*See Appendix B*). I then researched these participants online using LinkedIn to confirm what college and/or university they attended. Finally, I reviewed their schools' course offerings beginning, when possible, with their Social Work, Sociology, American Studies, and Political Science departments in search of community organizing-specific classes. If I found a class on community organizing, I would contact its professor or director by email and ask them to participate in my study.

Unfortunately, the process of identifying community organizing classes proved to be particularly difficult as only one of the three colleges or universities that I researched offered

classes specifically on the subject. As a result, I expanded my research to include classes on the related topics of political movements and power. This difficulty also caused me to abandon my planned methodology of researching four institutions. Instead of finding my fourth school, I decided to add three more educators who teach community organizing-specific or relevant classes to my research pool. In other words, I maintained my count of twelve participants by recruiting six educators, three student organizers, and three community organizers instead of four of each (*See Figure 3*).

Figure 3: Participant Recruitment by School
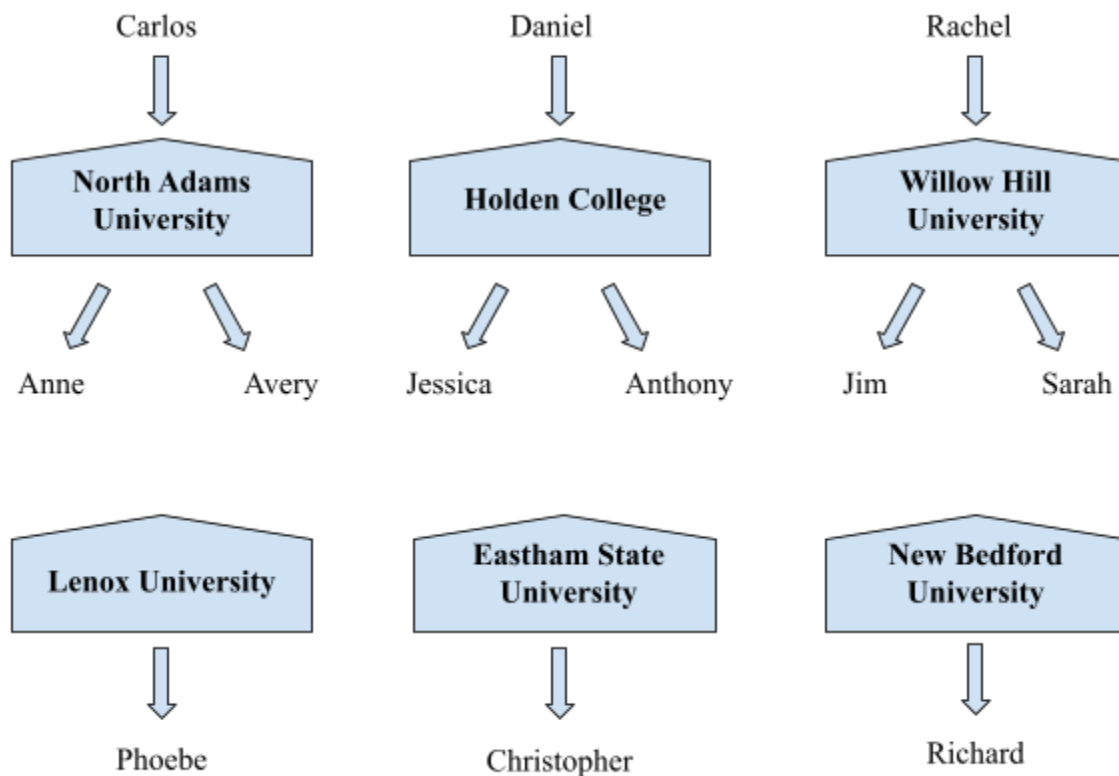
I made this methodological change because I wanted to include community organizing-specific classes in my research but would not have been able to do so with my previous participant pool. I found my three additional non-affiliated educators by exploring the course offerings at well-regarded universities in the home states of my recruited community organizers and then

contacting their professors by email. In the end, I recruited six college/university educators, of whom three taught at schools attended by participating organizers and student organizers.

Finally, to recruit student organizers, I compiled a list of active progressive social groups at the colleges and universities my participating organizers attended by researching their extracurricular catalogs and looking on Facebook. I then contacted the leaders and/or members of these organizations through cold-emailing/messaging techniques based on publicly available contact information. This process also proved challenging as many of the students I contacted did not respond to my request. However, I eventually recruited three students: one from a disability rights student organization, one from an environmental justice student organization, and one involved in various students/workers' rights campaigns on their campus.

In total, I recruited twelve participants: six educators, three community organizers, and three student organizers who represented a total of six different U.S. colleges and universities from the East Coast and the Midwest United States.

Data Collection Methods

As written, my research question (**To what extent, if any, do U.S. colleges and universities cultivate formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?**) demands an understanding of the environment cultivated in or required by each of my three research categories: formal learning spaces, informal learning spaces, and the community organizing profession. It follows that talking with the individuals who create, learn, and work in these spaces is a logical means of understanding them. For this reason, my data set consists of participant interviews. I had originally planned to also analyze curricular materials shared by participating educators but cut this method due to time constraints. My goal for my interviews was for educators to tell me what they *intend* to

teach in their college/university classes, for students to tell me where/what they *learn* at college/university, and for organizers to tell me what they *need* to know to do their work. I succeeded on these points and more, as most participants had experience in more than one of my research categories. Altogether, my interviews offered a picture of the extent to which formal and informal learning spaces are cultivated by colleges and universities and opened up new avenues of analysis in the form of direct and indirect preparation. I will expand on this latter point in Chapter 5.

For my interviews, I adhered to one of three pre-established interview protocols that were written specifically for each of my three research categories (*See Appendix C*). My interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and were conducted virtually over Zoom. They were between thirty and seventy-five minutes in length and consisted of nine to ten pre-determined questions plus one to four follow-up questions (*See Appendix C*). Questions started with introductions and definitions before moving into more experiential questions. The goal was to ease participants into reflecting on their own organizing or teaching experience so that I could 1) identify what skills and qualities they think are necessary to organize, 2) identify whether or not their college or university classes teach/taught these skills, and 3) determine whether or not they *believe* that colleges and universities prepare students to organize. I used this method because personal experience has taught me that there is sometimes a discrepancy between what colleges and universities do and what students credit them as doing; I will expand on this point in Chapter 6. At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and my research topic. Then I reminded participants that their responses would remain anonymous and asked for their permission to audio record the interview (*See Appendices A and B*). I then

concluded each interview by giving participants space to ask questions or add anything else they would like to discuss.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis consisted of a mix of first-string coding, second-string coding, memo writing, and analytical discussions with professors and peers. After each interview, I wrote a summary of my experience and main takeaways, and sent the recording to Rev.com for transcription. Once I had the completed transcript, I coded my interviews using a mix of top-down and bottom-up coding schemas based on both pre-written codes and those that I surfaced through the coding process (*See Appendix C*). My pre-written codes reflected my predicted themes, including my research categories, participants' relationship to schooling, and the relevance of their schooling to the community organizing profession. Using grounded theory, additional codes were also added during the coding process. The mixed top-down/bottom-up approach to coding allowed me to acknowledge the assumptions in and intentions of my research while leaving opportunity for the discovery of new themes and conclusions in each unique interview. Once all interviews were coded, I then returned to my gathered codes and grouped them into categories and the categories into themes to identify my findings chapters and subheadings. This process was based on patterns, similarities, and differences that I found in my data. I also identified important or illuminating quotes during the process. Ultimately, second-string coding made me realize that I should pay attention not only to formal and informal learning spaces but also to direct and indirect preparation, as I will explain in Chapter 5. Finally, I also analyzed my data by discussing content and codes with my thesis advisor, Professor Jaime Del Razo, and with my peers in the Vassar Education Department. Both offered me valuable

space to verbally share my thoughts as well as insightful feedback that made me reflect on my own biases and think more critically.

Using the data analysis methods of first- and second-string coding, memo writing, and discussion, I identified the skills and qualities that my research participants thought necessary for successful community organizing (*See Appendix D*) and used this understanding to consider the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities were teaching their students the skills and qualities necessary to enter the community organizing profession.

Limitations

Nonetheless, my research was limited by several factors. First, I recruited a small sample size indicative of only six colleges and universities from the East Coast and the Midwest United States. This study, therefore, should not be read as definitive of the full diversity of experience and offerings available at colleges and universities across the country. Second, I had limited time to conduct my research. On several occasions, the academic calendar of Vassar College affected when I contacted and interviewed participants and when/how I analyzed my data as it was necessary that I hit specific requirements or due dates to graduate. For instance, I had to cut my planned analysis of curricular materials due to time constraints. Nonetheless, I believe that, despite these limitations, I created a compelling, intentional, and ethical study that informs the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities cultivate formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing procession on the basis of the skills and qualities identified by participants themselves.

