College Student Environmental Activism:
How Experiences and Identities Influence Environmental Activism Approaches

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Abstract

College student environmental activism is one way students civically engage in addressing social issues. This study explores the environmental activism of twelve college students and how their experiences outside of college and in college influenced their activism. In addition, how students’ identities influenced their approach to activism was considered. Each participant approached environmental activism in their own unique way. The way in which students engaged with environmental activism was shaped by their childhood experiences, their worldview, and experiences in College both in and out of the classroom. The identities of participants influenced how they were involved and why they were involved in the current social movement.

Students conceptualized the environmental movement and their role in it in different ways. The current movement focused less on saving wilderness and more on addressing climate change and related social issues. The activities participants engaged in fell on a continuum from volunteerism to advocating for social change. Students’ environmental activism was supported by family, peers, K-12 education, and spending time in nature as children. In college, students emphasized the importance of peer networks, interactions with faculty members, and experiences in classes.

Students’ identities intersected in unique ways and influenced why they were involved in and how they approached environmental activism. Students discussed the way in which their identities of gender, race, and class shaped their involvement. In addition, some students viewed their sexuality, spirituality, and being a young person as key influencers. Students said their biographic availability enabled them to be involved in
environmental activism. Student environmental activists were concerned about oppression and privilege related to how the environmental movement addresses social change.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Environmental issues are increasingly at the forefront of the public’s social agenda as more is understood about the impact these issues have in communities around the globe (Dumanoski, 2011). Environmental activists participate in activities and behaviors in order to address environmental issues and work towards saving the planet. Environmental activists are members of communities and participate in many different types of environmental behaviors. The roles environmental activists assume vary in the focus of their engagement with the environment and how they participate. Environmental activists have been called preservationists, conservationists, hippies, ecofeminists, environmental justice advocates, or simply environmental activists. The activities that environmental activists participate in today vary in scope and are grounded historically in the complexity of the environmental movement.

Colleges and universities provide a unique environment for students to engage in pro-social behavior. Pro-social behavior is defined as activities people participate in that strive to address social issues. Institutions are inherently charged to address social issues while educating students to be engaged citizens. College students participate in pro-social behaviors and activities that focus on the environment yet a paucity of research exists to describe the experiences of college environmental activists. Exploring the experiences of student environmental activists could help institutions better understand what pro-social actions students participate in related to the environment and how students describe their environmental activism. By obtaining an understanding of pro-social actions in which students participate, institutions can gain insight on how to prepare students to engage
with and address environmental issues that are increasingly impacting the world in which we live.

In particular, the research questions I explored in this study were:

1. In what ways do students engage in environmental activism grounded in charity, project, and social change paradigms?
2. How do students’ worldviews and experiences outside of college influence their approaches to environmental activism?
3. How do students’ experiences in college influence their engagement with environmental activism?
4. How do students’ intersecting identities influence their approaches to environmental activism?

It is important to examine the context in which environmentalism has taken place historically. Reviewing the complexity of environmental movements and how they contribute to the definition of environmental activism will provide a foundation for understanding the social and historical context in which environmental activists engage. Articulating the role of higher education in the development of student civic engagement will make the case that better understanding the experiences of student environmental activists is a critical issue for colleges and universities. Colleges and universities are charged with educating students to become engaged citizens who are prepared to address social issues, including those related to the environment.
Environmental Movements

To better understand how students engage with social issues, including environmental issues, it is important to understand what environmental activism looked like historically and how that historical context sets the stage for today’s activism. The environmental movements have been and continue to be gendered, racialized, and classed. Therefore, individual and collective identities are important to consider in these histories.

The goal of the early environmental movement was to address the pollution caused by large corporations and improve health conditions. Issues of race, ethnicity, and gender arose in the mainstream environmental movement in the late 1800s with the emergence of Jim Crow laws, continued oppression of Native Americans, and the emergence of the separate sphere doctrine. This idea of separate spheres was gendered and claimed that the woman’s sphere was the home while the man’s sphere was working outside the home. This idea, coupled with social-class disparities, created a reality where upper class women no longer worked outside the home, but lower class women continued to work outside the home due to necessity. Women in the middle and upper classes continued to justify their involvement in the environmental movement as an extension of their household duties and termed these tasks as “municipal housekeeping” (Mann, 2011, p.7).

In the late 1800s Black women’s clubs came together under the National Association of Colored Women Clubs (NACWC). The Black women’s clubs were composed primarily of members of the middle class, although they were better at
crossing class structures than the white women’s clubs. The environmental efforts of the
Black women’s clubs focused on local neighborhood campaigns including primarily
improving health and environmental conditions (Mann, 2011).

The focus of the environmental movement in the early 1900s was conservation
and preservation, which emerged as two distinct movements led primarily by upper and
middle class white men (Mann, 2011; Sonneborn, 2008; Wellock, 2007). The
conservationist movement advocated for protecting natural areas while allowing
government to regulate the use of natural resources by private entities. The focus of
preservationists was to keep nature in its original untouched form and “to protect scenery
and wildlife for their aesthetic or leisure value” (Wellock, p. 45).

Female activists in the early 1900s are not well known, but played an important
role related to improving urban pollution and subsequent health hazards. Women called
for urban clean-up efforts and were referred to as the “nation’s housekeepers” (Switzer,
2003, p. 3). In Chicago, women used the term municipal housekeeper to describe the role
they played in cleaning up the city. Women bridged class boundaries by partnering with
individuals in the working class to improve living conditions. Municipal housekeepers
focused on sanitation issues, food safety, and improving living conditions for and with
the working class. The efforts of municipal housekeepers align with the premise of what
is presently understood to be environmental justice, and some consider these activities
some of the first environmental justice-like efforts in the United States (Mann, 2011;
Unger, 2004; Wellock, 2007).
Many experts agree that the current environmental activism movement began with the arrival of Rachel Carson’s book, *Silent Spring*. This book was released in 1962 and discussed the impact pesticides have on the environment and health. In a discussion about her ecological views on CBS Reports, Carson stated, “We still talk in terms of conquest. We still haven’t become mature enough to think of ourselves as only a very tiny part of a vast and incredible universe” (Lear, 1997, p. 450). *Silent Spring* used scientific knowledge and studies to discuss the issue with pesticides and their negative impact on the environment. Carson’s book generated serious discussions about humankind’s impact on nature and the interconnectedness of ecosystems as well as the nation’s dependence on chemical pesticides (Carson, 1962; Unger, 2004). President Kennedy developed the President’s Science Advisory Committee to review issues surrounding pesticides based on the argument in Carson’s book (Wellock, 2007).

The 1960s and 1970s are best known for the emergence of grassroots efforts to address social issues and to promote protection of the environment. On college campuses in the 1960s, environmentalism became part of a counterculture that rejected consumerism and was marked by the involvement of “hippies” who called for a more natural way to live. During the same time period, “college-age activists who had fought for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam saw environmentalism as a middle-class movement” (Wellock, 2007, p. 174). White college students saw the environmental movement as a local cause and the next thing for them to participate in following the civil rights movement (Wellock).
At the University of Michigan, in March of 1970, teach-ins related to environmental issues were held. It was estimated that 15,000 students, public officials, and corporate leaders attended these events (Switzer, 2003). Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin talked about holding a nationwide teach-in with the purpose of increasing awareness for the environmental movement and developed the first Earth Day celebration held in 1970. The grassroots response to Earth Day was immense, involving 20 million people nationwide and engaging 2500 colleges in activities (Kline, 2011). This event was intended to be mainstream and was attended primarily by middle and working class individuals. Many credit Earth Day with bringing various organizations grounded in differing environmental schools of thought and focus together. “Some portray it as a breakthrough moment in environmental history that finally forced together the preservationist and urban, industrial wings of the conservation movement” (Wellock, 2007, p. 177).

In the 1980s, the environmental justice movement in the United States emerged and focused on the disparate effect of environmental issues and policy decisions on marginalized communities, which included low-income working class individuals, women, and people of color (Switzer, 2003). The local grassroots origin of the environmental justice movement makes it difficult to pin-point one event or local community where environmental justice began. In fact, some scholars believe the environmental justice activities began prior to the 1980s with the efforts of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union in the 1960s, while others look at the Love Canal event from 1978 as the starting point. Other scholars credit the Warren County protests in
North Carolina as beginning the movement in 1982 when the term “environmental racism” emerged (Allen, Daro, & Holland, 2007; Bullard & Johnson, 2000; Cole & Foster, 2001). The early effort of women and municipal housekeepers to improve sanitation and water quality for working class individuals in the early 1900s is cited as some of the early environmental justice activities (Unger, 2004). Some Native American scholars argue that the environmental justice struggles began concomitantly with the European invasion of the North American continent over 500 years ago (Unger).

Despite the contested beginning of the environmental justice movement, the 1980s brought a movement that was more pervasive than in the previous decades and focused on “anti-toxics and civil rights activism in the US” and created “one of the most significant developments in contemporary environmentalism” (Walker, 2012, p. 1). Leaders of the environmental justice movement argued they were not included in the mainstream environmental movement’s agenda. The environmental movement was critiqued for not considering race, class, and gender and focusing on improving amenities that only some of the public benefited from due to availability and location (Kline, 2011). Local movements began to use a common language to talk about the health and safety threats their environment created for their communities. “Exasperated with the perceived narrowness of the environmental movement’s social agenda and the marginalization of their issues and experiences,” environmental justice activists defined their efforts as environmental justice to differentiate between their efforts and those of the mainstream environmental movement (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007, p. 10).
During the 1980s and 1990s, ecofeminism rose to prominence. Stemming from the women’s movement during the 1960s, feminists questioned the concept that biological sex determines superiority or inferiority, and that men were correctly positioned to control or dominate the environment (Mann, 2011). The intersections of “feminist research and the various movements for social justice and environmental health” contributed to the emergence of ecofeminism, which explored “the linked oppressions of gender, ecology, race, species, and nation” (Gaard, 2011, p. 28).

Ecofeminism acknowledges the connection between women and nature that inherently occurs because of the biological connection of a woman as a mother to nature and includes nonhuman animals in ecofeminism. Applying an ecofeminism lens, Gaarder (2011) found that women were able to demonstrate empathy with nature because they share similar inequities and both experience a lack of voice. Criticisms of ecofeminism questioned the inclusion of nonhuman animals in a feminist framework and charged ecofeminism as being essentialist, which others argue is unsubstantiated (Gaard; Gough, 2004). Due to these essentialist critiques, ecofeminism was rejected by many and scholars that continued to work at the intersection of environment and gender developed different names to describe their research (Gaard).

In the late 1980s, national environmental student groups began to form with the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) being founded in 1987 at the University of North Carolina. Switzer (2003) states that this action was “reviving campus politics at universities and high schools” (p. 113). SEAC took out an ad in 1988 in the Greenpeace magazine asking interested students to become part of an environmental network. The ad
received a large response (Levine & Cureton, 1998). As a result, SEAC set up a Threshold conference that took place for the first time in October 1989 in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and attracted “more than 1700 students from 43 states and over 225 schools” (SEAC, 2012). Calling on students to address environmental issues locally and regionally, SEAC has been credited with launching a new student environmental movement.

College student activism of the 1990s focused on many areas and was more fragmented than the activism of the 1960s (Rhoads, 1998). These issues included gender equity, sexual harassment, LGBT rights, free speech infringement, curriculum issues, campus culture, racism, and the environment. The array of social issues college students addressed was the result of unaddressed social issues that were inherited from previous generations. Critical of the college students of the late-1970s and 1980s, the students of the 1990s believed that many of the previous decade turned away from their responsibility in addressing important social issues and left it to the new generation to fix everything (Levine & Cureton, 1998). The environmental activities college students focused on during the 1990s included competitions to reduce energy use, protests focused on encouraging universities to not build structures in untouched lands, and campaigns to divest university stock holdings in companies delaying progress towards addressing global warming (Switzer, 2003). Many of the student efforts in the 1990s focused on local action.

During the 2000s college students supported college plans to pay for alternative energy credits and engaged in the National Campus Climate Challenge from the Energy
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Action Coalition. In November of 2007, “6,000 student leaders and activists gathered at the University of Maryland, College Park, and on Capitol Hill for Power Shift 2007, organized by Energy Action to call for a clean energy future” (Bardaglio & Putman, 2009, p. 40). In January 2008, “Focus the Nation” was launched on campuses across the nation. This project was the country’s largest teach-in project and involved 1,800 colleges. The goal of this project was to reach out to college students who did not know about climate change and discuss environmental issues. In March 2008, the Clinton Global Initiative University was held at Tulane University and hosted 700 students from 40 states, and 15 countries. This event aimed to help student activists explore ways to better the environmental futures of their communities (Bardaglio & Putman).

Today, individuals are taking action to address environmental impacts through pro-social behavior. However, how they participate and what motivates them differs. The next section discusses how environmental activism has been defined to include the various ways of and rationales for participation.

**Environmental Activism**

The term environmental activist is used to describe an individual who participates in a range of pro-social behaviors intended to protect or improve the environment. Environmental activism is often presented as a function of specific behaviors that people choose (Seguin, Peletier, & Hunseley, 1998). These include but are not limited to participating in an environmental group, participating in political action, participating in a more difficult environmental behavior, such as composting or commuting via bicycle, conducting a local pollution and health hazards study, or helping in protective
Many disciplinary fields attempt to explain why people participate in environmental activism and how this activism manifests into behavior. Environmental activists may vary in what specific environmental issue they focus on, what types of activities they engage in, and how they make sense of their involvement. In this section, I will explore how current research defines the term environmental activism.