Chapter 5: Direct Preparation & Indirect Preparation

"The hardest job of any organizer is to train others."

- Eric Mann, Playbook for Progressives

This thesis responds to the research question: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** I found that the U.S. colleges and universities my participants attended *do* offer formal and informal learning spaces that directly and indirectly prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession. However, the format, extent, and accessibility of this preparation vary widely by space and by school.

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Before conducting my research interviews, I intended to analyze community organizing preparation based only on whether or not a given formal or informal space taught its students the skills and qualities participants identified as necessary for the community organizing profession. Through further analysis of my data, however, I realized that my data should be separated into two categories: direct preparation and indirect preparation. Direct preparation refers to education that both prepares students to organize and describes itself as a training ground for organizers. In contrast, indirect preparation refers to education that prepares students to organize but advertises a different goal, such as teaching Marxist thought or encouraging college students to vote. In other words, the former describes community organizing-specific education, and the latter describes non-community organizing-specific but still relevant education.

I chose to distinguish between direct and indirect preparation in my analysis in order to fully describe the experiences of my participants. To my surprise, none of my student organizer

or community organizer participants described having taken a community organizing-specific class at college or university. Instead, they credited a variety of classes across disciplines, including Sociology, Philosophy, Native American Studies, and Environmental Science, with teaching them how to be better organizers. But, even when describing these classes, participants did not credit them with teaching the skills they identified as necessary for the community organizing profession (*See Appendix D*). Instead, participants described these classes as teaching them how to think critically and carefully. As I outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, critical thinking is a crucial piece of critical pedagogy, the recognition of oppression, and, ultimately, successful progressive community organizing. So while participants' college and university experiences might not have *explicitly* prepared them to organize, they nonetheless were described as making participants better organizers. This is a subtle distinction but one that I deemed necessary to highlight by considering the type of preparation (direct vs. indirect) as well as the location of preparation (formal vs. informal learning spaces) in my analysis. The results span style and space to give a more accurate depiction of the kinds of preparation being cultivated at six U.S. colleges and universities across the country.

Ultimately, direct and indirect preparation can and does exist in formal and informal learning spaces at U.S. colleges and universities. However, this conclusion should acknowledge three additional findings: 1) the extent of preparation varies widely by institution, 2) direct preparation is less common and accessible than indirect preparation, and 3) preparation is not always supported by all parties at a college or university. For these reasons, and in the name of critical pedagogy, college and university professors, students, and administrators can and should do more to support the cultivation of direct and indirect preparation in formal and informal learning spaces in higher education.

In this chapter, I will describe how the U.S. colleges and universities in my sample do offer direct and indirect preparation to some students in formal and informal learning spaces but still have room to grow in how their administrations and departments create and support these opportunities. I will begin by examining instances of direct preparation in formal and then informal learning spaces before moving on to instances of indirect preparation; I will conclude each section by examining specific participant critiques of that style and space.

Direct Preparation in Formal Learning Spaces

"Of course, we need to teach organizing. That just sort of seems silly." This was how Phoebe (she/her), a professor at Lenox University in New York, responded to my question of whether or not colleges and universities should have a place in preparing students to become community organizers. "We have to teach this stuff," she explained, "it's about democratic practice." Here, Phoebe is advocating for direct preparation in formal learning spaces, or the intentional education of students in community organizing skills and topics. However, while these programs do exist and were described as highly successful by the educators I interviewed, direct preparation in formal learning spaces is not as common as Phoebe's assertion might imply. In the following section, I will first examine how participants described community organizing-specific classes as influential in preparing students to become community organizers before, second, critiquing the availability of direct preparation programming.

Community Organizing-Specific Classes

One of the most obvious examples of direct preparation in formal learning spaces is community organizing-specific classes. In my research, I found three university classes that described themselves as teaching community organizing-specific skills. Two of these instances

were classes titled "Community Organizing," which were taught by Phoebe, a Public Service

professor at Lenox University in New York, and Christopher (he/him), a Social Work professor

at Eastham State University in Massachusetts. Both of these professors described their classes as

teaching community organizing-specific skills, including recruitment strategies, power analysis,

and relationship-building. Christopher explained:

> [I teach] some pretty specific skills. So, we get into our analysis and other kinds
> of assessment of a community. We talk about some of the mechanics of building
> an organization. Notably, I do a fair amount of training on so-called relational
> interviewing… [a] tool for getting access to people in a community when you're
> needing stakeholders and gatekeepers. … So we train students in doing relational
> interviewing or one-on-ones, and they go out and do them. That's one of the
> assignments.

Through discussion, training, role-play, and more, Christopher is directly preparing his students

to become community organizers by teaching them how to build relationships and accurately

assess community needs. And according to him, his method works:

> It's a 10-week, 30-hour course titled "Community Organizing"… [It's] intended
> to help people develop and move into the community organizing profession, and
> it has. We've gotten some fantastic results with people going into organizing
> full-time after graduating out of this program.

In other words, direct preparation for the community organizing profession is available to

students at Eastham State University. Phoebe expressed similar intentions by explaining that she

tries to teach community organizing skills "actively by, first of all, bringing in guests who

epitomize those skills in who they are and how they organize" and then telling "concrete stories

for how those skills come into play" in the profession. In both cases, we can see that instances of

direct preparation are available in classrooms at U.S. universities.

Another instance of direct preparation in a classroom setting was described by Jim

(he/him), the director of the Community Action Collective (CAC) at Willow Hill University in

the Midwest United States. Unlike Christopher and Phoebe, Jim teaches a one-week community

organizing workshop for students with the goal of equipping them with the skills they need to organize successfully. When asked to describe his workshop, Jim explained:

> The second half is very skill-based. [We say]... 'Here's a curriculum of what a one-on-one is', but then we're following that by [saying], 'Ok, now go do one-on-ones with each other.' Or 'I'm going to tell an organizing story where we use a power analysis so you can see how a power analysis works. Now, go break into groups and pick an issue that one of you is working on and then do a power analysis.' We're giving them that opportunity to actually practice using the tools.

In other words, Jim, like Christopher, aims to give his students hands-on opportunities to learn and apply community organizing skills through the CAC. Again, this is a clear example of direct preparation that is relevant to the community organizing profession being offered in a formal setting by a U.S. university. These spaces exist; unfortunately, my research indicates that they are not always accessible to all students.

While some participating professors made clear that their universities do offer direct preparation in formal learning spaces, these same professors also described their spaces as rare and somewhat inaccessible to undergraduates. As I explained in Chapter 4, it was challenging to find community organizing-specific classes at U.S. colleges and universities. This difficulty was later affirmed by Christopher and Jim, who described their programs as highly unique. "As far as having an institution that's regularly doing community organizer training, as far as I know, we're the only one," claimed Jim, "we're pretty unique in that." Christopher made similar assertions, stating, "there must be some undergraduate courses where they study the history of organizing," but in terms of classes that teach skills, "this is it." Obviously, the existence of Christopher, Jim, and Phoebe's programs disprove the total uniqueness of each; nonetheless, the geographic distance between these programs and their general lack of awareness of each other suggests a rarity to community organizer-specific classes. Additionally, all three classes cater solely to graduate students or working professionals, not undergraduates. As Phoebe explained: "[My

class is] for… students who are professionals who already have their master's degrees [and who] have been working in the non-profit, corporate, or government world and come back for a two-year intensive degree." Jim voiced a similar experience, arguing that "almost everyone who comes through [my class] is outside the university." Though undoubtedly helpful to the students they serve, the fact that these rare instances of direct preparation are only accessible to working organizers raises questions as to the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities cultivate formal spaces that prepare students *to enter* the community organizing profession rather than merely improve within it. This, perhaps, explains why none of the student organizers or community organizers I interviewed, all of whom entered the profession before, during, or immediately after the undergraduate level, described a single instance of direct preparation in their college or university classes. So, while direct preparation in college and university classes does exist, serious questions can be asked about whether or not there is enough of it.

Community Organizing-Specific Literature

In addition to teaching community organizing-specific skills, college and university classes also directly prepare their students by exposing them to community organizing-specific academic literature and theory. In their interviews, some participants cited the works of specific community organizers, including Alicia Garza, Jane McAlevey, and Saul Alinsky, as influencing their practice and/or classes. Phoebe suggested that academic literature had such an impact on understanding the right way to organize that she made the "students in my class… read double the reading" because she added so many more texts that aligned with her values to her syllabus compared to the professors teaching other sections of the class. Christopher put similar importance on theory when he explained that:

> one of the things we teach is models of community organizing. So we talk about direct action. We talk about community development. We talk about popular education [and] community-based participatory research. Those are all different, [but] they can all be put under an organizing umbrella with some caveats.

Both Phoebe's and Christopher's assertions suggest that community organizing theory is useful to the community organizing practice. In fact, in addition to strong theoretical foundations, many community organizing-specific texts and theories offer readers directly applicable tactics and recommendations for how to organize most effectively. Several community organizers also cited community organizing-specific academic literature in their journey to the profession. Daniel (he/him), an organizer in Downstate New York, specifically highlighted an essay by Steve Jenkins titled "Organizing, Advocacy, and Member Power: A Critical Reflection" as hugely influential to his organizing style. In other words, academia produces literature that is applicable to the community organizing profession and is, therefore, worthy of consumption by aspiring organizers looking for avenues of direct preparation. This is valuable information for students looking for direct preparation but whose college or university does not offer a class on the subject.

All this said, it is important to note that many of my participants, including Phoebe, Christopher, and Daniel, asserted that no one book alone is enough to prepare students to enter the community organizing profession. So, while participants credited literature with exposing them to new ideas or experiences, they pushed back against the idea that reading alone is an effective way to learn to organize. "There is only so much you can understand about organizing from a book," argued Christopher, "Teaching [community organizing] and introducing students to it has the value of providing a theoretical foundation, but there's no substitute for doing." One can conclude, therefore, that colleges and universities should offer more than just access to

community organizing-specific literature. They should off hands on learning, classes, and more if they are to prepare effective community organizers.

So, while meaningful direct preparation exists in collegiate formal learning spaces, community organizing-specific classes are hard to come by at the undergraduate level, and community organizing-specific literature is insufficient as a student's only means of preparation. For this reason, I will turn our attention to the frequently more recognized instances of direct preparation occurring within informal learning spaces on college and university campuses.

Direct Preparation in Informal Learning Spaces

"There's a lot of teaching that goes on in the academy, and sometimes the learning happens in spite of it." In this one quote, Phoebe accurately summarized an idea that appeared again and again throughout my data; sometimes, the most valuable learning occurs outside of the classroom. While a formal learning space was not credited as directly preparatory by any student organizer or community organizer that I interviewed, its non-academic counterpart certainly was. Direct preparation in *informal* learning spaces is also available at U.S. colleges and universities. Unfortunately, throughout my research process, several participants criticized what they considered to be a lack of support for these informal opportunities from their college/university administrators. So, while direct preparation in informal learning spaces does exist, my research shows how some colleges and universities vary in the level of support and funding they provide these spaces.

As a reminder, direct preparation in informal learning spaces refers to community organizing-specific education that occurs outside the traditional bounds of academia. However, in my research, I only coded one kind of direct preparation being offered in informal learning spaces: community organizer training sessions.

Community Organizer Trainings

Community organizer trainings refer to instances in which a student organization, group, or other informal learning space sets aside time to educate its members on a community organizing-specific skill. Unlike classes, these instances are not part of the college curriculum, are stand-alone, and are typically led by practitioners rather than professors. For example, Sarah (she/her), a student organizer at Willow Hill University (WHU) and the president of WHU Students for a Green Society, described a partnership that her organization has with the coaching organization Divest Ed.

> We will have Zoom calls with them and talk about strategy, and, if we're running into some issues, they'll be like: 'what about this?' and that's often been helpful. … [we] had a weekend routine where we got organizing training from a couple of people who were community organizers … I learned a lot about power building and how it is really [about] relationships and getting to know people.

This is a prime example of direct preparation in an informal learning space. Sarah is learning applicable skills with the help of experienced practitioners outside of the traditional classroom setting. Both Avery (they/them), a student organizer at North Adams University in D.C., and Anthony (he/him), a student organizer at Holden College in New York, described similar instances of receiving influential training as a member of a student or off-campus organization. In some cases, participants even described these trainings as filling a void left by the absence of formal learning spaces. For example, Jessica (she/her), a professor at Holden College, explained that, while her classes did not prepare students to organize, "there are some groups around the area that are very good at training our students [and] giving them insights into what is effective organizing, and we have a fair number of students who work with them." Educational partnerships between students or student groups and off-campus organizations are an effective

and available means of direct preparation in informal learning spaces at U.S. colleges and universities today.

That said, it should be noted that the community organizer trainings described by participants were described as being organized with little to no support from their respective institutions; instead, these trainings were predominately the work of individual students, student organizations, and off-campus organizations at the colleges and universities I conducted my research. As I will describe in more detail in Chapter 6, all three student organizers I talked to raised concerns about their school administrations and the level of support they extended to student organizers. Sarah, Avery, and Anthony all described their college or university administrators as inaccessible, with the former two going so far as to claim that their school's board or president were hostile to student organizing efforts. These claims raise questions about the extent to which administrators at all three institutions can improve trust and better support their students in the cultivation of meaningful informal learning spaces. Without this awareness and intention from administrations, higher education is not maximizing its critical pedagogy potential as a supportive, accessible, preparatory space for aspiring organizers. As Carlos (he/him), a community organizer from Central Massachusetts, sarcastically asked: "Do the clubs exist? Sure. Well, what does the institution provide? The room?"

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Direct preparation at colleges and universities, whether in the classroom, the pages of a book, or a scheduled training is clearly valuable. Professors, students, and organizers all cited these means as factors that can impact the preparation of a community organizer. Nonetheless, direct preparation at U.S. colleges and universities is limited by circumstances of both formal and informal settings. Classes are restricted to the graduate level, and organizer training availability and support varies by institution and administration. Lucky for us, college and

university preparation does not only occur via direct preparation. Instead, it is most available to aspiring organizers through extensive *indirect* preparation.

Indirect Preparation in Formal Learning Spaces

"My more leftist-inclined classes and readings, in particular, played a big role in my development." This assertion from community organizer Daniel was what first caused me to take note of the potential power of indirect preparation in formal learning spaces. Though Daniel had earlier asserted that his college experience had not prepared him to enter the community organizing profession, a fact I will expand on in Chapter 6, he nonetheless noted that his education had exposed him to valuable theory and thought. This experience was common throughout my data. All but one student and all but one community organizer included in my research extended at least some credit to formal learning spaces for *indirectly* impacting their development, with particular emphasis placed on classroom learning spaces and the consumption of non-community organizing-specific theory.

Non-Community Organizing-Specific Classes

According to participants, college and university classes can and do teach their students to be critical, aware thinkers with strong values in a way that indirectly prepares them to enter the community organizing profession. "I think that my classes have just given me a set of principles," explained Anthony, a student organizer from New York, "they're an ideology to interpret my organizing or understand more critically the solutions that are being proposed, which is useful. It results in more thoughtful organizing and more thoughtful solutions." Anthony's idea that formal learning spaces offer their students a useful opportunity to gain critical thinking skills and clarify their values appeared again and again in the comments of the

student organizers and community organizers I interviewed. Organizer Daniel claimed he was "radicalized" through his sociology classes at Holden College and organizer Rachel (she/her) credited an American Indian Studies class at Willow Hill University with teaching her "what a community is and what is valuable about that." Over and over, participants claimed that their classes had not directly taught them the skills they needed to organize, but inadvertently those classes had made them better organizers. Student organizer, Sarah said so quite plainly when she argued:

> There's one class I took that was called EVST 345: Environmental Activism… that class really helped me learn to articulate the problems that I saw. … And EVST 248: Decolonization of Indigenous Lands. Those two classes have been the most influential. And more so by giving me new ways of thinking and understanding and being able to look at things than by [giving me] tangible skills.

Here, Sarah argues that, though not *directly* preparatory, her classes were "influential" to how she organized. College and university classes across disciplines are teaching students to think critically and, most notably, to be able to recognize and verbalize the oppression they witness around them. And as established in Chapter 3, an awareness of oppression is a fundamental piece of the community organizing profession. So, like direct learning spaces, we can conclude that indirect preparation in formal learning spaces is available at U.S. colleges and universities.

Additionally, college and university classes can be credited with indirectly teaching students valuable collaboration and relationship-building skills. For instance, though Anne (she/her), a professor at North Adams University, claimed that her classes did not directly prepare her students to organize, she nonetheless stated that: "any class that gives students a chance to work independently and collaboratively can be seen as building community organizing skills." When I asked her whether her class taught students to build relationships, she responded:

> Absolutely. All of them do, right? It's that core value of community and collaborative work… 'How can you work with other people to get something

done?' I think that's one of the most empowering things about any of my courses, one of the most valuable things about them. The students have to figure [that] out. They have to make their own contracts and figure out what they want to do and be in relationship to each other to get something done knowing that they're all going to get the same grade no matter how much someone shows up or doesn't show up.