Researchers in the fields of political science and sociology conceptualize environmental activism as a collective action that focuses on supporting the overall environmental movement (Dono et al., 2010; Horton, 2003; Lubell, Zaharan, & Veditz, 2007). Collective interest, which is a model of collective action, suggests that people will participate more often when the perceived value of participating is higher than that of not participating. For example, an individual may see their participation in a river clean-up as more valuable since it will improve the ecosystem and protect water quality than the value of using the same amount of time reading about water quality. Lubell et al. suggest that many theories of environmental behavior and values do not consider the influence of collective action. Lubell et al. believe collective action and collective interest must be considered to fully understand why individuals participate in environmental activism. For example, individuals will be more likely to be involved in a buy local campaign because they can see the impact of their actions and believe that their involvement will make a difference.

Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) looked at student engagement and differentiated between community service and civic/political participation. Students
involved in community service such as cleaning up a beach or making personal lifestyle choices such as eating organic foods would not be considered to be engaging in political action. Rather, students who participate in handing out pamphlets or work to shift public behavior in a collective manner are being politically active (Colby et al.). The difference between personal behaviors and political action lies with the potential impact of the behavior, with personal behavior primarily impacting the individual and political action attempting to shift a community’s behavior. Using Lubell and Colby et al. together helps distinguish between personal pro-environmental behaviors and civic, political, and collective action.

Horton (2003) conducted an ethnographic study including participant-observation and focus groups of environmental activists in Lancaster, England. From this research Horton categorized environmental activists into two different groups: the reformists and the radicals. The reformists were defined as individuals who recognized and worked within political systems while the radicals knowingly bypassed the political system in favor of direct action. The distinctions between the actions of reformists and radicals were recognized by community members as a whole and amongst environmentalists. The common drive environmentalists shared, Horton suggested, was their “willingness to perform environmental commitment in public” (p. 66). Horton’s study concluded that environmental activists possess a green identity and live a green lifestyle, which is embedded in their local community and focused on minimizing the need for material things. The conclusions of this study are a narrow snapshot of how individuals engaged in this specific community and may or may not apply to college students.
The field of psychology considers environmental behaviors in its definition of environmental activism, which focuses on an individual’s motivation and why they choose to participate in pro-environmental behaviors. Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) state that when individuals participate in pro-environmental behavior, they intentionally choose to reduce the negative impact an action could have on the environment. They do this by choosing alternative behaviors for everyday activities, including those related to transportation, recycling, minimizing water usage, and reducing household consumption (Dono et al., 2010; Kollmuss & Agyeman).

Stern (2000) argues that environmental activism is not synonymous with pro-environmental behavior. He suggests that although environmental activists participate in pro-environmental behavior, not everyone who participates in pro-environmental behavior is an environmental activist. Stern presents several distinct types of environmentally significant behavior that people participate in, such as environmental activism, nonactivist behaviors in the public sphere, private-sphere environmentalism, and other types of environmentalism.

According to Stern (2000), environmental activism is demonstrated through committed activism via participation in environmental organizations and the link to participating in environmental social movements. In Stern’s research, the terms public and private spheres are used to describe the context in which activism takes place. The public sphere refers to society or the public arena, and the private sphere describes the home or private setting. Individuals who are categorized as participating in nonactivist behaviors in the public sphere work towards supporting the acceptance of public policy
and political activities that are focused on environmental issues. Although these types of political action do not rise to the level of environmental activism in Stern’s view, he asserts that people working to promote policies could have a tremendous impact on the environment because, when implemented, those policies would influence the behaviors of many members of society. The area of private sphere environmentalism focuses on consumer purchase decisions and consumption. Research has focused on this component of environmentalism although some argue that the impact individuals can have through their actions is small (Maniates, 2001; Pink, 2012). Stern suggests a greater impact from environmental engagement comes from collective action seen through environmental activism and nonactivist behaviors in the public sphere than from private sphere environmentalism.

Dono et al. (2010) challenged Stern’s (2000) view that environmental activism and pro-environmental behavior were not synonymous by articulating a relationship between environmental activism and pro-environmental behavior. Their study surveyed 131 Australian university students about environmental activism, pro-environmental behavior, and social identity. Pro-environmental behaviors were categorized into three main groups of activities including 1) consumer behavior, 2) willingness to sacrifice, and 3) environmental citizenship. The research found a significant positive relationship between environmental activism and specific pro-environmental behavior categories examined (consumer behavior, $R=0.43$; willingness to sacrifice, $R=0.48$; environmental citizenship, $R=0.78$). Dono et al. suggest that this relationship is partly due to similarities
between categories because both environmental activism and environmental citizenship are subsets of pro-environmental behavior.

Environmental activism and the everyday activities of activists are often studied in isolation of one another. Studies on activism focus primarily on the political, public, and sometimes volatile actions of individuals while the everyday activities of activists are dismissed as uninteresting or not impactful. In *Situating Everyday Life*, Pink (2012) looks at “people’s relationships with their environments in the context of everyday life and activist practices” (p. 37). How people interact with the environment and make choices “in their homes [is] contingent on a range of circumstances that are concerned with moralities, identities, social relationships and the physical layout of the home” (Pink, p. 146). Pink suggests environmental movements should recognize both political activist activities and everyday life activities in local communities. Considering activities in both the public and private spheres increases understanding of how environmental behaviors are performed in different contexts.

Relational activism is a term suggested by O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy (2010) to describe the nature of environmental activism as building relationships and the importance of community and networks that enable individuals to work together to enact long-term change. O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy argue that “relational activism intentionally uses the private sphere in a public way contributing to mid- and long-term change” (p. 555). They discussed three differences between activism and relational activism, stating that “relational activism conceives of the individual as a member of a community; relational activism uses daily practices to change norms of high
consumption; and third, relational activism used the private sphere for public purposes” (p. 566). In this way, private individual actions are shared with members of the community and through this network permeate the local society. For example, an individual may be an expert in canning local produce and may teach this to other individuals in his or her community.

This network and behavior modeling approach serves to transfer private sphere pro-environmental behavior to the public sphere to enact long-term change. This permeation and mobilization from a private to public level is an important concept when defining environmental activism since it allows private sphere behaviors to spread through a network of individuals, thus increasing its impact. Environmental activism is unique in that individuals who participate in public and political actions also participate in personal private sphere behaviors including consumer choices, eating habits, and transportation selection. Thus, environmental activism is different from other types of social activism because the opportunity to participate in pro-environmental consumer and lifestyle choices is often integral to one’s involvement in environmental activism.

Civic engagement literature, which I present in Chapter Two, provides a more descriptive analysis of the types of pro-social behaviors students participate in. This literature assists in understanding how and why students engage in particular environmentally-oriented behaviors and suggests that environmental behaviors can be placed on a spectrum from one-time projects to being involved in a social change campaign.
The Role of Higher Education and Civic Engagement

Much of the current research on environmental activism does not focus on environmental activism in a higher education context. However, higher education plays an important role to further research related to social issues and prepare college students to be engaged citizens. In this section, I make a case for why it is important for higher education to examine the experiences of college student environmental activists.

Higher education institutions are expected to play a key role in addressing social issues, including those related to the environment, through educating students, researching issues, and creating solutions (Bardaglio & Putman, 2009; Barlett & Chase, 2004; Creighton, 1998; Kezar, 2005; Wright, 2004). Bruininks (2012) suggested that “public universities have inherent value: a public good and create public value simply because it exists to preserve, advance, distribute, and apply knowledge in order to improve the human condition” (p. 2). Kezar uses the term “social charter” to describe the unwritten agreement that colleges and universities inherently exist to contribute to the public good of society. At an institutional level, colleges and universities are charged with addressing environmental issues, reducing their carbon use, and educating citizens. Organizations and initiatives that encourage higher education to address environmental issues include the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), the American College and University Presidents’ Climate Commitment (ACUPCC), and the United Nation’s Decade of Environmental Education. The United Nation, AASHE, ACUPCC, and other organizations expect higher education institutions to address environmental issues while fulfilling the unwritten social charter of preparing
students to be engaged citizens that are prepared to address social issues. Therefore, the role of the institution in addressing environmental issues exists both at an institutional level and at the student level.

AASHE provides institutions and students with resources from across the country and offers research, best practice examples, and an assessment program to help institutions evaluate their efforts related to environmental sustainability as an organization. The ACUPCC began in 2006 and is a network of institutions committing to carbon reduction through a variety of initiatives. In 2014, presidents from 684 different colleges had signed this commitment (Presidents’ Climate Commitment, 2014). Internationally, the United Nation’s General Assembly declared the decade of 2005-2014 the Decade for Education of Sustainable Development and emphasized that education is a key component to promote sustainable development (U. N. Decade for Sustainable Development, 2014; Wals, 2014).

Educational attainment is “a powerful predictor of political knowledge, civic values, and active engagement in the political realm” (Colby et al., 2007, p. 49). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2009-2010 over 20 million students attended some type of post-secondary institution. With a large number of Americans attending college, at least in some part, colleges and universities have the ability to influence this critical mass toward civic engagement and environmental activism. First, though, they must understand more about the current experiences of student environmental activists. Colby et al. (2007) believe that educators can impact political engagement through “creating structured opportunities, offering encouragement,
and providing other incentives for reducing known barriers to and increasing familiarity with political participation” (p. 43). Hill (2012) discussed the importance of including activism as a “necessary component” to environmental literacy, which by itself strives to simply increase knowledge about environmental issues (p. 45). By adding activism opportunities to environmental literacy efforts, institutions could provide students with experiences in college that prepare and teach them how to actively engage in environmental social issues outside the walls of the academy.

In *Educating Citizens*, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003), argue that

> If today’s college graduates are to be positive forces in this world, they need not only to possess knowledge and intellectual capacities but also to see themselves as members of a community…They must be willing to act for the common good and capable of doing so effectively. (p. 7)

The experiences students have in higher education, both curricular and extracurricular, can support the development of civic engagement. In a subsequent book, Colby et al. (2007) discuss political participation and civic engagement and define democracy as “a practice of shared responsibility for a common future. It is the always unfinished task of making social choices and working toward public goals that shapes our lives and the lives of others” (p. 25). Students participate in environmental activism and engagement in many ways and are often overlooked as a valuable resource to help administrators address environmental issues (Creighton, 1998).

Higher education institutions can provide students with opportunities to engage in environmental research, increase environmental knowledge, and improve local communities through both the curricular and extracurricular experiences (Cortese, 2003). These opportunities may impact the context of learning and how institutions practice
sustainability and partner with local communities (Cortese). Understanding both the impact of environmental issues and the role students play in addressing these issues can help higher education institutions better understand how they fulfill the inherent social charter. Seeking the knowledge of how institutions fulfill the social charter is not free of complexity. The breadth and depth of environmental issues coupled with the growing diversity of the student body can make the pursuit of this knowledge complicated.

The increasing diversity both in society and higher education is reflected in the composition of the college student body. This diversity, when coupled with growing environmental justice concerns, calls for a better understanding of environmental activism in regards to an individual’s gender, race, and class.

The challenge for higher education leadership today is to accept the responsibility of leadership and participation in the construction, development, and advancement of a new narrative and discourse that gives voice to diverse communities that have, for too long and too frequently, remained invisible. (O’Neil Green & Trent, 2005, p. 103)

Since environmental issues have been historically gendered, racialized, and classed, researching environmental activism without considering identity would ignore a potentially important influence on how individuals approach activism. As campuses increasingly become more diverse, it is critical to understand how the experiences of student environmental activists may differ based on their identities. Although understanding how people engage in environmental issues is complex, focusing on understanding how those who are engaged discuss their experiences and how this differs based on their identities may help colleges and universities better understand college student environmental activism.
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

**Statement of the Problem**

In order to fulfill the inherent social charter of educating students to be fully engaged citizens who have the skills, abilities, and motivations to address social issues, higher education institutions need to understand more about environmental activism occurring on campus and how individual identities influence these experiences. However, a paucity of research exists that seeks to describe the experiences of college student environmental activists. Some research exists that discusses the influence of unidimensional identities on pro-social behavior in college students. Yet, increasing student diversity in higher education and continued environmental concerns call for investigating the relationships of identities to environmental activism among college students.
Environmental activism and pro-social behavior are grounded in research from civic engagement, social anthropology, psychology, sociology, and critical theory. To better understand how individuals make sense of their participation in addressing complex environmental issues it is necessary to look both at what types of pro-social behaviors individuals participate in and how gender, race, and class influence their activism.

Civic Engagement and Environmental Activism

Students participate in many types of pro-social behaviors related to the environment. This participation varies in the amount of time the activity takes, the commitment required by the individual, and the extent to which the root cause of the environmental issue is addressed. Current research explores how higher education institutions engage students through curricular and extracurricular activities to develop individuals who productively engage with other members of society (Colby et al., 2003; Hustinx, Meijs, Handy, & Cnaan, 2012; Moely, Furco, & Reed, 2008).

Civic engagement literature provides an approach to conceptualize how students in higher education participate in pro-social behavior and what this engagement looks like. A study by Weerts, Cabrera, and Mejias (2014) examined recent college alumni and their level of civic engagement while in college. Based on existing literature, they proposed four classes of civic behavior: super-engagers, social-cultural engagers, apolitical engagers, and non-engagers. The class of super engager described an individual who was “involved in a robust set of civic-orientated activities that demonstrate a high
level of involvement in campus/off-campus programs” (Weerts et al., p. 161). Socio-cultural engagers were involved in social-cultural groups that “may or may not be connected to civic purposes” (Weerts et al., p. 161). Examples of socio-cultural activities included groups focused on the arts or on specific cultures. The class of apolitical engagers included individuals who participated in activities that were “primarily professional, social-fraternal, and provide value to the larger community. Behaviors in this class were “less political or environmental-cause related” (Weerts et al., p. 161). Examples in this area include service or charity activities that are not expressly tied to social change. The last class Weerts et al. identified was the non-engagers who were participants who were “not involved in civic or social organizations in college” (p. 161). Weerts et al. (2014) used the work of Morton (1995) as a way to categorize pro-social behavior into useful categories. This study found that college students participating in environmental groups and/or social issues tended to be super engagers because they participated in activism grounded in charity, project, and/or social change paradigms.

Morton (1995) used the term “paradigm” to describe three different levels of pro-social behavior. The paradigms include charity, project, and social change and succinctly describe pro-social behavior and different levels of engagement. Morton developed the theory of pro-social behavior paradigms based on his experience with service-learning. The research Morton conducted included conducting interviews with community members, college administrators, and college students. In addition, Morton surveyed students in six service learning classrooms as a part of the course evaluation to help better understand types of service and motives for their engagement. This research asked
participants about their motivation of participating in pro-social behavior, the perceived impact of their behavior, and how they viewed the impact of others’ behaviors. Grounded in the literature and informed by the data, Morton conceptualized the three paradigms as distinct types of pro-social behavior. For the purpose of this study, I will focus on each of Morton’s categories and provide examples of pro-environmental activities that may be included in each area.

Charity Paradigm

The charity paradigm focuses on pro-social behavior that includes helping others, but does not extend to social change. Morton (1995) states that the charity paradigm includes behaviors that are a “direct service where control of the service (resources and decisions affecting their distribution) remain with the provider” (p. 21). Activities in the charity paradigm require limited time and limited commitment of those participating. Participants are not involved in the decision-making process and activities are often fragmented in their deployment. This paradigm of pro-social behavior does not include an attempt to understand or impact the root cause of the issue. Activities in the charity paradigm are essentially short-term volunteer activities. Research found that college students felt like they had the greatest impact on the world by providing direct service to other individuals while in college (Bringle, Hatcher, & McIntosh, 2006; Morton).

Morton (1995) raised an important issue related to power differences and the charity paradigm. Traditionally speaking, charity is used to describe when affluent individuals participate in activities for disenfranchised groups, or, in other words, charity is “the well-off doing service to the poor if and when they feel like it and then only on
Despite the negative connotations of the term charity historically, Morton found that college students viewed charity activities as a positive thing and a way for them to help. Examples of pro-environmental activities that would fall in the charity paradigm would include one-day activities where students volunteer. Events may include highway or park clean-up events, or invasive plant species removal activities. In each of these instances, students volunteer their time for a few hours or a day. Students are not involved in the planning or coordinating of the day and will often not learn why they are doing the project. The level of engagement is limited in time and participants are directed how to complete a task by event leaders.

**Project Paradigm**

The project paradigm describes pro-social behavior that is characterized as a more in-depth project that addresses a community concern. Activities are longer and focus on developing partnerships with individuals who have access to resources in order to address issues. In this paradigm, participants define the problem, determine solutions, and implement well-conceived plans to respond to a community need. Morton (1995) found in his research that although college students believed they would have the greatest impact through charity paradigm activities while in college, they anticipated having the greatest lifetime impact if they participated in project paradigm activities. Examples of project paradigm activities include working towards creating a community garden, being involved in a campaign to increase recycling amongst students, or participating in an environmental student group focused on promoting environmental activities not focused
on enacting social change. The activities in the project paradigm have participants define the issue, develop a plan, and implement a plan to address the identified issue (Morton).

The “role of the expert” is a main criticism of the project paradigm (Morton, 1995, p. 22). In the project paradigm, an expert often leads the project or is sought in the initial shaping or implementation of the project. Since the concept of expert is an issue for both the project paradigm and the environmental movement, it is important to further consider the impact of this role. The environmental movements have been laden with power issues related to scientific expertise (Ignatow, 2005; Meyer, 2009; Schlosberg & Bomberg, 2009). If experts plan and manage projects, it results in a dependence of those being served on the experts (Morton). Further, the concern of whose voice is at the table to impact environmental decisions and policy is a key concern for environmental justice and social change activists (Meyer; Schlosberg & Bomberg). Projects focused on environmental issues often seek out information and scientific data regarding the projects’ impact, which can be a concern if there is a difference in the amount of knowledge participants and those being served have. One issue is that “experts define problems differently than people living them, primarily by applying analytical tools - theories- to the latter’s situation” (Morton, 1995, p. 22). The role of the expert must be considered when discussing the impact of identities on environmental activism and/or engagement.

Social Change Paradigm

Morton’s social change paradigm describes students seeking to change social issues through advocacy, activism, and political engagement. Activities in the social
change paradigm focus on “creating power-neutral learning communities to address root causes to problems” (Weerts et al., 2014, p. 5). Building relationships with individuals specifically affected by the issues is key to activities in this paradigm. Morton (1995) stated that this type of pro-social behavior was the “gold standard for evaluating service” (p. 23). However, when asked, college students did not feel that participating in social change advocacy had the biggest impact but rather felt like their behaviors had more impact through direct service and project activities (Morton).

The activities in this area are political in nature and focus on determining the root-cause of issues and addressing these root-causes. Environmental justice initiatives often fall in this category due to the political nature required to enact structural change to address environmental justice issues. Activities in the social change paradigm include protesting, lobbying, and leadership efforts that are focused on addressing the root causes of environmental issues. Social change activities require a longer time commitment and a deeper desire to address more complex environmental issues.

Weerts et al. (2014) found that environmental activists tended to engage in activities that fit into all three of Morton’s paradigms. The charity, project, and social change paradigms provide a way to organize pro-social environmental behavior (Morton, 1995). The research of Weerts et al. and Morton suggest college student environmental activists would participate in activities from each pro-social paradigm.

**Environmental Activism: Worldview, Identity, and Experiences**

Research has found that worldview, gender, race, and class influence environmental values, behaviors, and activism in various ways. Limited research exists
on the characteristics of environmental activist college students; that which does exist focuses primarily on students enrolled in environmental education courses and environmental literacy (Arnold, 2011; Balgopal, Wallace, & Dahlberg, 2011). Demographic and social characteristics may help provide information about participation trends in environmental action. The discussion that follows presents an overview of how individuals conceptualize their values and roles with nature related to their environmental worldview. Research related to the identities of gender, race, and class are then reviewed to understand the impact identities have on environmental activism and pro-social behaviors.

Environmental Worldview

How one views the world and conceptualizes his or her place in it may help explain why individuals engage in environmental issues. Clayton and Myers (2009) define worldview as “an integrated set of beliefs about what is real, what is knowable, what is valuable, and what it means to be human” (p. 20). Traditionally, environmental worldviews have been organized into two primary categories including those who view nature as a resource to be used by humans and those who believe nature should be taken care of due to its inherent value (Clayton & Myer).

Anthropocentric is a term that is used to describe the viewpoint that humans are valued more than other living beings and that nature exists to be used by human alone (Webster, 2015). Biocentric is the term commonly used to describe the set of values and attitudes that recognize the environment and all life as having intrinsic value (Webster). Milfont and Dukitt (2004) examined data related to environmental attitudes and based on
their research organized attitudes into two primary themes including the utilization theme (anthropocentric) and the preservation theme (biocentric). Plumwood (1996) argues that anthrocentrism is more than simply failing to acknowledge the intrinsic value of nature but is rather an issue of human-centeredness. Further, an individual with anthrocentric views of nature is focused on the importance of human needs and will behave in ways that serve human needs with disregard of what nature needs.

Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, and Jones (2000) proposed that two paradigms existed related to environmental views including the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm. The dominant social paradigm emphasizes the economic value of and human domination over nature. The new environmental paradigm considers the fragility of nature and the protection of the environment from negative human impact.

The dominant social paradigm was the most prevalent worldview of the United States from the time of colonization in the late 1700s until the 1970s when a shift to the new environmental paradigm occurred (Thapa, 1999). Jurin and Hutchinson (2005) found that students described tension between the dominant social paradigm and the new environmental paradigm in ecological autobiographies they completed as part of a course on American History and the Environment. The tension was frequently noted due to society assuming the dominant social paradigm marked by consumerist and technological values while individuals held views characterized by the new environmental paradigm acknowledging the environment’s intrinsic value.

Stern et al. (1999) defined three value orientations related to environmental worldview including: egoistic, social-altruistic, and biospheric. Egoistic refers to
individuals who are more likely to participate in environmentally responsible behaviors due to self-interest. Individuals who have a social-altruistic environmental worldview act in environmentally responsible ways because of their concern for the greater good or benefit of society. A biospheric worldview is grounded in how actions impact the ecological environment (Stern, Dietz, & Kalof, 1993). A study by Schultz and Zelezny (1998) suggests that social-altruistic and biospheric worldview orientations positively predict environmentally responsible behavior, while egoistic values negatively predict these behaviors.

Understanding how individuals assume worldviews and experience tension in worldviews is an important foundation to understand pro-social behavior. Research suggests that environmental activists tend to have worldviews that are biospheric or social-altruistic (Schultz & Zelezny, 1998). In addition to worldview, the identities of gender, race, and/or class may influence how individuals approach environmental activism.

**Gender**

Much research suggests that women have greater levels of concern for the environment and higher levels of environmental citizenship; they are also more likely than men to alter behavior to positively impact the environment (Barkan, 2004; Hunter, Hatch, & Johnson, 2004; Tindall, Davies, & Mauboules, 2003). Other research claims that gender does not play a role in whether an individual participates in environmentally friendly behavior (Lubell, 2002; Wakefield, Elliott, Eyles, & Cole, 2006). In contrast, Tindall et al. found that men in the general population are more likely to participate in
environmental behavior even though they report lower levels of environmental values than women.

Women are more likely to alter their behavior within the private sphere to positively impact the environment than men, which could be categorized as behaviors in the charity or project paradigms (Barkan, 2004; Hunter, et al., 2004; Tindall et al., 2003). The *Minnesota Report Card for Environmental Literacy* found that women reported higher frequencies of engaging in pro-environmental behavior than men (Murphy, 2002; Murphy, 2004). The concept of relational activism “provides important social and community support that facilitates public-sphere environmental actions and contributes to long-term cultural change. Relational activism provides important insight into the contradictory findings of women’s participation in environmental activism” (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010, p. 555). Since private sphere behaviors are not often considered environmental activism, it makes sense that women are not considered environmental activists when only looking at political involvement. Relational activism considers private sphere behaviors performed in networks as environmental activism and expands the type of engagement that can be considered activism.

Research has demonstrated that women are well represented in environmental organizations, mainstream and environmental justice groups, and belong to as many, if not more, environmental organizations as men do (Mann, 2011; Meyer, 2009; Tindall et al., 2003). Historically, women in the United States environmental justice movement were criticized and demeaned for their efforts. Lois Gibbs was accused of using “housewives’ data” in her attempt to bring the Love Canal issues to light (Buckingham &
Kulcur, 2009, p. 676). Buckingham and Kulcur found that environmental justice research often ignores the domestic responsibilities and social relations that women often create and rely upon to catalyze environmental activism.

Perkins (2012) interviewed 25 women in a study focused on better understanding the pathway women took to becoming environmental justice activists. Participants discussed that their involvement was “fueled by their moral conviction” (p. 86) and exhibited “anger about being excluded from government processes” (p. 87). Many participants were already politically active when they began engaging with environmental justice issues. The women in Perkins’ research often had a family or close community member who introduced them to community activism. The findings of this study contradict the idea that women become involved in activism through their domestic role of caring for their family.

Abbruzzese and Wekerle (2011) conducted a study focused on the grassroots efforts of women activists related to urban sprawl in Toronto’s suburban areas. Eight women were selected and interviewed based on their active involvement in the exurbia campaign that advocated against urban sprawl. The women in this study “were not economically, socially, or spatially marginalized” and often did not speak about the privilege they possessed from being white, middle-class suburban dwellers (Abbruzzese & Wekerle, p. 148). The study found that social roles impacted how women participated as environmental activists. Women in their study discussed how their identities as middle-class white mother, housewife, worker, environmental activist, and community member were salient to influencing their engagement in environmental issues. Women
“often blurr(ed) the boundaries between the public and private spheres” (Abbruzzese & Wekerle, p. 153). Women in this study discussed equity, quality of life, sustainability, and the negative impacts of growth on the community in their interviews with researchers. Abbruzzese and Wekerle (2011) found in this same study that men focused on environmental issues concerned with community planning and growth.

Tindall et al. (2003) researched gender differences in activism and conservation behaviors. In this study, a survey was sent to members of three environmental groups in the Greater Victoria Area in Canada. A random sample of participants was selected from the two larger organizations while a census of membership was used for the smaller group. Women reported statistically significant higher participation rates in four specific environmentally friendly activities including conserving energy (94.3% vs. 88.7%, p ≤ 0.05), buying organic products (72.2% vs. 62.2%, p ≤ 0.05), using environmentally friendly cleaning products (90.7% vs. 81.9%, p ≤ 0.01), and reusing and/or mending items instead of discarding them (93.8% vs. 86.4%, p ≤ 0.05). In addition, women reported a statistically higher participation rate in purchasing merchandise to help support environmental organizations than men (74.9% vs. 63.8%, p ≤ 0.05). Men reported statistically higher participation rates in environmentally focused activities including writing a letter to a newspaper (28.8% vs. 16.9%, p ≤ 0.01), participating in a press conference (11.3% vs. 3.1%, p ≤ 0.005), presenting to a public body (16.9% vs. 6.7%, p ≤ 0.005), and serving on an advisory board (10.2% vs. 3.1%, p ≤ 0.005). Tindall et al. also conducted two separate multiple regression analyses for men and women to attempt to determine which factors predict environmental activism. Both models included the
independent variables of parent, age, education, income, postmaterialist values index, frequency of communication, and activism. The model using data for male participants explained 8% of the variance in the sample while the model for the female subset explained 30% of the variance in the sample. In the discussion of these results, Tindall et al. posit that women often experience a double work day that includes both paid and domestic work responsibilities, which may decrease the likelihood of participating in environmental activism in the public sphere. “Biographic availability” is a term to describe an individual’s ability to participate in an activity because they have time available to participate (McAdam 1986). A lack of biographic availability may mute women’s activism due to their obligations both in the home and the workplace. However Tindall et al. found that women are more likely to participate in private sphere activities since they can be included in their domestic work.