Given that community organizing must be community-based, Anne is right that collaboration is a "core value" of the field (Brady and O'Connor, 2014; Mann, 2011). So, if college and university classes are successfully teaching this skill set through group work, then they should be recognized as indirectly preparing students to be better organizers. Similarly, Jessica, a professor at Holden College, explained that college classes have the unique opportunity to teach students "how to have a thoughtful argument with people with whom you disagree." This is the potential preparatory power of the classroom. Though not explicit to the community organizing profession, professors can equip their students with the necessary skills of collaboration, debate, and listening. All of the professors I interviewed expressed this intention. Regardless of discipline or professed relevance to the community organizing profession, each of my educator participants expressed a desire to teach their students to be more critical, thoughtful thinkers capable of taking action to change the world around them.

This desire to create critical thinkers was true even among professors who said that their classes did not prepare students to become community organizers, thereby further suggesting a distinction between direct and indirect preparation. "I'm not really teaching organizing skills in my class," explained Richard (he/him), a professor at New Bedford University in Michigan, "but I am teaching foundations of understanding why we have justice or lack justice in society. And so I think that's a really important foundation for an organizer to have." Phoebe, a professor at Lenox University in New York, even went so far as to argue that:

You can go on YouTube and find lots of [videos saying] 'Ok, everybody! We're going to learn how to do a power analysis,' and some of those are pretty good.

> They're not bad. But I don't want to teach people that kind of stuff. I want to teach them more about how to think.

In other words, to Phoebe, colleges and universities should not just teach skills but rather fulfill the difficult but equally valuable role of teaching their students the *thought processes* necessary to critique oppression. This includes bias awareness, self-reflection, critical thinking skills, and more. As such, educating for specific skills could potentially be left to non-academic more community-based settings. From all of this, we can conclude that professors, like their students, see the education of students to be engaged, critical thinkers as a valuable part of the learning process. And, as we extrapolated in Chapters 1 and 2, if we believe that a goal of education is to produce thinkers capable of recognizing and resisting oppression, then it is *essential* that our nation's colleges and universities be able and interested in producing critical, representative, and effective community organizers.

But, even though the professors I interviewed explained that their goal was to produce critical thinkers capable of creating social change, some expressed uncertainty about whether or not they were succeeding. "I try to teach these skills," explained Phoebe, but "how do I, as a professor, determine that my students have actually learned? … I tear myself up over it because I am teaching them in a classroom setting. I don't see them live in the field, so I can't assess except by what they write or what they say." This is the enduring conundrum of both direct and indirect community organizing preparation in formal learning spaces; it is inherently divorced from community, and therefore, practitioners like Phoebe describe having trouble determining the extent to which formal learning is actually applicable to the profession. After all, and as I will explain in more detail later in this chapter, these formal spaces often lack one of the most valuable learning opportunities for the aspiring organizer: in-the-field experience. Still, in this thesis, we have evidence from organizers that indirect preparation in their college/university

classes *did* influence their development even as they voiced skepticism as to whether or not other forms of preparation could have done better (*see Chapter 6*). As Daniel succinctly summarized: "I think that [Holden College] couldn't do more than what it could, but what it could do was enough to set me on this track." Additionally, some organizers still questioned the availability of these kinds of influential classes. As Rachel explained: "It's interesting the weird places where you find the useful classes. They're not all in one place, and they're not all in one department or under one teacher. But they're there if you look." This is a good summary. Indirect preparation in informal learning spaces can come from unexpected places, but it's there if you look.

Ultimately our main takeaway from these findings should be that, through the effort of faculty, some U.S. colleges and universities *are* offering classes across a range of disciplines that indirectly prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession by teaching them necessary critical thinking and collaboration skills.

Indirect Preparation in Informal Learning Spaces

In many regards, indirect preparation in informal learning spaces is the hardest category to describe, even though it is the area of learning that most closely resembles the community organizing profession itself. Specifically, indirect preparation in informal learning spaces refers to instances of relevant but non-explicit learning that occur in extracurricular, social, or personal settings without the guidance of a formal educator or curriculum. In my research, this included everything from student protests to off-campus internships. However, in the following section, we will look at the most prevalent form of indirect preparation in informal learning spaces being cultivated at U.S. colleges and universities: student organizations.

Student Organizations

Throughout my interviews, the informal learning space credited most frequently by participants as preparatory were student organizations. This term refers to groups of students on a college or university campus that gather and act around a shared interest or goal. In the case of my participants, this included organizations like WHU Students for a Green Society at Willow Hill University, Holden Wage Strike at Holden College, and Equal Rights for Disabled Students at North Adams University. These spaces were described by participants as some of the most meaningful opportunities for students to indirectly prepare themselves to organize.

Throughout my research process, participants argued that hands-on experience was the most effective way to learn community organizing skills. "I think you can't really learn it until you experience it," explained Daniel, "organizing is like any other craft, which is that doing it is really how you learn." Unlike other preparatory spaces, student organizations provide an opportunity for hands-on learning. Sarah explained that she "learned so much from trial and error" as the president of WHU Students for a Green Society, and Avery, a student organizer and the president of Equal Rights for Disabled Students at North Adams University, claimed that:

> It's something I never could have pictured when I was fifteen and going into organizing for the first time. I didn't think anyone else was going to do something if I asked them to. And so now I have the confidence and some capabilities of boundary setting: when to say no, when to say yes to things, when to hand something off, when to ask for help on supporting a project. All of those things have been lessons that I learned specifically through Equal Rights for Disabled Students because I couldn't have learned them anywhere else.

Quotes like these indicate that not only are student organizations giving students the hands-on organizing opportunities they need to hone their skills but also that students feel that these opportunities are not available elsewhere on campus. "A lot of the things I know about how to change things, I learned at Holden College," argued Anthony, "but not in my classes." Across the

board, students, organizers, and professors described student-led organizations as some of the best means of preparation for the community organizing profession. "There is learning about organizing going on through the work of student activists [that is] not supported formally by courses," explained Christopher, a professor at Eastham State University, "historically, undergraduate activism is its own catalyst for learning about organizing." Altogether, this indicates that meaningful learning can and does occur indirectly through experiential and practical means made possible by student organizers and organizations at campuses across the country. And while these movements are certainly not unique to colleges and universities, several participants, including Sarah, Rachel, and Daniel, described themselves as not being engaged in social justice issues before attending college. Instead, all three participants credit higher education with exposing them to organizing because they first got involved in the field via student organizations. As such, we can conclude that indirect preparation in informal learning spaces does very much exist on U.S. college and university campuses and that it is teaching students some of the skills, qualities, and interests necessary for successful community organizing.

That said, like direct preparation in informal learning spaces, some organizers expressed dissatisfaction and anger over the level of support that they felt their college or university gives students organizations. As Anthony explained:

> Holden College's been an active participant in all of it, but not, I think, a voluntary participant just in the sense that they're always the subject of the organizing. So I guess it wouldn't be possible if Holden wasn't there in some way, but that's not to say that Holden's actively telling me how to organize a tuition strike or something like that. So it's not supportive in that regard.

In other words, Anthony claimed that his administration's support for community organizing education can vary depending on whether or not Holden College agrees with students' intentions

and goals. While somewhat understandable, this illustrates how administrations can resist certain aspects of critical pedagogy, thereby illustrating how U.S. colleges and universities can, via various parties, be both oppressor and a means to resist oppression. I will expand on this more in Chapter 6.

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Altogether, the described experiences of educators, student organizers, and community organizers suggest that some U.S. colleges and universities provide meaningful, if somewhat rare, opportunities for direct and indirect preparation across formal and informal learning spaces. Whether as part of an explicit community organizing class or as a leader of a student protest, students are learning how to question, collaborate, and resist. However, despite this evidence, community organizers routinely argue that their college or university did not prepare them to enter the community organizing profession in an important cognitive process called university/organizer preparation dissonance.

Chapter 6: University/Organizer Preparation Dissonance

"By and large, the academic world is tolerant. But it tends towards passivity, and tolerance and passivity are a deadly combination. Together they allow us to tolerate the intolerable, to ignore the power of anger in works of love; for if you lessen your anger at the structures of power you lower your love for the victims of power."