Hunter et al. (2004) used the existing results from the Environment Survey from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), which included data from 20 nations. Survey questions were identified to measure both public-sphere and private-sphere behaviors. Controlling for demographic characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, employment status, and marital status, allowed the authors to focus on gender difference. Hunter et al. found in this cross-national gender variation study that women were more likely to participate in private sphere behaviors than men. In addition, the study found that the men did not participate at statistically higher rates in public-sphere behaviors than in private-sphere behaviors (Hunter et al.). Overall, both men and women participated at higher rates in private-sphere activities than in public-sphere activities.
These results are not consistent across the nations in the study but rather show participants from nations with higher gross national income per capita reported higher participation rates of private-sphere behaviors (Hunter et al.).

Studies have found that female college students have higher levels of involvement in pro-environmental behavior. A study conducted by Ewert and Baker (2001) at the University of British Columbia examined differences in environmental attitudes and behaviors of college students related to their major, gender, age, and location of residence. In this study, Ewert and Baker used a modified version of the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) to survey 285 students from a variety of selected courses in all offered majors over a two year period. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted and found statistically significant F-statistics for the main effects of gender \( (F = 6.01, p = .002) \) and academic major \( (F = 2.13, p = .028) \). The variables of age or residence did not demonstrate any main effects. Ewert and Baker combined sixteen survey questions to compose a pro-environmental category of behaviors. Women reported statistically significant higher levels than men in this aggregated category of pro-environmental behavior \( (p=0.04) \).

Lang (2011) surveyed 1,225 incoming first year students about their environmental attitudes and behaviors at a middle-sized institution in Pennsylvania. Questions were analyzed using four groups including attitudes about the environment, recycling behavior, support for university initiatives, and willingness to pay to support environmental initiatives. In addition, the variables of major, gender, political orientation, and financial security were considered to determine if there were any difference in
behavior and/or attitudes based on these variables. Relevant to the current study is the variable of gender. An analysis found that female students reported statistically significant higher levels of environmental attitudes, higher participation in recycling, and greater levels of support of university initiatives than their male counterparts.

Ropers-Huilman (2009) conducted a study at City University in New Zealand and Old South University in the southern United States. In-depth interviews were conducted with 41 total participants between the two institutions including 29 women and 12 men involved in student engagement related to social change. Interview questions focused on what role they played at their institutions related to change efforts, what motivated this involvement, and what activism meant to these participants. The study found noticeable gendered differences with student participants. Women discussed the importance of friends, social networks, personal fulfillment, and passion for their cause as motivators for their participation in student movements. Overall, men talked primarily about their passion for a cause as a motivator for engaging in social change and focused much less on the social networks as a motivator for their participation. Although this research was not focused exclusively on environmental activism, it provides an important lens for understanding how college students describe their engagement as change agents.

Race

Race is problematized in the mainstream environmental movement in that many have suggested that the environmental movement is a white middle- and upper-class movement (Allen et al., 2007; Meyer, 2009; Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). Meyers presented a review of recent literature that discusses how “environmental justice leaders
are far more likely than those of mainstream national environmental organizations to be women, people of color, and people from working class backgrounds” (p. 39).

Recognizing the importance of race and structural racism and how they are historically embedded through the mainstream environmental movement is a focus of the environmental justice movement (Bullard & Johnson, 2000). Racial identity matters when discussing environmental issues and how people describe their involvement, yet race is more evident in the work of environmental justice, social movement theory, and student engagement literature than in mainstream environmental literature.

Allen et al. (2007) presented the findings of an ethnographic study they conducted in the late 1990s with environmental justice activists and organizations. The study included 163 interviews and participant observation that focused on the environmental and political nature of environmental justice advocates. Allen et al. found that the identity as environmental activist was problematic for environmental justice activists. The primary issue with the term environmentalism is that it is “occupied- or already determined- by the concerns of white environmentalists and the interests of wealthy people affects the development of both environmental justice and mainstream environmentalism” (Allen et al., p. 107). Participants talked about how they viewed race as relevant to environmental issues citing how historically race was linked to the location of toxic waste dumps and/or how the participation of people of color was limited in mainstream decision making related to environmental issues. Environmental justice efforts focus primarily on local concerns and work to change oppressive systems. Environmental justice activists discuss the role race plays in how individuals understand
environmental problems. For example, one environmental justice activist presented an example of the impact a community health center would have on the community. Environmental activists opposed this center because it would require cutting down trees in the city while environmental justice activists supported the center because it would provide healthcare to the local community whose health was affected by their urban environment (Allen et al.). Allen et al. found that although there were differences in the focus of mainstream environmentalists and environmental justice advocates, these individuals worked together to solve local issues.

In a study focusing on political activism of Latina women, Jaramillo (2010) interviewed 38 Latina women in the San Antonio, Texas area via 11 group interviews. Although this study did not focus specifically on environmentalists, Jaramillo explored the engagement of Latina women to addresses social issues through political activism. Jaramillo suggested that race and ethnic identity impact the likelihood of participating in collective action. When individuals see their race or ethnicity as an individual characteristic that is focused on meeting the individual needs, it may not motivate action because “collectivism competes with individualism” (p. 198). Nevertheless, the more an individual identifies their racial identity as collectivistic where identity begins to include community consciousness, the more likely he or she is to participate in collective action or be politically active (Jaramillo).

Levine and Cureton (1998) presented the findings of several campus surveys in their book *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today’s College Students* in a comprehensive review of student engagement. The Undergraduate Survey examined the
student life of campuses throughout the United States. The 1993 rendition of the Undergraduate Survey was administered by Levine and Cureton and randomly sampled 9,100 students nationwide. This survey found that students of color were more likely to participate in demonstrations; African American students in particular reported higher rates of participation than white students. In a subsequent book, *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today’s College Student*, Levine and Dean (2011) state that overall student participation in protest activities has declined from 28% in 1969 to 11% in 2009. As part of their research, Levine and Dean conducted campus visits and during these visits found that environmental efforts were plentiful and often focused on the environment coupled with demographic characteristics including ethnic identity and/or gender.

**Class**

As Buckingham and Kulcur (2009) point out, studies on environmental injustice often neglect to factor in class into their analysis. Abbruzzese and Wekerle’s (2011) study on women activists in the exurbia campaign in Toronto found middle-class women did not discuss their class when they described their involvement in activism. Similarly, Jaramillo (2010) in her study with Latina women found participants did not expressly discuss their class in describing their experiences as political activists. Both studies suggest that since participants were part of the middle- and upper- class they did not consider class as influencing their engagement. Lois Gibbs, leader of the Love Canal movement, argued that social class was a factor in her activism and that the mainstream
environmental organizations mostly ignored the concerns of poor, white working-class communities (Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007).

The *Minnesota Report Card on Environmental Literacy* found that income level was somewhat tied to environmental behavior with a few indicators showing significant differences based on income level. The 2001 survey found that those earning less than $30,000 were more likely to consider a political candidate’s environmental record and less likely to donate money to environmental groups than those making more than $75,000 (Murphy, 2002; Murphy, 2004). In the 2003 survey, differences were found in water conservation efforts and transportation use where lower income individuals participated at higher rates than those with higher incomes (Murphy, 2002; Murphy, 2004).

Laidley (2013) explored how social class impacts environmental behavior. In this study, Laidley examined municipal level data in Massachusetts to determine if there was a relationship between demographic data and recycling participation, hybrid car use, and the presence of environmental advocacy groups. The study examined data from 2000 to 2010 and included recycling rates from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the proportion of hybrid ownership from the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles, and existence of climate action groups from Massachusetts Climate Action Network. A regression analysis was conducted to determine which sociodemographic variables were significant in predicting the three behaviors in this study. The study did not find income as a significant variable in predicting recycling rates, hybrid car ownership, or the presence of environmental groups. However, higher home values were
found to predict higher rates of recycling participation and hybrid car ownership (Laidley). The author discussed the possibility that areas with more affluence or wealth were more likely to have the means and time to participate in pro-environmental behavior.

When considering the different experiences of environmental activists in regards to the identities of gender, race, and/or class, it is important to recognize that identities are typically not expressed in unidimensional ways. Environmental justice research addresses the complexity of environmental inequality based on race, gender, and/or class by using intersectionality to address and accommodate the unique lived experiences of individuals. Buckingham and Kulcur (2009) argue that focusing on “either race/ethnicity or poverty, as delineations of environmental injustice, will not be sufficient to ensure that gendered injustices as a result of environmental problems are resolved” (p. 677). In the next section, the theory of intersectionality will be reviewed as a useful approach to understanding how intersecting identities influence unique experiences.

**Intersectionality**

Grounded in critical feminist theory, the concept of intersectionality is important when examining how identities influence how individuals make sense of their experiences (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2010). Colleges and universities need to find new ways to understand the complexity of student identities and intersectionality can help do this (Harper, 2011). Looking at each identity individually may not be the most appropriate way to determine how students make sense of their activism in relation to the environment. “Intersectionality draws attention to the ways in which unidimensional
analyses based on one meaningful social category tend to privilege and render dominant one identity, while obscuring the relationship between other identities, social contexts, histories, and lived experiences” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, p. 38).

McCall (2005) defined intersectionality as “relationships among multiple social dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (p. 1771). Intersectionality looks at complex and layered social realities composed of different socially constructed identities including race, ethnicity, class, gender, economic status, political affiliation, culture, and experiences (Brah & Phoenix, 2009; Crenshaw, 2009; Mann, 2011; McCall; Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Research on intersectionality maintains the existence of the unique experiences individuals have at the intersections of their various identities, which may be interpreted different ways by different individuals. The salience and contextual nature of identities is unique for each individual (Crenshaw; Griffin & Museus, 2011; Ropers-Huilman & Winters).

Environmental justice activism research includes focuses on gender, race, and/or class. When attempting to understand how people make sense of their environmental activism, considering intersectionality provides a lens to understand how identities intersect to impact engagement. Doetsch-Kidder (2012) discussed intersectional activism and looked at activism that addressed intersecting oppressed identities including race, class, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability status, and nationality.

“Intersectional activists are often marginalized in social movement histories because they don’t work in organizations that focus solely on ‘women’s issues,’ ‘gay and lesbian issues,’ or ‘race issues,” (Doetsch-Kidder, p. 3). Discussions on gender, race, and class
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throughout the history of the environmental movements have specifically focused on the environment one lives in impacts health and disproportionately those with oppressed identities.

Studies on intersectionality found that women of color could not separate their gender and race identities when discussing their experiences (Crenshaw, 2009). Crenshaw explained that women of color do not experience racism the same way men of color do, nor do they experience sexism the way white women do. Intersectionality recognizes that women of color face racism and patriarchy at the same time and cannot consider these experiences, which are grounded in their identities, in isolation of the other because it would not reflect their lived experience. In addition, women of color found that race politics and gender politics alone did not explain the complexity of their experiences (Jaramillo, 2010). Buckingham and Kulcur (2009) suggest that researchers must consider intersections of identity when attempting to resolve environmental problems. In their review of current environmental justice literature, they discovered that considering race/ethnicity or poverty was not sufficient to understand engagement in environmental issues. Historically, women of color “have been vilified on the basis of their sex and their gender roles” in relation to their involvement in environmental issues (Buckingham & Kulcur, p. 675). Gender is important to consider concurrently with race and social class because the experience women have addressing environmental justice issues is unique and shaped by their gender, race, and/or class.

The complexity of attending to the intersection of multiple identities in research presents methodological challenges but allows for the connections between different...
forms of oppression and privilege to be contemplated (Bowleg, 2008; Doetsch-Kidder, 2012). Attempting to describe how college students see their intersecting identities influencing their approach to environmental activism by isolating one identity, such as gender or race, gives an incomplete, simplified view of how identity impacts their experience. Looking at how multiple identities intersect allows for a deeper consideration of the experiences students have related to environmental activism and their identities. Intersectionality theory informs both the conceptual framework and methodology for the current research.
Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this research study was to better understand the complexity of student environmental activism by considering the types of activities individuals participate in and how intersecting identities influence their engagement. An intersectional methodological approach was used to explore the experiences of college student environmental activists related to their identities. The following research questions were considered during this study:

1. In what ways do students engage in environmental activism grounded in charity, project, and social change paradigms?
2. How do students’ worldviews and experiences outside of college influence their approaches to environmental activism?
3. How do students’ experiences in college influence their engagement with environmental activism?
4. How do students’ intersecting identities influence their approaches to environmental activism?

Epistemological Approach

The framework and methodology for this study draw from both intersectionality theory and critical theory. Each of these epistemological approaches shares a common theme where they “recognize how different social locations by race, class, and gender result in different vantage points for viewing social reality… the existence of multiple social realities” (Mann, 2011, p. 2). Critical theory as an epistemological approach considers race, gender, and class in a historical and structural way (Creswell, 2003;
The epistemological approach I chose reflected my interest in further understanding the role of justice in the environmental movement and how individuals see themselves in this movement. By using this approach, I intentionally considered the unique vantage point of each participant’s constructed reality based on their intersecting identities and how this influenced their approach to environmental activism. This is a main tenet of critical theory’s ontology, which assumes “reality is shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values crystallized over time” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 168). Using critical constructivism allowed me, as a researcher, to move from simply being a “passionate participant,” who is reconstructing multiple voices, to an advocate for understanding how environmental experiences differ based on historically oppressed identities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba).

It is important to recognize that “views of the world are partial, and as such, privileged interpretations of experience may become dominant lenses through which epistemological and ontological meaning is made” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2010, p. 41). Haraway (1988) presented the concept of situated knowledges to describe “embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges” (p. 581). The concept of situated knowledge recognizes that participants make meaning of their world shaped by their perspectives and experiences. Further, Haraway contends that situated knowledge is not complete knowledge; rather it is partial knowledge grounded in an individual’s experiences and identities.
An intersectional approach is grounded in the epistemology of critical and feminist theory where participants create knowledge and where the use of value-mediated findings is required to understanding the meaning of this knowledge (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 100). Critical theory and intersectionality are linked in a fundamental way. Critical theory focuses on structural oppression and silencing of individuals based on historically oppressed identities (Crenshaw, 2009). Intersectionality connects to critical theory as it attends to the intersections of oppressed identities and how these create unique constructions of lived experience. Ropers-Huilman and Winters (2010) stated that “intersectionality argues that unique perspectives, social institutions, and identities are created by the ways in which intersecting identities and related social structures create a fluid and complex ‘wholeness’ in and among individuals and groups” (p. 37). Intersectionality “has the capacity to generate new ways of thinking, knowing, and interacting” (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, p. 38). Since knowledge and identities are inextricably linked to power, according to critical theory, power should be considered in how it impacts the social construction of identities. Mann (2011) warns that it is important to “recognize how privileged knowledges and discourses can dominate, silence, or exclude others” (p. 3). Through intersectionality, thinking critically about how we create knowledge and understand lived experiences is important if we are committed to “giving authority to those ‘who occupy the interstices” (Doetsch-Kidder, 2012, p. 155).

**Methodological Approach**

The methods chosen for research studies should align with both the epistemological approach and research questions under consideration (Yin, 2011). For the
current research study, I explored how students engage in environmental activism and how intersecting identities influence their approach to activism. Intersectionality research has used quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative approaches (Abbruzzese & Wekerle, 2011; Bowleg, 2008; Griffin & Museus, 2011; Harper, 2011; Jaramillo, 2010; Perkins, 2012). Although research exists that has used each of these methodological approaches, it is useful to briefly consider the strengths and concerns of each approach and how it may align with the research questions being explored.

Bowleg (2008) reviewed three studies that used an intersectional approach in their methodology. From this review, Bowleg presented three lessons she learned including “(1) ask an additive question, get an additive answer; (2) the problem of attempting to measure intersectionality through addition; and (3) ask precisely what you want to know” (p. 314). Additive questions assume that identities can be layered and added together to increase inequality. Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) found the additive approach to be problematic as it assumes identities can be added together to increase oppression. “Triple oppression” is the term used by Cuadraz and Uttal to describe the addition of the oppressed identities of gender, race, and class.

The issue with using an additive approach to identities is that it does not accurately portray the experiences of individuals in regards to these intersecting identities. For example, if the researcher was exploring how gender, race, and class influenced the experience of individuals protesting a toxic waste site, an additive approach would ask participants to disaggregate their experiences. In this example, participants would be asked how their gender influenced their experience, how their race
influenced their experience, and how their class influenced their experience. Although an individual’s identities intersect and vary in salience based on the experience, an additive approach would take the three demographic categories and give them equal importance and ignore the intersections of identities. The issue with this approach is by adding the oppressive experiences together and ignoring the intersectionality of identities researchers can inflate the influence of identities on experiences thus incorrectly assuming individuals experience greater levels of oppression than they may actually be experiencing. In the studies reviewed by Bowleg, participants found it difficult to rank their identities and indicated that depending on when they were asked to rank their identities the salience of each identity differed.

Bowleg discusses the concerns of using quantitative methods as being additive in nature and not truly representing the ideas that intersectionality presents stating that identities uniquely combine to define an individual’s experience. Bowleg (2008) argues “it is virtually impossible, particularly in quantitative research, to ask questions about intersectionality that are not inherently additive” (p. 314). Quantitative analysis can measure effects between identities and how they interact, but what it does not do is treat participants’ identities differently.

Statistical methods, even those that test interactions, were not designed with the study of intersectionality in mind. Rather, statisticians rooted in positivistic paradigms developed statistical assumptions of linearity, unidimensionality of measures, uncorrelated error components and the like that do not reflect the real world complexities of intersections of race, sex/gender and sexual orientation. (Bowleg, p. 320)
Since the current study focused on how intersecting identities influence students’ environmental activism, the limitations of using a quantitative methodology made this approach not an optimal choice.

Griffin and Museus (2011) argue for researchers to be paradigmatic pragmatists who use quantitative and qualitative methods for intersectional research in order to address limitations of either method. The collection of articles in an edited volume by Griffin and Museus provides examples of how quantitative and qualitative methods can be used together to better understand intersecting identities. The chapters in this journal consider present studies focused on college faculty and students. Harper (2011) argued that “current strategies to study and understand students’ identities fall short of fully capturing their complexity” (p. 103). A study conducted by Harper (2007) administered a longitudinal survey of 1,101 multiracial students. The study found that 66% of these students only marked one race when they completed the survey their first year of college while 56% marked two or more races during their fourth year (Harper, 2007). Harper (2007) suggests that the findings from this longitudinal survey demonstrate that identities are not static. Although the authors contributing to this journal make a compelling case, the fact remains that simplifying intersectional analysis to survey data does not fully recognize the complexities of identities. In addition, the limitations of a mixed-methods approach to intersectional research include the complexity of conceptualizing the study and the need for a great amount of resources including time and expertise (Griffin & Museus).
A commonly used methodological approach to intersectionality research is a qualitative approach. Qualitative research uses constructivist methods and assumes that multiple meanings of individual experiences can exist. In addition, individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences in a constructivist approach (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Several studies exploring intersecting identities and the environment have used qualitative approaches (Abbruzzese & Wekerle, 2011; Jaramillo, 2010; Perkins, 2012). The specified research questions in my study were explored using a qualitative approach that took into consideration intersectional approaches during participant selection and development of interview questions. This methodological approach allowed me to address the complexity of attending to the intersecting identities of student environmental activists as they described how they participate in environmental behaviors and how gender, race, and/or class influence their experience. A qualitative approach best aligned with the epistemological approach of the current study and allowed me to address the complexities presented in the research questions.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for the current research study encompasses a categorization of pro-social environmental behaviors and the influence of intersecting identities, worldview, and institutional context on the experiences of student environmental activists. The first component of the conceptual framework draws specifically from the work of Weerts et al. (2014) and Morton (1995). The literature defining environmental activism discusses a wide range of behaviors and activities that could be considered environmental activism. This range of behaviors necessitates a way
to categorize activities since the level of commitment, time, and depth of impact may differ greatly. Environmental activists participate in activities ranging from one-time events to long-lasting social change initiatives. For this framework, I rely on the findings of Weerts et al. that suggest a relationship exists between Morton’s pro-social behavior model and environmental behavior. Environmental activists participate in pro-social behaviors that tend to span Morton’s three pro-social paradigms (Weerts et al.). Morton’s paradigms of social change, charity, and project, allowed me to categorize the types of environmental behavior in which college students participate.

The second component of the framework considers the intersecting identities of gender, race, and class. Existing literature considers how gender, race, and class influence environmental activism. The framework takes an intersectional approach while also recognizing the unidimensional nature of identity-based social constructs. Since the intersections of identities were be unique for each participant, this component is complex in the analysis. For the purpose of the framework I represent this component with the term “Intersecting Identities” to illustrate how individuals’ unique lived identities impact their experiences with pro-social behaviors such as environmental activism.

The third component of the conceptual framework recognizes the influence of worldview and experiences on how individuals describe their care for the earth. Worldview provides a lens into an individual’s environmental values and how they conceptualize the relationship between nature and human beings. In addition, experiences with nature shapes the way students think about their place in addressing environmental issues. Worldviews that stem from the beliefs that an individual’s behavior will benefit
the greater good of society or will positively impact the ecological environment influence individuals to act in environmentally pro-social ways (Schultz & Zelezny, 1998).

The fourth component of the conceptual framework is to consider the institutional context in which students are participating in environmental activism. As was recognized in Chapter One, higher education institutions are involved in addressing environmental issues in a variety of ways, both inside and outside the classroom. Understanding the institutional context where participants are engaged in environmental activism facilitates a better understanding of the opportunities available to students and the way that students are influenced by experiences at the institution.

The conceptual framework guided each research question by providing a way to categorize different types of environmental behavior by using Morton’s pro-social behavior paradigms. Focusing on intersecting identities allowed me to explore how the complexities of identities influence students’ environmental activism. Additionally, considering an individual’s worldview and institutional context in which they are engaging in environmental activism furthered my understanding about what influenced their approaches to environmental activism. Providing space for individuals to discuss the complexity of intersecting identities required intentionality and attention to the current study’s methodological approach.
Methods

Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected from three different types of institutions including a Research University, two Baccalaureate Colleges, and an Associate’s Institution. Participants were selected from three different types of higher education institutions for two primary reasons. To begin, selecting participants from different types of institutions would aid in selecting diverse participants specifically in relation to their race and class. Associate degree institutions are open access institutions and serve a diverse student population. Bailey and Smith Morest (2006) found that students at associate degree institutions are more likely to identify as more diverse in terms of their
race, ethnicity, class, age, and first generation status. Secondly, by seeking participants from different institutional types, it was more likely that participants would have different experiences related to institutional activities and their engagement.

The institutions were selected based on three selection criteria including: (a) the presence of student clubs or activities related to the environment, (b) commitment to the President’s Climate Commitment, and (c) institutional investment and/or support of a sustainability office and/or environmental committee. All of the institutions had student organizations and/or activities that focused on addressing environmental issues. In addition, institutions from which participants were selected were signatories of the President’s Climate Commitment and had a campus-wide sustainability office and/or committee.

Although institutions shared many similarities, they also had key differences that made each institution unique. The research university will be referred to as River University and is a large four-year public research institution located in an urban area. The institution has a governing board that meets locally, enrolls over 50,000 students, offers four major field areas in environmental studies and the environment, and has a robust campus sustainability office. In addition, the institution has a chapter of the Minnesota environmental and social advocacy organization and over fifteen clubs focused on various environmental issues.

The two baccalaureate colleges are smaller than the research university. Each college enrolls roughly 2,000 students annually, supports a robust sustainability office and institutional sustainability agenda, and has a chapter of the Minnesota environmental
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and social advocacy organization and five student clubs focused on various environmental issues. Parkview College is a private, four-year baccalaureate college that has its own governing board, one specific environmental studies major, and is located in an urban setting. Prairie Grass University is a public, four-year baccalaureate college that does not have a local governing board, and is part of a larger state system. Prairie Grass University has two environmental studies majors and is located in a rural area.

The associate’s institution, named Tamarack College in the current study, is a public, two-year institution that does not have a local governing board and is part of a larger state system. Tamarack College enrolls over 10,000 students annually and offers two degrees related to environmental issues and renewable energy. The College does not have a sustainability office or a chapter of the Minnesota environmental and social advocacy organization. Tamarack College has two student groups that focus on environmental issues. The campus is located in a suburban setting.

A purposive sampling approach was used to select participants. In a purposive approach, information rich cases are selected based on their ability to discuss the topic in depth and therefore provide a wealth of knowledge to help best understand their experiences (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2011). College students are pro-environmental in a variety of ways (Bardaglio & Putman, 2009; Creighton, 1998) which was taken into consideration while identifying participants.

In this study I used two criteria to select participants. First, I approached participants currently involved with student environmental groups, campus environmental committees, and/or engaged with addressing environmental issues. The
second criterion focused on seeking diversity among participants. For the second
criterion, students were purposively selected with the assistance of key contacts at each
institution that aided in diversifying the sample. In addition, I clearly stated the purpose
of the study and that questions would ask students to reflect specifically on how identities
of race, gender, and class influenced environmental activism during preliminary contact
with each participant.

To solicit participation, I approached one or more contact persons at each
institution who assisted in identifying and communicating with specific students and/or
organizations about the current study. The contact persons at each institution assisted me
by sharing an email, a flyer, and/or a letter I developed that contained information about
the current study (Appendix D). Special attention by my campus contacts and myself was
made to identify students with diverse experiences related to environmental engagement
and diverse identities related to gender, race, and class.

For this study, I interviewed twelve participants in a series of two interviews for a
total of twenty-four interviews. I chose twelve participants because the goal was not to
attain data saturation but rather to explore the experiences of twelve participants in-depth.
By having two interviews with each individual it allowed me to review transcripts from
the first interview and explore each person’s experiences more fully.

At River University two key contacts passed information about my student on to
two student environmental activists that worked with at the institution. These participants
contacted me and later assisted me in identifying four additional participants, three at
River University and one at Prairie Grass University through snowball sampling.
Additionally, three potential participants inquired via email about participating but did not set up an initial interview. At Parkview College, two key contacts solicited participation and yielded two participants. Identifying participants at Parkview College was most difficult despite several efforts of reaching out for student participation. Participants at Tamarack College were identified by a key contact in student affairs who provided me with student emails, with their permission, to set up appointments. Originally my key contact at Tamarack College provided me with five interested student participants but only four of the five followed through with setting up and engaging in my study.