- William Sloane Coffin, The Heart is a Little to the Left

The evidence laid out in Chapter 5 illustrates that U.S. colleges and universities do cultivate formal and informal learning spaces that directly and indirectly prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession. However, these spaces and styles vary in terms of their availability and the level of administrational support they receive at the colleges and universities my participants attend(ed). This greatly informs our research question: **To what extent, if any, are U.S. colleges and universities cultivating formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?**

However, while collecting my data, I noticed a crucial phenomenon. Even though student organizers and community organizers described college and university experiences that taught the skills, values, or ways of thinking needed to organize effectively, some participants still expressed skepticism or denied that their school prepared them to become community organizers. In other words, despite their own evidence, organizers were hesitant or unwilling to credit their institutions with preparation. I term this phenomenon university/organizer preparation dissonance.

University/organizer preparation dissonance describes instances in which the direct and/or indirect preparation experienced at a college or university is not credited as preparatory by an organizer who attended that college or university. For example, it is when a participant

describes learning community organizing-relevant skills in a college class but then argues that college classes do not prepare students to organize. These statements contradict.

There are two possible causes for university/organizer preparation dissonance based on my research: 1) the participant *witnessed* harm being perpetrated by one or more individuals or institutions at their college or university, and/or 2) the participant *experienced* harm perpetrated by one or more individuals or institutions at their college or university. Both experiences involve a party in higher education acting as an oppressor. This is harmful and contradicts the critical pedagogy at the heart of community organizing education which calls for education to be a means to resist oppression. As a result, participants in my study struggled to reconcile the two truths before them (i.e., higher education can both prevent and create harm), thereby producing cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive dissonance refers to a discrepancy between cognitions and the subsequent psychological discomfort of that discrepancy (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019). In the case of university/organizer preparation dissonance, a form of cognitive dissonance, the discrepancy is between higher education as an oppressor and a means to resist oppression. It can be challenging to accept both attributes as true, given their inherent contradiction. As a result, individuals react to this discrepancy by attempting to reduce it. As authors, Eddie Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills summarized: "The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase the dissonance" (Harmon-Jones and Mills, 2019, p. 3). In other words, an individual might give less credit to the direct and indirect preparation they experienced at college or university because those experiences contradict the genuine instances of harm that participant might have experienced while at the same institution. This is university/organizer preparation dissonance.

Organizers who have witnessed or experienced harm perpetrated by one or more individuals or institutions at their college or university are less willing to extend preparation credit to that college or university.

Ultimately, university/organizer preparation dissonance should be understood as a significant growing pain of critical pedagogy within U.S. higher education systems. It is a reaction from students who are learning to recognize and resist oppression toward the oppression still being cultivated by some individuals and institutions. In some ways, this should be viewed as a positive; organizers and students are expressing criticism of the power systems around them and encouraging these systems to do better. But the fact remains that university/organizer preparation dissonance is the result of preparation contradicting harm. And no one should be harmed by parties at their college or university.

In the following chapter, I will provide evidence of university/organizer preparation dissonance, further explain the phenomenon's harmful causes, and caution academia against perpetuating its consequences.

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"Nope is the short answer." This was how Daniel (he/him), a community organizer in Downstate New York, answered my question of whether or not his college classes had prepared him to become a community organizer. However, earlier in his interview Daniel had argued that "a sociology of education class I took… had really big impacts on me. And yeah, I was kind of radicalized through a combination of the circumstances of how I grew up and my college classes." This discrepancy between what Daniel credits as impactful and describes as impactful is a prime example of university/organizer preparation dissonance. Daniel argues that his classes did not prepare him to become a community organizer, but his own story suggests that they were influential in his journey to organizing. He continued:

> Holden College was really good for me to be radicalized in my understanding of the problems of the world and it sort of got me to some kind of strong, very abstract understanding of oppression and the way the world works. But I think, if anything, it sort of negatively develops you in how you think about what you do and how you change the world.

This extension and withdrawal of credit was prevalent throughout my interviews with student organizers and community organizers. In several cases, including Daniel's, participants went so far as to claim that higher education is actively detrimental to the community organizing profession despite simultaneously describing instances in their college or university experience that had meaningfully impacted their organizing. This tells us that participants are rejecting their own evidence in a process that will reflect the reaction to reduce discrepancy that Harmon-Jones and Mills described. Both Carlos (he/him), a community organizer in Central Massachusetts, and Avery (they/them), a student organizer in D.C., expressed similar experiences to Daniel. When I asked Carlos whether or not he was taught community organizing skills while at college, he responded:

> No. And it's so interesting because I will never say to anyone, 'Don't go to college.' I will never say to anyone, 'Don't finish your school.'... But to this day, I do not believe that my institution gave me the foundation I needed to do what I was doing. … I won't ever disparage college, and I won't ever say to someone that they shouldn't go to school, but schools don't teach people to be community integrated.

In other words, Carlos is arguing that North Adams University does not prepare students to be community organizers because it does not teach them to be "community integrated." This may be true, but we know from Avery's experience at North Adams that they described learning preparatory lessons as part of Equal Rights for Disabled Students. In fact, they stated that "I couldn't have learned [these lessons] anywhere else." All of this begs the question of why organizers are making the broad assertion that colleges and universities do not prepare students to organize when the experiences outlined by themselves indicate that these spaces do exist.

My research suggests that participants have very real reasons. Specifically, student organizers and community organizers are hesitant to describe their higher education experiences as preparatory because they have witnessed or experienced professors, administrators, or students at their colleges and universities perpetuating harm. Unable to reconcile their institution as both an oppressor and a means to resist oppression, they then assign credit in an effort to reduce this discrepancy.

Witnessed Harm

The first factor influencing whether participants extend preparation credit to colleges and universities is whether or not those participants witnessed harm being perpetrated by one or more individuals at their institutions. By harm, I am referring to instances similar to those identified in Chapter 3: administrators, professors, or students ignoring community or individual needs when pursuing their academic agendas, exacerbating hardship for marginalized identities, or not accounting for privilege in their policy, classrooms, language, etc. Throughout my data, participants appeared more ready to question the role of U.S. colleges and universities in preparing students to organize if they also could cite personal experiences in which they witnessed parties at their college or university be unsupportive, inaccessible, or dysfunctional at the expense of students, marginalized groups, or off-campus communities.

Across my interviews, student organizers were far more likely to criticize college and university operations than describe instances in which their schooling prepared them to organize; in fact, through the use of grounded theory, I produced 15+ codes from my data that described various offenses ranging from being unsupportive of student organizing to not allowing student feedback. Sarah (she/her), a student organizer at Willow Hill University, described her shock at realizing that the student representative on WHU's Board of Regents was not a student nor was

elected with student input. As a result, she described feeling like any meaningful change on campus "gets bogged down in bureaucracy" because it does not have someone to advocate for it. Similarly, Anthony (he/him), a student organizer at Holden College, expressed frustration at what he considered his president's unwillingness to empower Holden's student government to pass more meaningful legislation. Participants then indicated that these instances created an "us vs. them" point of view among student organizers and community organizers. "They're not here for us," explained Sarah, referring to her administration, "they're just trying to invest their money, make the most money, and protect their assets and keep the rich and powerful happy." Or, as Carlos argued: "institutions are too worried about who they'll churn out [that they] oftentimes forget to teach some of the most basic things, which is just being humble, connecting with where you came from." Here, Sarah and Carlos are making broad claims based on their perceptions of administrator intentions and their feelings as a student at that institution. This kind of inaccessibility and distrust can be described as harmful because it does not attempt to dismantle systems of oppression and hinders important work. In the case of Sarah, she described the inaccessibility of her administration as the primary reason that environmental policy changes at Willow Hill University remain sidelined.

For all of these reasons, it is somewhat understandable that student organizers and community organizers might be hesitant to extend preparatory credit to their colleges and universities. If they witness their values or organizing efforts being ignored or contradicted by administrative action, they are less willing to credit these same institutions with teaching them to organize.

Some professors acknowledge this problematic disconnect between their students and administrations and call on colleges and universities to address it in order to offer meaningful

education indicative of critical pedagogy. To this end, some professor participants suggested

changes to how institutions teach social change. Phoebe (she/her), a professor at Lenox

University in New York, argued that:

> I think colleges should [teach organizing], but I think they should grapple with their role as a source of power and privilege. There is a way you could [teach organizing] absent of any kind of community relationships… At worst, it's just extractive, exploitative, and harmful, but at best, it would just be kind of shallow and somewhat disconnected.