Qualitative research typically follows the practice of collecting data until the point of reaching data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, approaching this research with an intersectional lens placed less emphasis on data saturation and rather an increased focus on data analysis. Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) stated that what is important is “How the researcher successfully manages to extrapolate the meaning and processes in the data is more important than whether 32 or 100 interviews were conducted” (Cuadraz & Uttal, p. 18). Hunting (2014) states that although “sample size and composition are dependent on the particular project, intersectionality-informed research demands that sample populations allow for in-depth understandings of a particular phenomenon” (p. 10). To allow for an in-depth data collection and attention to the complexity of intersecting identities, twelve participants were selected to participate in the current study.
Participant Consent and Confidentiality

Approval from the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) from the University of Minnesota and at each institution where participants were selected from was sought if required by institutional policy (Appendix A). In order to protect participant confidentiality, the University of Minnesota IRB requested the Informed Consent form be reviewed with participants at the beginning of each interview but not signed. At the beginning of the first interview, I reviewed the Informed Consent form with each participant and gave him or her a copy for his or her future reference (Appendix B). As part of this consent form students were given information about the study’s benefits and potential risks, procedure, compensation, and the steps that would be taken to ensure confidentiality of their interviews and resulting data.

The benefits and risks in this study were minimal. Participants were informed that the personal benefit was minimal but that their participation might enrich what we know about environmental activism and college student engagement. Participants were given a $10 gift card at each interview as a thank you for their time. Risks to the study included the possibility that some of the conversation might prompt uncomfortable reflections about their involvement in environmental issues. In addition, participants were informed that the study was voluntary in nature and that they could stop their participation at any time.

Participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality of their identity. In addition, to offer additional protection the names of the institutions that they attend, the student groups they are a part of and main campus offices were given
general names. As mentioned earlier, the research university will be referred to as River University, one baccalaureate college will be referred to as Parkview College, the second baccalaureate college will be referred to as Prairie Grass University, and the associate’s institution will be referred to as Tamarack College. In addition, research records were stored on a locked computer that only I have access to. The interviews were conducted in quiet places mutually agreed upon by the student and myself. It was important to make sure the location selected was both convenient and comfortable for the participant.

**Data Collection**

Critical theory research uses dialogic methodologies that focus on using dialogue to craft meaning about a particular experience that is grounded in historical and social issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical theory focuses on oppression of historically marginalized groups while intersectionality attends to the intersections of these oppressed identities. Interviews are often used to collect data in an intersectional approach. This method is able to pay attention to the complexity of intersecting identities by using well-thought out questions paired with probing questions to deeply discuss how intersecting identities influence the experiences of environmental activists. It is for these reasons that interviews were my primary data collection method.

**Interviews.** In similar research studies using intersectional methodology, in-depth interviews with information rich cases were used to explore how individuals approach environmental activism in relation to their intersecting identities (Abbruzzese & Wekerle, 2011; Bell & Braun, 2010; Jaramillo, 2010; Perkins, 2012). Several authors discuss the importance of developing good interview questions for research and stress that how
questions are worded impacts how individuals respond to them (Bowleg, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2011). Bowleg notes that “asking good questions is vital to intersectionality research too, but doing so well can be quite challenging. At issue is how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting…to an additive approach” (Bowleg, p. 314). Although it is tempting to disaggregate identities, it is best to allow participants to discuss their identities and experiences in regards to how they resonate for the individual.

Keeping in mind the lessons presented by Bowleg (2008), the concern of additive questions was considered in development of interview questions for this research study. Researchers are encouraged to avoid using an additive approach because it ignores the complexity between interacting identities and the salience of identities as related to the experience being considered. Although Bowleg warned that questions should not imply that “identities are independent, separate, and able to be ranked,” (p. 316) Cuadraz and Uttal (1999) admit that it can be useful to analyze intersectional data in a way that looks at each identity as long as an additive approach is resisted. Resisting an additive approach means to ask questions in a way that allows for individuals to discuss identities in an intersecting why. For example, in my study participants' how their identities influenced their approach. I did not ask questions that forced individuals to talk about their identities in singular sense. An additive approach would pull apart each identity in this way and then add the experiences together assuming that each identity had an equal amount of influence on a participant’s experience. Asking about an individual's identities in an aggregate way allowed them to discuss the complexities of identities and their salience
for each question. Following the guidance of Bowleg and Cuadraz and Uttal, the interview questions asked participants to discuss both their identities and reflect on how those identities intersect.

Bowleg also suggests that the best approach with intersectional research is to “ask precisely what you want to know” (p. 315). The interview questions focused on pro-social behavior, an individual’s worldview related to the environment, how institutional context may or may not influence a student’s involvement in environmental activism, and how intersecting identities influence how students approach environmental activism.

Too often researchers explain that observed differences “can be explained by race, class, or gender, even though they measured no meaningful constructs relevant to race (e. g., discrimination, stereotype threat), class (e. g., social distancing, prejudice, stereotypes), or gender (e. g., gender role norms)” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 322). To address this concern, meaningful questions must be developed in order to truly explore intersecting identities and environmental activism. In the current study, questions focused on participants’ identities, participation in environmental activities, and how their intersecting identities influence their approach to environmental activism. To ensure that interview questions were understood by participants and would generate responses relevant to the proposed research questions, a pilot interview took place with a recent college graduate from one of the institutions where participants were selected.

The pilot interview was conducted to check for validity of the interview questions and to further develop them to ensure that the questions being asked would solicit answers that aligned with the research questions of this study. A recent graduate,
previously involved in environmental activism at one of the institutions included in the study, agreed to participate in a pilot interview via Google+. The pilot interview provided feedback to help shape and further develop the interview protocol prior to using with study participants.

Each participant was asked to participate in a series of two interviews. The first interview used a semi-structured interview protocol and asked several open-ended questions surrounding involvement with environmental issues, individual’s worldview, and several about intersecting identities (Appendix C). Participants were provided with the interview questions prior to the first interview to allow them time to review them, think about them, and reflect if they desired. Individual interviews were conducted with each participant and lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. Following this interview, I transcribed each interview and conducted a preliminary review of the data to identify areas that needed clarification or where I felt a need to dig deeper into a specific topic existed.

The second interview was used as a time to check accuracy of meaning and interpretation from the first interview and allowed me to ask follow-up questions of specific participants as I analyzed the data. I wanted to make sure that I made sense of each participant’s story as they saw it and not solely how I interpreted it. In addition, I asked participants to engage with Morton’s pro-social paradigms and discuss how they saw the activities they participated in aligning with Morton’s typology. Each second interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes.
Data analysis

Data were collected throughout the spring, summer, and fall academic terms in 2015. First and second interviews with participants were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts from these interviews were used in data analysis. This provided raw data needed for analysis and ensured the accuracy of individual comments.

The complexity of intersectional data analysis necessitates attention be paid to how data coding and analysis are approached. McCall (2005) presents three primary approaches that have been used to analyze the complexity of intersectionality including: anticategorical complexity, intercategorical complexity, and intracategorical complexity. The anticategorical complexity approach is used most often in data analysis and attempts to reject pre-determined categories by deconstructing them and allowing categories to emerge through the data analysis process. This approach discusses the simplifying nature of categories and criticizes categories as “social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (McCall, p. 1773). The intercategorical complexity approach to intersectional methodology “requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall, p. 1773). The final methodological category, intracategorical complexity approach, “interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself, though that is not its raison d’être” (McCall, p. 1773). The intracategorical complexity approach looks at the intersections of particular social groups that are traditionally defined. My research approached intersecting identities in an anticategorical
way in which categories are deconstructed and participants are asked to assign meaning to their identities and their salience. The interview questions were crafted in such a way to encourage participants to assign meaning to their identities. In the analysis of my data, I did not specifically create predetermined categories for identities. Rather, I used the interviews and subsequent transcripts to attempt to better understand what identity means for each participant with the understanding that this may be different for each individual.

Also pertaining to the interview questions and related analysis, it is difficult to get away from an additive approach when collecting data and asking questions regarding intersectionality. Although “critics of the additive approach deride the notion that social identities and inequality that are intersectional can be separated, treated independently, or added” (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999; Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003), “Cuadraz and Uttal conceded that isolating the meaning of each identity is an essential analytical step to understanding intersectionality in qualitative research. Thus the researcher must analyze each structural inequality separately, as well as simultaneously” (Bowleg, p. 319). In Appendix C, interview questions are presented that asked participants to discuss their combined identities in regards to how their identities influence their approach to environmental activism.

Bowleg (2008) presents several concerns with analyzing intersectional data. First, the philosophical paradigm of the researcher informs how observations are transformed or coded. For my study, I used a critical approach, which emphasizes the role participants have in assigning meaning to their unique experiences as they reflect on what environmental behaviors they participate in and how intersecting identities influence their
approach to environmental activism. This was emphasized by having participants participate in reviewing excerpts of their first transcribed interview to ensure that I understood how they viewed their participation in environmental work.

Another concern of analyzing data intersectionally is the implicit nature in which participants often discuss identities. Bowleg suggests that instead of simply considering each of these implicit responses as “individual accounts” (p. 317), researchers should consider historical knowledge to overlay with specified identities of the past and how historical context may impact an individual’s current experience. An intersectional approach to analysis is similar, but also deviates in how the approach to coding and interpretation. In intersectional analysis, “the key interpretative task is to derive meaning from the observed data… (and to) interpret this individual level data within a larger sociohistorical context of structural inequalities that may not be explicit or directory observable in the data” (Bowleg 2008, p. 320; Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999). To do this, I included in my analysis codes related to pertinent historical influences on topics participants discussed.

Bowleg (2008) suggests coding intersectional data in the following way. “During the open coding phase, I would broadly code…using multiple and overlapping codes” (p. 319). The overlapping codes would include ones related to identity and also intersectionality. “In the axial and selective coding phases, I would refine each of the separate codes into more distinct codes…During the selective coding phase, I would further refine the codes to reflect a specific dimension of an intersectional experience to highlight intersections of racism, sexism” (p. 319).
The approach to data analysis for the current research took into consideration both qualitative data analysis coding techniques and intersectional approaches. To begin, interview transcripts were read for understanding and completeness. I read transcripts from both the first and second interview for each participant. I read each transcript a second time and took notes and highlighted phrases and words in order to explore potential emerging concepts. Saldaña (2013) called this process pre-coding and suggested that this may help identify quotations to include in the analysis phase or identify potential coding titles.

Nvivo was used to analyze the transcribed interviews because using a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software may improve the rigor of analysis (Welsh, 2002). Each transcribed interview was uploaded as an external source to Nvivo for coding and theme analysis. Coding the material essentially means organizing the material into chunks in the first part of the process and then revisiting the codes to get more meaning (Saldaña, 2013). During the initial open coding phase, transcripts were read for statements that related to the conceptual framework of this research. I used an eclectic coding method during the first-cycle coding phase or open coding phase in order to apply broad overlapping codes. The eclectic coding method is appropriate for many qualitative methods and uses more than one first-cycle coding method (Saldaña, 2013). During the open coding phase, descriptive coding, in vivo coding, and attribute coding were used. Descriptive coding uses a word or short phrase to identify the topic of the code and was used to broadly identify topics discussed by participants (Saldaña). In vivo coding was used in some instances where participants’ own words or short phrases could be used to
code data. In vivo coding was used when possible in order to honor people’s own voices related to the topics they discussed. Attribute coding was used to code student identities throughout each source and school types at the source level (Saldaña, 2013).

During the second-cycle or selective coding phase, I refined each code into more distinct codes as suggested by Bowleg while specifically highlighting intersectional experiences (2008). Specifically, a focused coding approach allowed me to categorize data that were similar in order to develop “the most salient categories” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 210). In addition, refining each code allowed me capture information about students related to their experiences and identities at an individual and collective level.

Data analysis was conducted at both the individual and collective levels. Using Nvivo, I was able to extract codes for each individual and create a narrative for each participant. The narratives are presented in Chapter Four and serve as a foundation to better understand the participants, what their involvement with environmental issues looks like, and how they describe their identities. In addition, each narrative includes how participants discuss their environmental worldview, how they conceptualize environmental activism, and their role with activism.

Chapters Five and Six present a collective analysis of all participants included in the current study. Nvivo was used to identify key themes that emerged from the data surrounding what types of environmental issues students are addressing, how the institutional context, environmental worldview, experiences with nature, and identities influence the environmental activism approaches of college students.
Delimitations

One limitation of my study is that results are not transferrable or generalizable to all college student environmental activists. However, this was not the intention of my study. Rather the critical and intersectional approach enabled me to construct rich descriptions for each participant to discuss their own unique lived experience related to their activism and identities. Another potential limitation is related to the difficulty I had in identifying participants. Although I had more than twelve potential participants initially contact me, I only had twelve participants follow-through with setting up initial interviews. Participants in my study provided rich data but if I had a larger pool of individuals interested in participation I could have been more intentional in selection related to my second selection criterion of diversity.

Trustworthiness of this Approach

Intersectional and critical research strive for credibility and trustworthiness of data through three primary approaches. For this study I specifically used in-depth member-checking, developed rich descriptions from participants, and reflected on my own positionality as a researcher. The research design had participants complete a series of two interviews. Between the first and second interview, I transcribed each interview and conducted a preliminary analysis. During the second interview I reviewed excerpts from the transcript and discussed the passages with participants to complete an in-depth member check and to continue to develop richer participant descriptions of their experiences. The second interview also provided an opportunity for more in-depth exploration of the research questions by having participants engage in different activities
surrounding the research questions under consideration. In addition, rich descriptions were used to help best communicate the key findings and context of participant responses. For example, using detailed descriptions of participants’ experiences in their own words allows for better interpretation of what was meant by the experience.