Phoebe argues that colleges and universities can teach organizing in a way that exacerbates

distrust and oppression. It is not as simple as making sure that a relevant class exists; instead,

that class, and particularly its leading educators, must be conscious of their power and responsive

to the needs of students, organizers, and any community members which whom they might

partner. If achieved, this would be an enviable application of critical pedagogy within higher

education. Unfortunately, as Anne (she/her), a professor at North Adams University, argued:

"[maybe] there are some universities that are not interested in reproducing their own institutional

power… but I don't know them." In other words, for now, Anne is of the opinion that colleges

and universities are continuing to perpetuate harm by maintaining systems of power. And as

students recognize this, they appear less willing to describe their college or university as

preparatory even if it did prepare them.

Experienced Harm

The second factor in creating university/organizer preparation dissonance is the harm

participants experience that is perpetrated by individuals or institutions within a U.S. college or

university. Two of my three participants who definitively stated that their college or university

had not prepared them to organize, Avery and Carlos, were also the only two participants who

detailed significant personal hardship while at university. As previously noted, Avery, a student

organizer at North Adams University, is the president of Equal Rights for Disabled Students. In Avery's words, their university experience "has literally been so frustrating, and disappointing, and stressful, and annoying" because of the lack of support they have received as an immuno-compromised student during the COVID-19 pandemic. "It's just tough," Avery explained, "it hurts to be told by the university that what you want, what is the right answer, isn't going to happen." In this case, Avery is referring to their campaign to require testing for North Adams students in the midst of the Omicron surge in February 2022, which they described as driving them and their disabled friends into isolation out of fear. They reflected:

> What do I have to do to make [the administration] care? And the answer is probably nothing. There's probably nothing I can do to convince them, which is a terrible thing to have to say to yourself. When you have been doing work like this for four years, and this is your life, this is your family, this is your community, this is my entire friend group, my whole life. And there's just nothing I can do. There's nothing more that I can, I can't show, I can't explain to the university why they should care about people. … I can say as much as I want, and I can advocate to as many people as I want, but they'll only care if they want to care. And that's been a really tough lesson because there are just some people who are just bad people.

Given this experience, it is understandable that Avery was the only student organizer I interviewed who did not give any credit to their institution for cultivating direct preparation or formal learning spaces that prepared them to enter the community organizing profession. Similarly, Carlos was the only community organizer who did not give his university any credit and the only one to detail personal hardship while at school. Carlos was a first-generation college student from Massachusetts who attended North Adams University but did not graduate due to financial hardship. "I remember how hard it was," Carlos explained:

> It was emotionally tolling. It was physically exhausting because I had to figure it out [alone]. And I knew I wasn't the only one. When I was comparing stories, it was always… Black and brown people who I constantly was able to resonate with. [Meanwhile,] I had white counterparts that were strolling up in their BMW.

As a result, Carlos argued that:

> I do not believe that my institution gave me the foundation needed to do what I was doing. It was the days that we were sleeping in the living room with the oven on to heat our apartment. It was the volunteering at a food bank that would give me a box when I was going home. It was my ability to be a translator on election day. Those were the moments that built a foundation to being an organizer.

Ultimately, Carlos used his personal experiences as an impetus for his organizing and founded a workers' rights campaign in D.C. to alleviate the hardships impacting low-income students of color entering the workforce. Both Avery and Carlos' experiences highlight how colleges and universities offer opportunities for radicalization to otherwise privileged students, like Daniel, but they can perpetuate harm toward identities already experiencing hardship. Because American higher education institutions do not offer validation and equitable support for all students and even can perpetuate harm by making students feel unheard or unsupported, it is understandable that those same students remain highly skeptical of their preparatory impact.

Now, this is not to say that individuals do not learn from those that hurt us. But, for the most part, my research framed preparation as a positive. As such, some participants who had experienced harm at their college or university were being asked to describe both positive and negative experiences in their interviews. These participants were the same individuals who then expressed the greatest university/organizer preparation dissonance – resistance to extending preparatory credit to an aspect of their institution (professors, students, administrators, etc.) despite self-evidenced examples of preparation.

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Ultimately, it is clear that work is needed if U.S. colleges and universities are to fully achieve the goals of critical pedagogy and create spaces that directly and indirectly prepare *all* students to organize regardless of background or identity and without the threat of harm. As Carlos argued:

> I think the reality is that the roots of institutions need to change before a course is implemented ... Or institutions need to embrace activists. They need to embrace community organizers. They have to embrace when they're wrong. And oftentimes, institutions will bend over backward before saying that they are wrong. And so until that is fixed, a course does nothing.

In this quote, Carlos generously extends the possibility that U.S. colleges and universities *could* become recognized means for students to directly prepare to enter the community organizing profession in formal and informal learning spaces. However, until this ideal of critical pedagogy can be reached, these spaces, while perhaps not "nothing," will be so much less than they could be. For this reason, it is paramount that college and university students, professors, staff, and administrators consider how university/organizer preparation dissonance might be being created at their institution. By tracing this, we can root out instances of harm that continue to undercut the realization of critical pedagogy and community organizing preparation in higher education.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This thesis began with me explaining why I want to find an answer to the question: **To what extent, if any, do U.S. colleges and universities cultivate formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession?** Behind this research question is the same curiosity that drove me to carry a thick red notebook with me throughout the summer of 2018. I still want to know how and where community leaders learn to manipulate power and make change. Today, that red notebook sits, nearly full, on my desk next to my journal of thesis notes.

However, while my question: whether or not aspiring community organizers can learn the skills and qualities they need to become successful organizers at U.S. colleges and universities, remains similar to four years ago, the motivations behind my question have not. When I arrived at Vassar College, I was looking for an answer because I wanted to know what *I* needed to do to make change. Today, I am looking for an answer because I understand what that answer could mean for U.S. higher education and the vision of critical pedagogy. In the following concluding chapter, I will summarize my findings and their ramifications in a final attempt to offer one.

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As I have already stated, education has the never fully realized potential to be humanity's best means of recognizing and resisting oppression. If this is true, then it is *essential* that our nation's colleges and universities be able and interested in producing critical, representative, and effective community organizers. By asking whether or not U.S. colleges and universities are currently cultivating spaces that prepare their students to organize, this thesis outlines the ways that U.S. higher education is succeeding and failing to implement critical pedagogy and

consistently produce students that can recognize and resist oppression in their classrooms, communities, and countries. As I have explained many times already, this is a worthy goal.

My research shows that some U.S. colleges and universities do cultivate instances of direct and indirect preparation in formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession. However, some student organizers and community organizers remain hesitant to extend preparation credit to their colleges and universities due to witnessed or experienced harm in a process I term university/organizer preparation dissonance. The first finding clearly answers my research question; the second, complicates it.

First, as evidenced in Chapter 5, direct and indirect preparation can and does exist in formal and informal learning spaces at U.S. colleges and universities. However, this conclusion is impacted by three additional findings: 1) the extent of preparation varies widely by institution, 2) direct preparation is less common and accessible than indirect preparation, and 3) preparation is not always supported by all parties at a college or university. For these reasons, and in the name of critical pedagogy, college and university professors, students, and administrators can and should do more to support the cultivation of direct and indirect preparation in formal and informal learning spaces in higher education.

Second, as evidenced in Chapter 6, university/organizer preparation dissonance reflects the complicated role of higher education as both an oppressor and a means to resist oppression. It illustrates that students are learning to recognize and resist oppression within their immediate environments. This awareness is valuable as it is the actualization of critical pedagogy. However, in many cases, this awareness is also a reaction to harm instead of merely learning. That harm then produces cognitive dissonance when put in comparison to positive instances of preparation. To reduce this dissonance, participants inaccurately credit their institutions for that preparation.

In some regards, this is not a bad thing. Administrators, professors, and peers should be criticized when they perpetuate harm, and communities are right to ask for greater accountability before expanding partnerships with oppressive institutions. However, the problem (beyond the harm already being created) arises from the fact that in some cases university/organizer preparation dissonance caused my participants to not only conclude against their own self-provided evidence that colleges and universities *do not* prepare students to enter the community organizing profession, but that they *should not try*. If we are to realize Paulo' Freire's vision of critical pedagogy and produce an education system that can teach its students how to recognize and resist oppression, we cannot give up on our institutions of higher learning. Instead, we must highlight the discrepancy created by higher education institutions acting as both an oppressor and a means to resist oppression. We should elevate good work and demand that harm be addressed. To not do so would be to ignore the evidence of pain and growth being perpetrated and pursued on college and university campuses.

Ultimately, I hope that academics understand from my work that academia's community organizing preparation exists in a shade of grey. In some cases, it is brilliant. In others, it is not. Regardless, we have work to do.