During this process, I reflected on my own assumptions through personal reflection and constructing a narrative similar to that developed for each participant. Reflecting on one’s positionality as a researcher including my own personal experiences and which intersectional literature and scholars I have engaged with impacts “the way one thinks, constructs, and enacts research” (Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014, p. 114; Dill 2009). In addition, being aware of individual bias as a researcher helps to increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research. For these purposes I have constructed my own personal narrative in Chapter Four to reflect on my own experiences while laying the groundwork of understanding for how I am personally informed by my worldview and identities related to addressing environmental issues.
Chapter IV: Student Narratives

Each participant brought a unique and rich narrative as part of this research. Students shared stories of how they came to be interested and involved in environmental issues and what that involvement looked like at the time of our interview. Many participants talked about their childhood experiences. Literature suggests that childhood experiences with nature influence an individual’s relationship with the environment (Clayton & Myers, 2009). Other participants discussed their exposure to environmental issues in high school or beginning in college.

This section shares a brief description of each participant, focusing on their identities, the environmental activities and organizations with which they engage, and how they see the earth and their place in it. In addition, each narrative includes the participant’s definition of environmental activism and how it manifests in their lives. The participant narratives included in Chapter Four are intended to provide an overview of each participant’s engagement with environmental issues. An analysis and discussion of intersecting identities, involvement with environmental issues and activities on a continuum of engagement, and the influence of worldview on engagement with these issues will be addressed in upcoming chapters.

During my interviews with participants, they were often curious about my story. As I have worked to capture and share their stories, I believe it is important to compose my narrative in a similar fashion to both reflect on and be upfront about my own positionality as a researcher. The last narrative is my personal narrative. Providing my personal narrative allows me to reflect as a researcher on my own biases and allows the
For the purpose of confidentiality, participants were each given a pseudonym that they either chose themselves or asked me to assign them. Each institution was given a pseudonym to further mask individual identities. As a reminder, Associate’s Institution will be referred to as Tamarack College, the four-year private Baccalaureate College will be referred to as Parkview College, the four-year public Baccalaureate College will be referred to as Prairie Grass University, and the Research University will be referred to as River University. In addition, organizations and campus offices are discussed with general names in order to offer an additional layer of confidentiality. Participants were selected from each of the aforementioned institutions. Table One presents key participant characteristics.

**Table One: Participant Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
<td>Tamarack College</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hmong</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Tamarack College</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Tamarack College</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black and White</td>
<td>Working poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Valentine</td>
<td>Tamarack College</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Parkview College</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mexican and White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Parkview College</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Prairie Grass University</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>River University</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspen</td>
<td>River University</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>River University</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>Upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathryn</td>
<td>River University</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Upper-middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>River University</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Lower-middle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eileen was a student at Tamarack College who identified as a Hmong student, female, and from a middle class family. She named her Hmong culture and family as influencing her approach to environmental issues and her experiences related to engaging with these topics. Eileen discussed the cultural tensions and beliefs in environmental issues that she experienced between the Hmong culture she is a part of at home and the American culture that she is a part of at college.

Eileen is not currently involved in many campus activities related to the environment. She posits that if she knew more about environmental issues sooner, she “would probably [be] more active with certain groups or volunteer work.” She also stated that she did not see many opportunities to be involved at her Tamarack College. She is interested in environmental issues and has learned about the greenhouse effect and other environmental issues in some of her classes. Eileen has done her own research on environmental issues by reading articles, watching videos, and engaging in conversations with her peers that are interested in these issues. She has recently adopted a vegan and raw foods diet like some of her peers. She decided to pursue this lifestyle choice when some of her peers challenged her about her stated values and misalignment with her actions. Eileen said that she decided to be a vegan when some of her friends asked her why she was not doing something about addressing these issues if they were important to her. Eileen made an effort to purchase cruelty free and eco-friendly products. The activities that Eileen participated in would fall primarily in the charity paradigm and would also include everyday lifestyle choices.
In high school, Eileen did not recall hearing a lot about environmental issues and what she did hear she did not trust to be accurate. Eileen said she “never really had any nature experiences growing up.” She stated that Hmong people were very “outdoorsy” people, but she was “born and raised in California and just never did most of those things” in nature. She went camping for the first time at the age of 18 and said, “it was just for me the most fun thing and I just realized what I was missing.” After moving to Minnesota, she thought differently about nature than she had in California. Eileen said, “I’m such a big fan of nature, I love the beautiful scenery... because I was exposed to that here.” The big change for her was moving to Minnesota “because in Minnesota we have a lot more nature than we do in California, where I lived at least.” Eileen said not spending time in nature until she moved to Minnesota may be why she is “figuring these things out now because as a younger kid I didn’t really have the opportunities to do those little things and so I wasn’t exposed to these environmental issues like I should be.”

The responsibility Eileen feels to address environmental issues stems from her desire to do her part. She tried to inform herself and discuss environmental issues with her family and friends. She admitted that it is hard to “stay up-to-date about it because it’s really hard when you live in such a fast-paced kind of world.” Eileen was most concerned about animal cruelty, pollution, health impacts of plastics, and veganism. Water quality was important to Eileen because the chemicals poured into our lakes and rivers were poisonous. In addition, the toxins in meat encouraged her to lead a vegan lifestyle and purchase eco-friendly products. She discussed the importance of knowing where we get our food from because how food is grown and the pesticides that are used
Eileen defined environmental activism “as just trying to be more engaged and involved in issues that would help our environment as a whole. To make sure that it’s healthy for everyone.” In addition she believed that people should be encouraged to be more aware and knowledgeable about what’s going on with environmental issues. Eileen believed it was important “to hear a little bit more about the place that we live in because we kind of take it for granted now.” When I asked Eileen if she viewed herself as an activist, she said she was “maybe not a major activist right now but [I am] building up to it.” Eileen continued, saying, “I am a semi-activist…it will take a lot of me, more of me engaging in actual issues, me putting myself out there… but during this time I’m not doing that…so I don’t consider myself that big of an activist.”

Eva

Eva was a student at Tamarack College who identified as Latina, female, and as being from a family that would identify as lower class. She talked about being Latina and addressing environmental issues stating, “I think environmental activism and being
Latina don’t really go together.” She explained that her family previously had not recycled, or bought organic food, and that her choice to be a vegetarian was strange for her family. She continued, saying, “I come from a minority background…being a vegetarian is something that is super weird to my parents and to the Latino culture. It’s just something that they don’t really understand.” Eva’s identity as a student also influenced how she approached environmental issues. Her approach differed depending on whether she was at home or at school. Although her family was supportive of her involvement with environmental issues and animal rights she said they did not fully understand why she was involved. She stated that normally as a child you learn things from your parents but for her “it was the kind of the other way around.” She was the one who started addressing environmental issues and then she taught her parents about them.

Eva became involved with animal rights issues in high school which led to her interest in environmental issues. She learned about these issues by going to a conference that focused on environmental and animal rights issues at a nearby college. She learned about factory farms and the pesticides that are used in large-scale farming. From these experiences, Eva became a vegetarian and began to be more concerned with the links among food, pesticides, and the impact they potentially could have on her health. During her senior year in high school, she was required to do a senior project. She implemented an initiative called Meatless Mondays where she encouraged classmates to make a pledge to not eat meat on Mondays. Eva worked with the school to offer more vegetarian options as part of this project. She had a teacher and mentor who was supportive and helped her learn more about these issues in high school. At first her involvement was not focused on
the environmental aspect of not eating meat, but then she became more aware of the overlap and environmental impact of the food industry. Currently, Eva was involved in student government at Tamarack College. The organization is collaborating with the college on a project to implement more sustainable practices on campus. In addition, she participated in some environmental activities that friends were leading and discussed environmental issues with her friends at Tamarack College. Her current activities included activities in the charity and project paradigm. As for everyday activities, she continued to be a vegetarian, purchased animal and eco-friendly products, and attempted to purchase local organic food when possible. Eva primarily chose to focus on her diet because “that is something that I personally control.” Eva also mentioned that she discussed environmental issues in several of her classes.

Eva described her care for the planet or responsibility to do something about environmental issues in the following way:

I guess just kind of doing something even if it’s small. Like I said it makes a difference…with all of our environmental issues going on you never know what our world is going to be like in the future…because we are still trying to recover [from] past mistakes that our society has made… I feel like our generation is trying to pick it up and fix it…our generation kind of has a responsibility to sort of fix that problem because…in the future we might not even have a place, a healthy place, to live in. So, it’s important for us, especially younger folks, to be informed, be aware that there is a problem in our environment. And it’s important to be involved to try and fix it.

The way Eva discussed her care for the earth aligned with a social altruistic worldview because she emphasized the fact that if her generation did not address environmental issues, society may not have a healthy place to live.
For Eva, she first felt like an activist when she led the Meatless Monday campaign at her high school. She defined environmental activism as being “aware that there is a problem in our environment and to at least try to contribute a little bit.” She acknowledged that some people saw activism as “protesting and being zealous about an issue,” but she believed that, “even if you just recycle, that is being active. Activism is being active about an issue and even if you’re not passionate and super involved, even contributing a little bit makes you part of this whole movement, or activism.”

James

James was a student at Tamarack College who identified as male, black and white, and from the working poor class. His environmental work focused on helping the community, friends, and family whenever he could. Whether it was sharing vegetables that he grew with those who needed fresh produce or assisting the institution address the buckthorn crisis on campus, James was there to help and identified simply as a helpful person. He participated in several everyday activities that related to the environment, including gardening, running, skiing, and winemaking.

James grew up in an under-sourced urban area with his mother. During elementary school, his mother had a terrible car accident, and he needed to go stay with his grandmother in a large suburb to complete a year of school there. After spending a year in the suburban district, James returned to the under-sourced urban school district and realized that they were still learning what they had been when he left a year earlier. James said:

I realized at that point in third grade, that the city was getting a raw deal. I realized that….it’s like the same concept of putting the frog in room temperature
water and you slowly heat it up and he will never know the difference, right? But if you throw him in [a pot of boiling water] and he jumps right out in a panic. I was able to see what both sides look like.

In eighth grade, representatives of an agricultural charter school came to his school to recruit students to enroll in this new school. His best friend was going there and invited him to check out the charter school. James said that he “decided immediately that that’s where I would be going after I saw what it would be like. It was not a zoo, like a big school where you get lost in the class and the teacher never knows you.” At the agricultural charter school he was a member of FFA and learn about agriculture and food science. He participated in FFA competitions and received several awards. James said the charter school was the first in the country to require all students to become a member of FFA. In fact, all the students were automatically enrolled and a bill was sent home to the parents of the kids. It was not an option to not participate in FFA.

He discussed an important moment in high school when a teacher and mentor bought him his first set of skis. This mentor believed in his skiing ability, wanted to support his efforts, and knew he couldn’t afford his new skis. He stated that “lots of positive people have helped me along the way,” and because of this he wanted to help others as well. The drive to be helpful and positively impact others’ lives and the environment influenced James to be involved with environmental issues.

At Tamarack College, James studied horticulture and was a leader in a club focused on horticulture. The student group focused on removing buckthorn, an invasive species of plant, planting native trees, and building spaces like a Frisbee golf course for fellow students to spend time in nature. James followed the process to re-instate a
disbanded horticulture club, secured funding, and recruited members. As part of this club, James participated in activities that could be categorized as charity and project paradigm activities.

The primary campaign that James led was a project to clear several acres on campus of buckthorn. He was passionate about educating the campus about the negative impact buckthorn has on the environment and engaged other students in removing and properly disposing of this invasive species, which puts toxins in the ground and harbors “two other invasive species, oak crown rust which is a fungus that attacks native prairie grasses, and oats and barley and hops, and then the soybean aphids.” He continued, saying, “When you take out these trees, you are helping in way more ways than just helping the tree next to it,” and since birds eat buckthorn berries and spread the seeds throughout the community, it is important that the entire community be responsible for removing the plant because it is a community issue.

James viewed buckthorn as a community issue saying, “We don’t want to be a problem for the community. We don’t want this college campus to be a problem for anyone else.” By removing buckthorn on the college campus, James believes they are doing their part of addressing this rampant environmental issue. James recently completed his studies and received a position in the horticulture field.

James discussed feeling “pretty deeply connected” to the earth. His environmental worldview could be described as biospheric. He said:

I just feel like we are here, and we’re lucky to be here. When we’re gone, we’re gone. I’m not a religious person or anything, I’m a naturalist. I identify as a naturalist, as opposed to an atheist, or your anti-religion, I’d rather be just, the belief that everything comes from the natural world and we all come from that.
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

The universe, like Carl Sagan, to truly create an apple pie from scratch you must first save the universe. Because without the universe’s molecules you would never have gotten them in the same place to have that apple be what it was…that’s my personal belief, my connection to the world.

He defined environmental activism as “acting to make a difference in your environment…pretty straight forward.” He clarified by stating that those changing the environment would be considered an environmental activist “as long as their intentions are positive.” The first time James viewed himself as an environmental activist was when he was 11 or 12 years old and volunteered at a paper drive at a local church. His best friend’s grandfather coordinated the drive, which had a goal of raising money for the church so it could build another building for its school. He recalled that “The town would come together, bring in cans, the paper, and we would stuff it in the semi…they would go and get the money from…the recycling…that was the first thing I did to help the environment…just being helpful.” James stated, “I don’t believe in karma, so much as what goes around comes around, but I know that when you are good and you do good things then it pays off in the long run.”