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There are many ways that an individual can learn to community organize. Indeed, there should be because there are many kinds of communities. However, as my research indicates, U.S. colleges and universities can be one place where an aspiring organizer learns some of the skills and qualities they need to enter the community organizing profession. For this reason, higher education institutions should be recognized, supported, and, when necessary, critiqued in their pursuit of effective community organizing preparation. Doing so will make for better critical pedagogues and, ultimately, better organizers.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Emails

Community Organizer Recruitment Email

Dear *[potential Subject Name]*,

My name is Chelsea Sheldon, and I am a Graduating Senior at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. I am conducting a research study on the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities prepare their students, if at all, to become community organizers.

Given your role as a community organizer, I am emailing to ask if you'd be willing to participate in my study. Participation would include a 45-minute to 60-minute virtual interview. The interview would be confidential, and, should your information be used, it would be reported anonymously with no identifying information connected to you. **If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email, and I will be in touch to schedule a time that works for us and any further details on the interview.**

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me and/or my faculty sponsor, whose contact information is below.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Chelsea Sheldon
(she/her)
Educational Studies Major
Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Box 3868
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: csheldon@vassar.edu
Phone: 774-364-0245

Faculty Sponsor:
Jaime L. Del Razo, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Education
Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Box 132

Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: jdelrazo@vassar.edu
Office: 845-437-7358
Fax: 845-437-7359

Student Organizer Recruitment Email

Dear *[potential Subject Name]*,

My name is Chelsea Sheldon, and I am a Graduating Senior at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. I am conducting a research study on the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities prepare their students, if at all, to become community organizers.

Given your role as a member of *[student organization]* at *[college or university]* and your referral by [referred person], I am emailing to ask if you'd be willing to participate in my study. Participation would include a 45-minute to 60-minute virtual interview. The interview would be confidential, and should your information be used, it would be reported anonymously with no identifying information connected to you. **If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email, and I will be in touch to schedule a time that works for us and any further details on the interview.**

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me and/or my faculty sponsor, whose contact information is below.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Chelsea Sheldon
(she/her)
Educational Studies Major
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124 Raymond Avenue
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Phone: 774-364-0245

Faculty Sponsor:
Jaime L. Del Razo, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Education
Vassar College

124 Raymond Avenue
Box 132
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: jdelrazo@vassar.edu
Office: 845-437-7358
Fax: 845-437-7359

Educator Recruitment Email

Dear *[potential Subject Name]*,

My name is Chelsea Sheldon, and I am a Graduating Senior at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York. I am conducting a research study on the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities prepare their students, if at all, to become community organizers.

Given your role as a professor of *[class name]* at *[college or university]*, I am emailing to ask if you'd be willing to participate in my study. Participation would include a 45-minute to 60-minute virtual interview. The interview would be confidential, and should your information be used, it would be reported anonymously with no identifying information connected to you. **If you are willing to participate, please respond to this email, and I will be in touch to schedule a time that works for us and offer further details.**

If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me and/or my faculty sponsor, whose contact information is below.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Chelsea Sheldon
(she/her)
Educational Studies Major
Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
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Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: csheldon@vassar.edu
Phone: 774-364-0245

Faculty Sponsor:
Jaime L. Del Razo, Ph.D.
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Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Box 132
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: jdelrazo@vassar.edu
Office: 845-437-7358
Fax: 845-437-7359

Appendix B: Consent Forms

Community Organizer and Student Organizer Consent Form

VASSAR COLLEGE
Senior Thesis in Educational Studies, 2021-2022
Consent Form: Interviews

Primary Investigator & Contact Information:
Chelsea J. Sheldon
Senior '22 at Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Box 3868
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: csheldon@vassar.edu
Phone: 774-364-0245

Faculty Sponsor:
Jaime Del Razo, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education
Email: jdelrazo@vassar.edu
Phone: 845-437-7358

Project Title:
Where We Learn to Organize: Considering How/If U.S. Colleges and Universities Educate
Community Organizers

I acknowledge that I was informed by Chelsea J. Sheldon of Vassar College of a research project
having to do with the following: the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities cultivate
formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community
organizing profession. This project will use interview analysis and critical discourse analysis of
curricular materials to consider the influence of higher education in this field.

This interview will include about 9 questions that the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon, will ask
and that I may answer if I so choose. The interview should last about 50 minutes. I agree to
permit the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon, to obtain, use and disclose the information provided as
described below.

Conditions and Stipulations

- I understand that all information is confidential and that I will not be personally identified
  in any reports. I agree to participate in this interview for research purposes and that the

data derived from this confidential interview may be available for the general public anonymously through the use of pseudonyms for all public presentations, journals or newspaper articles, and/or books.

- I understand that my participation in this research interview is totally voluntary and that declining to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits I would otherwise have with the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon. Choosing not to participate will not affect any beneficial opportunities in any way. If I choose, I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that if I choose to participate, that I may decline to answer any question that I am not comfortable answering and/or end the interview at any time.

- **Potential Risks:** The risks will be minimal but may include feeling some discomfort with some of the questions asked, which you may choose to skip.

- **Potential Benefits:** You may not benefit directly from your participation, but your voice will be heard, and your opinion will help the researcher (and possibly other researchers) better understand what people think about how/if U.S. colleges and universities prepare students to enter the community organizing profession.

I am aware, to the extent specified above, of the nature of my participation in this project and the possible risks involved or arising from it. I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in the project. (You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent.)

_____
Date

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____
Signature of Participant. (If returning form electronically, please sign using the following format: e.g. "/s/ Chelsea J. Sheldon")

_____
Place: City and State

Should you have any questions and/or concerns regarding this consent form and/or interview, you may contact the principal investigator and/or the faculty sponsor at the contact information above.

Educator Consent Form

VASSAR COLLEGE
Senior Thesis in Educational Studies, 2021-2022
Consent Form: Interviews

Primary Investigator & Contact Information:
Chelsea J. Sheldon
Senior '22 at Vassar College
124 Raymond Avenue
Box 3868
Poughkeepsie, NY 12604
Email: csheldon@vassar.edu
Phone: 774-364-0245

Faculty Sponsor:
Jaime Del Razo, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education
Email: jdelrazo@vassar.edu
Phone: 845-437-7358

Project Title:
Where We Learn to Organize: Considering How/If U.S. Colleges and Universities Educate Community Organizers

I acknowledge that I was informed by Chelsea J. Sheldon of Vassar College of a research project having to do with the following: the extent to which U.S. colleges and universities cultivate formal and informal learning spaces that prepare their students to enter the community organizing profession. This project will use interview analysis and critical discourse analysis of curricular materials to consider the influence of higher education in this field.

This interview will include about 9 questions that the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon, will ask and that I may answer if I so choose. The interview should last about 50 minutes. I agree to permit the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon, to obtain, use and disclose the information provided as described below.

Conditions and Stipulations

- I understand that all information is confidential and that I will not be personally identified in any reports. I agree to participate in this interview for research purposes and that the data derived from this confidential interview may be available for the general public

anonymously through the use of pseudonyms for all public presentations, journals or newspaper articles, and/or books.

- I understand that my participation in this research interview is totally voluntary and that declining to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits I would otherwise have with the researcher, Chelsea J. Sheldon. Choosing not to participate will not affect any beneficial opportunities in any way. If I choose, I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that if I choose to participate, that I may decline to answer any question that I am not comfortable answering and/or end the interview at any time.

- **Potential Risks:** The risks will be minimal but may include feeling some discomfort with some of the questions asked, which you may choose to skip.

- **Potential Benefits:** You may not benefit directly from your participation, but your voice will be heard, and your opinion will help the researcher (and possibly other researchers) better understand what people think about how/if U.S. colleges and universities prepare students to enter the community organizing profession.

I am aware, to the extent specified above, of the nature of my participation in this project and the possible risks involved or arising from it. I understand that I may withdraw my participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty of any kind. I hereby agree to participate in the project. (You must be at least 18 years of age to give your consent.)

_____

Date

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Signature of Participant. (If returning form electronically, please sign using the following format: e.g. "/s/ Chelsea J. Sheldon")

_____

Place: City and State

Should you have any questions and/or concerns regarding this consent form and/or interview, you may contact the principal investigator and/or the faculty sponsor at the contact information above.

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Community Organizer Interview Protocol

Introduction:

1. **Introduce yourself** - Briefly summarize who you are, your context, and why you are doing this work.

2. **Introduce research project** - Briefly introduce your thesis.

3. **Review Consent Form(s)** - Go over Consent Forms. Give your subject as much time as necessary to read and answer all questions your subject may have.

4. **Confidentiality Reminder** - Remind the participant that all information/recording will be strictly confidential and that they have the option to not answer any question and/or end the interview at any time.

5. **Review** - Briefly review the structure of the interview (number of questions, timing, etc.).

6. **Questions, Comments, or Concerns?**

7. **Ask for Permission to Record** - Confirm that participants are comfortable being audio recorded.

Begin recording and begin the interview.

Interview Questions: Community Organizer

1. Tell me a bit about yourself.

2. How do you define community organizing?

3. How did you become a community organizer?

4. What qualities or skills do you think are necessary to be a successful community organizer?

5. Tell me about your college/university experience.

6. Did you learn and/or use the qualities or skills you identified earlier while at college/university, and if so, where?
    a. Probe: Classroom? Student Org? Community Org? Books?

7. Did your college/university experience prepare you to enter the community organizing profession? Why or why not?

8. What advice would you give to a college/university student that wants to become a professional community organizer?

9. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add or any questions you might have about this interview or how this process was for you? Please feel free to speak your mind.

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate your participation in this study.

Student Organizer Interview Protocol

Introduction:

1. **Introduce yourself** - Briefly summarize who you are, your context, and why you are doing this work.

2. **Introduce research project** - Briefly introduce your thesis.

3. **Review Consent Form(s)** - Go over Consent Forms. Give your subject as much time as necessary to read and answer all questions your subject may have.

4. **Confidentiality Reminder** - Remind the participant that all information/recording will be strictly confidential and that they have the option to not answer any question and/or end the interview at any time.

5. **Review** - Briefly review the structure of the interview (number of questions, timing, etc.).

6. **Questions, Comments, or Concerns?**

7. **Ask for Permission to Record** - Confirm that participants are comfortable being audio recorded.

Begin recording and begin the interview.

Interview Questions: Student Organizer

1. Tell me a bit about yourself.

2. Tell me about your college/university experience thus far.

3. How do you define organizing? i.e., student organizing, community organizing, etc.

4. What skills or qualities do you think are necessary to be a successful organizer?

5. I reached out to you because I know you are a member of *[Organization or Campaign]* at *[College/University X]*. Could you tell me a bit about it?

6. What, if anything, have you learned about organizing by being part of *[Organization/Campaign]*?

7. Have other organizing experiences and/or individuals at *[College/University X]*, either in the classroom or out, have taught you organizing skills?
   a. Probe: This can include your own learning via books, films, videos, talks, events, etc.

8. Do you feel like your work with *[Organization/Campaign]* is supported by *[College/University X]*? Why or why not?

9. Do you feel like what you have learned while part of *[Organization/Campaign]* is applicable outside of *[College/University X]*?

10. What are your plans after college/university?

11. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add or any questions you might have about this interview or how this process was for you? Please feel free to speak your mind.

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate your participation in this study.

Educator Interview Protocol

Introduction:

1. **Introduce yourself** - Briefly summarize who you are, your context, and why you are doing this work.

2. **Introduce research project** - Briefly introduce your thesis.

3. **Review Consent Form(s)** - Go over Consent Forms. Give your subject as much time as necessary to read and answer all questions your subject may have.

4. **Confidentiality Reminder** - Remind the participant that all information/recording will be strictly confidential and that they have the option to not answer any question and/or end the interview at any time.

5. **Review** - Briefly review the structure of the interview (number of questions, timing, etc.).

6. **Questions, Comments, or Concerns?**

7. **Ask for Permission to Record** - Confirm that participants are comfortable being audio recorded.

Begin recording and begin the interview.

Interview Questions: Educator

1. Tell me a bit about yourself.

2. How do you define community organizing?

3. What qualities or skills do you think are necessary to be a successful community organizer?

4. Do you think that any of your classes at *[College/ University X]* prepare students to enter the community organizing profession and, if so, can you tell me about them?
    a. If yes, would you be willing to share any curricular materials with me after this interview?

5. Are you aware of any other opportunities at *[College/University X]* for your students to learn about community organizing?

6. Do you think colleges and universities should play a role in preparing students to become community organizers if that is a career they wish to pursue?
    a. Probe: If not, why not?

7. If yes, what might this look like at *[College/University X]*?

8. If you could teach any class related to community organizing, other than the ones that you currently teach, what would you like to teach and why?

9. That was my last question. Is there anything you would like to add or any questions you might have about this interview or how this process was for you? Please feel free to speak your mind.

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate your participation in this study.

Appendix D: Skill/Quality Codes and Definitions

Organizer Skill Codes

Adaptable - The skill of changing tactics/strategy, etc., to meet with needs of the moment or movement; flexibility.

Asks questions - The skill of acknowledging and asking productive questions (often connected to an awareness that you don't have all the knowledge).

Attention to detail - The skill of being organized and able to ensure quality.

Canvassing - References to the organizing/electoral skill of canvassing (i.e., doorknocking).

Coalition building - The skill of partnering with relatively like-minded individuals, groups, institutions, etc., in the pursuit of a shared goal.

Collaboration -Being able to work effectively as a member of a team.

Community assessment - The skill of getting to know a community as an outsider to the extent that you can organize it successfully.

Community mapping - Reference to the skill of mapping factors on a geography (ex. ArcGIS).

Conflict navigation - References to organizers needing to be willing to start/navigate conflict to achieve their goal.

Critical thinking - References to critical thinking skills; the ability to deduce and grapple with multi-layered arguments, ideas, etc.

Decisive - The skill of being able to make decisions at key moments

Delegation - The skill of handing off work successfully to peers/team members.

Facilitation - The skill of leading meetings, groups, etc.

Fundraising - The skill of raising money for a campaign or cause.

Good listener - The skill of being able to listen attentively and productively (often without a need to insert oneself into the discussion).

Instructive - The skill of teaching others to organize as a current organizer (not professors).

One-on-ones - References to the skill of relational meetings between two individuals with the purpose of gaining or sharing power.

Organization creation - The skill of building an organization out of a community organizing effort.

Persuasive - References to persuasion and similar tactical conversation with the goal of achieving a result/convincing your audience.

Phonebanking - The skill of calling up community members, constituents, etc., to talk or persuade them to take an action.

Power analysis - The skill of identifying and analyzing systems of power and relationships between individuals in the hopes of influencing them.

Power building - The skill of earning power for your community, cause, etc.

Productive - The idea that organizers have to be making progress to be successful; need wins. The ability to produce these results.

Public speaking - The skill of being a confident and/or capable speaker in front of a group or crowd.

Recruitment - References to the skill of recruiting others to join or support a cause or campaign.

Relationship building - The skill of developing or deepening connections with individuals/communities partially for the purpose of accessing or organizing their power.

Self-reflection - The skill of recognizing your own relationship to or within a given community; reflecting on privilege/experience.

Strategy development - The skill of developing or using appropriate strategy to achieve your objective.

Storytelling - The skill of being able to convey a message through stories

Team building - References to building productive and complementary leadership teams.

Organizer Quality Codes

Aware of oppression - An acknowledgment that oppression exists along race, gender, class, etc., lines through personal experience or observation.

Caring - References to acts and expressions of care or love.

Committed to the long-term - The quality of being dedicated to a movement/campaign for the long haul (until the end).

Committed to values - The quality of being committed to a set of personal or cultural values.

Community-based - Centering community members/voices in community organizing efforts; ensuring those affected take the lead.

Courageous - The quality of being brave, courageous, etc., in the face of challenge or resistance.

Curious - The quality of being interested in other experiences, skillsets, etc.

Energetic - The quality of having a can-do attitude that can maintain itself/its energy level.

Good - The quality of being a morally good/kind person.

Hopeful - References to an unshakeable positive belief in a movement, issue, individual, cause, etc.

Humble - The quality of being humble or modest.

Instinctive - References to having good/accurate gut instinct; quick decision-making.

Integrity - The quality of being genuine in your actions

Open-minded - The quality of approaching a community with the awareness that you don't know everything (even if you are a member of that community); a willingness to learn.

Passionate - The quality of putting your heart into the work of community organizing; a love for the work.

Personable - The quality of being friendly, open, approachable, etc.; being someone a community is willing to talk to.

Place-based - References to geographical impacts and influences from place and space (particularly in connection to indigenous theories).

Practical - Being able to accurately develop an understanding of what can or should be done to advance work; an awareness of what is possible.

Relatable - References to community organizers needing to be a "normal" person that is relatable to the community they are a part of.

Resilient - References to resilience; the ability to continue organizing when times are tough.

Respectful - References to being respectful; feeling or showing deference.

Skeptical - The quality of being healthily skeptical of institutions and systems, often based on prior negative experiences.

Thoughtful - References to being conscious of the impact of your own actions.

Trustworthy - the quality of having earned trust, and specifically community trust.

Visionary - The quality of having an imagined goal for the future and being able to inspire/engage others with that goal.

Willing to work within institutions - References to a willingness to organize within existing social institutions, including schools, government, etc., to achieve a goal.

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