Jonathan Valentine

Jonathan was a student at Tamarack College who identified as male, Caucasian, specifically Irish and Icelandic, and lower class. He discussed the influence of class on how he approached environmental issues stating, “I try not to show my identity through my class,” but admitted class impacts individuals’ ability to be involved. Jonathan also discussed his identity as a leader as being important to addressing environmental issues and raising money for his student group’s charity. In high school, he was involved by helping raise money for a local non-profit. The focus was on providing clean water for
communities in developing countries by building wells in those communities. Jonathan talked about his parents, teachers, and peers being very supportive of his efforts to address environmental issues.

Jonathan played outside “all the time” growing up including building forts in the woods behind his house. He said that his family didn’t go on vacation often, but once in a while they went camping at local campgrounds and recently his family has been canoeing. He stated, “I just love being outside…it’s just kind of been the thing that I’ve been involved with.” When he was asked if his experiences with nature as a child influenced his drive to address environmental issues, he said, “I don’t know that it’s really influenced me as much as been kind of a joy to me.”

Jonathan was currently involved in various organizations at Tamarack College. He was engaged in efforts surrounding water quality and availability. He led an organization focused on the water crisis and coordinated events to raise awareness of water issues and to help provide greater access to clean water for communities in developing countries. Jonathan was involved in student government and an honor society, both of which have projects that aligned with environmental issues including developing a community garden and incorporating more sustainable practices at the college. Jonathan was involved with activities that could be considered as part of the charity or project paradigms. He was pursuing a certificate in global studies.

Jonathan specifically focused on the environmental issue of water conservation. As he explained:

Water is your basic need. Everyone needs water. It’s the most important thing in your life and you don’t realize it at all. There are people that don’t have access to
it. There are people that have access to unclean water. There is only 0.96% of the water that is on earth that is actually able to be drank and that’s ridiculous…is a really under looked problem and I like under looked problems.

The environment and water quality were not the only issues that Jonathan was interested in. He discussed involvement and concern for access to education, women’s rights, and human rights. As he learned about new issues, Jonathan became involved and attempted to be part of the movement. He described his involvement in these topics as overlapping and advocating for doing little things saying, “My form of activism is doing lots of little activisms, little things until the world is a better place.” He also stated, “Everything is connected in some way…do good things, it’s not hard to be a nice person and do good things and the world is going to be a better place… those good things will lead to other good things.” Addressing multiple injustices was important for Jonathan.

He describes his responsibility to address environmental issues in the following way:

I feel like I know about it so I should do something about it and that’s about as simple as it gets for me… I am privileged to be in a place where access to water is not a problem. The more I learn about the problem, the more I appreciate what I have and the more I wish someone could share in what I have.

Jonathan also stated, “I think privilege leads to ignorance in a way because we don’t recognize other problems when we don’t have the problem… I think knowledge is power. Now that I know, I have to do something about it.” His environmental worldview aligned with a social altruistic viewpoint because he was concerned with water quality, which extended to those in other countries that did not have the access he had to clean water.
Jonathan defined environmental activism as:

Being aware of an environmental problem and going out and doing something about it. Lots of people are aware of the problem and just leave it be [because they think] someone else can take care of it. I feel activists are important because if everyone is just going to sit around saying someone else is going to do it nothing will get done. So I’m a strong advocate for activism of any sort, for everything.

Jonathan also stated, “I understand the impact of doing very little things… just a bunch of little things add up and make huge, huge impact.”

**Helen**

Helen was a student at Parkview College who identified as female, mixed race, and middle class. She noted that the focus Parkview College had on race and privilege has made her racial identity “become very important to [her].” Helen identified as half Mexican and half white and stated that she thought her Mexican ethnicity “is probably the most underrepresented in environmental issues and activism.” She also saw culture as influencing her approach to environmental activism in that it involved “your traditions and your lifestyle and your values, and how that fits in with a group.”

Growing up, Helen was interested in both animals and plants, and as a child she wanted to be a veterinarian. Her father was a horticulturist, and she said, “he really modeled to me how to be kind to the earth and work with it instead of against it.” Helen had many role models in her life who have shown her “the importance of working with environmental issues.” One of these individuals was her grandfather. She remembered hearing stories from her mom growing up that:

She never ate a grape until she was in college because of the Farm Worker’s movement, which I think of as part of the environmental movement really it was environmental justice because the farm workers were getting sick because of the
pesticides on the grapes. My grandfather had them all boycott grapes until they changed the pesticide rule. That was something that really stuck with me and was also important to me because I saw that environmental activism doesn’t just have to be saving a species or saving a habitat it can involve people too and that’s often when it’s the most powerful.

As a first year student in high school, Helen joined a club that focused on water quality even though most members were juniors and seniors. The group did water quality research on the creek that ran behind their school. A special project was developed for her and two other first year students to focus on their first year because they were not quite ready to participate in the water quality project. The project was to refurbish the greenhouse and raise native plants to give away to community members. During her senior year of high school Helen took an environmental science course, and this “solidified what I wanted to do, what I was passionate about, and what I wanted to support in my life.”

Helen was an environmental studies and educational studies major at Parkview College, which provided her many opportunities to volunteer, get involved, and participate in internships. Her activities are included in the charity, project, and social change paradigms. She was involved in various campus organizations including an organization focused on conservation and energy issues, including divestment. “Joining the [Parkview College] environmentalist community was really important to me,” she stated.

Helen participated in three different internships focused on environmental education. She said that “I’ve had a lot of really different experiences in really different places.” She participated in an internship in a New Zealand wilderness refuge where she
worked with students and tour groups to teach them about the refuge. She completed a separate internship in California that focused on an urban community garden. Helen worked with youth to educate them about the garden, seeds, and provided lessons and activities for youth visiting the garden.

She most recently completed an internship with the Fish and Wildlife Service at one of their refuges in a Minnesota urban area. She worked with outreach efforts to the diverse community surrounding the refuge. Her role was to focus on why different immigrant populations that lived around the refuge didn’t visit and to determine how to increase the local community involvement in the work of the refuge. The current visitors were primarily middle- and upper- class white males. Helen chose environmental activities that focused on education and believed that in order to create a culture shift, education needed to be a part of the solution. Education was what excited her, and she used an educational lens in how she approached environmental issues.

Helen first felt like an environmental activist when she arrived at Parkview College. One of the first projects she participated in was sneaking into the trash rooms in the residence hall to sort through trash to see if people were putting things in the correct recycling and trash bins. She felt like she was “making a difference, even if it’s something little.” She also recalled a time in high school when she gave away native plants that they had grown to community members. Helen noted that these moments emerged as key moments of her environmental activism journey.

Helen noted that “past environmental activism has been very much not people focused” and has focused on stopping something occurring in nature or preventing
something from happening, or to “mitigate or try to fix the already bad things that are happening.” Helen “buys into” environmental activism’s emphasis on considering the impact of environmental issues on people. Helen continued, saying:

Environmental activism is working to make the world a better place for people and non-human nature to live together… I never felt like I’m doing environmental activism unless I’m thinking about how people are going to affect the situation, how the situation is affecting people. I think that the environmental justice part of it is, you can’t remove that, that’s totally necessary to qualify even as environmental activism because I think that there’s… a huge misunderstanding to think nature versus people or this dichotomy of people and wilderness. . . I think we absolutely have to look at people and nature as part of each other. So, to fight for one of them is to fight for the other one I think.

Helen acknowledged that the way she approached activism, through teaching, “is really different than a lot of how people think of activism.” She said, “When I think of the word activism in my head, I think of people protesting, sit-ins, walk-outs….but I think that teaching is very much a form of activism, especially when you’re teaching, it involves ethics, and lifestyle, and ideology.” Helen categorized her everyday activities of being vegetarian, eating local mostly seasonal foods, and shopping responsibly, as activism. She stated, “I think of not eating meat as both beneficial to the non-human environment and to the human environment, because of resource use, land use and I try to eat local and seasonally.” Helen said that this could be difficult to do, but she shopped primarily at a co-op that offered local and mostly seasonal food. Helen also had a garden where she grew her own food. She said she was “trying to more consciously consume” and purchased organic when she could. She noted, “Organic is really expensive though as everyone knows.”
Helen’s environmental worldview could be described as biospheric. She described her care for nature the following way:

If I had any kind of spiritual leaning, it would be with nature, and I feel like nature gives us so much and if it’s not our responsibility to give back to it or say thank you, then whose responsibility is it? It just feels very innate to me. I don’t feel like there’s one specific reason why I feel like I need to do it, but I know that it makes me happy and it makes me feel like I’m doing something that is worthwhile.

For Helen, focusing on educating others about environmental issues and making personal choices that align with her value of the environmental were extremely important.

Samantha

Samantha was a student at Parkview College who identified as white, female, heterosexual, and from a family that she considered middle class. She stated that although she considered herself middle class, her family was less affluent than those of fellow students attending Parkview College. She noted that based on her identities, she was privileged and stated, “My identity as a person of privilege is the main reason why I’m a part of environmental issues.” Samantha also believed her generational identity of being a young person influenced her approach to addressing environmental issues by creating a sense of responsibility to address these issues.

Samantha came to be interested in environmental issues in what she termed the “conventional way.” She grew up going to the Boundary Waters and state parks. Her dad loved the environment and shared this love with her. She became interested in environmental issues at a young age and remembered focusing many school projects on environmental topics such as ocean pollution and she completed a history project on Rachel Carson. Samantha grew up in urban city and remembered her family was not able
to have a garden because of potential toxins in the soil in her yard. Her house was built in an area where there used to be an old car plant, and in order to make sure the soil was safe to plant vegetables families had to go through an expensive testing and soil replacement process. Her family never completed this, but she remembered several neighbors digging up their lawn and removing the top two feet of dirt and replacing it with all new dirt. Samantha recalled the image of caution tape lining neighbor’s lawns that were having toxic soil removed. Seeing this in her neighborhood left an impression on her about the importance of the environment one lives in and how it can impact one’s health directly.

Samantha noted that although she was interested in environmental issues growing up, she struggled with getting actively involved as a leader in high school. She did not specifically know exactly why she struggled with leading during high school, but chose to focus her energy on class projects and educating herself about environmental issues. When she started attending college, she decided that she was “going to go for it and joined a bunch of organizations [and] went to workshops.” When Samantha began participating in activities related to addressing environmental issues at Parkview College, her confidence grew.

Samantha was an environmental studies and geography major at Parkview College. She was involved with an environmental advocacy group, a sustainability group, pipeline issues, and divestment efforts at the college. Samantha worked with the sustainability office on campus in addition to being involved with environmentally focused organizations. Through this involvement she realized “that I needed to have a
voice and I couldn’t just inherit what the environmental movement had been before because it wasn’t right and I saw it wasn’t working here.” Samantha has learned a lot about environmental issues in her courses at Parkview College and has realized that there need to be multiple approaches to addressing environmental issues because “there’s no silver bullet.” Samantha was involved in activities that would be included in the charity, project, and social change paradigm. She spent the most time engaging with activities that would be categorized in the project or social change paradigms.

Samantha defined environmental activism by first acknowledging that the environmental movement and the environmental justice movement have different origins and are now coming “together in order to solve the environmental problems that we are facing today.” She continued, saying:

I think the focus of the movement is not saving beautiful places any more, I think there’s three big umbrellas that you can talk about environmental issues with, there is climate change, food systems… and then there is land change and extraction…I think there is going to be a new environmentalism and I feel like I’m a part of that new environmentalism that combines these movements…. I think it’s a social movement now, honestly. I don’t think you can just constrain it into the environmental movement anymore.

After making this delineation, Samantha said she would see herself as an environmental activist even though

…I really don’t identify with the environmental movement of the past, and I think that I really disagree with my dad on a lot of environmental issues now…So, I don’t want to be a part of that environmental movement but this new environmentalism I would definitely be an environmental activist around that.
Samantha’s environmental worldview has changed over time shifting from biospheric to social altruistic stating:

It’s really different from what I felt when I was growing up and I think for me the primary thing that motivates me is that environmental problems are directly linked to inequality… the way we treat each other manifests itself in the environment in kind of a funny way. I think a lot of social problems are directly tied to environmental problems. It’s a way that we oppress people too and the way that that oppression is institutionalized, you see it with the environmental justice movement. People are living on landfills, chemical plants, and we’re exporting all of our chemicals to the third world… cutting down the Amazon, climate change is influencing countries that are not prepared and did not cause climate change way more than it’s influencing the countries that did. I think that is what motivates me. I’m privileged to have… environmental privilege and I think that if I just stand still, I’m a part of it, perpetuating the system of oppression. I’m actively fighting against it in order to not be a part of it, of that system.

She discussed that the “best way to make change is through your community” and that “community is really powerful.” Samantha said she selected activities partially “because that’s what my community is doing” at Parkview College but then also to “create broad system change,” she believed you need to build community.

**Sarah**

Sarah was a student at Prairie Grass University who identified as female, middle-class, and white. She stated that society saw her identity as stereotypical in relation to her work with environmental issues stating, “middle-class white people…historically were seen as the people that [sic] get involved with these issues, but…I don’t organize because I am a middle-class white woman, I’m an organizer who happens to be a middle-class white woman.” Sarah also discussed how her identities of being a young person and a college student influenced her engagement with environmental issues.
Sarah grew up in a conservative state, but had very liberal parents. She grew up with her mom watching CNN and her parents insisting on her understanding the political structures of the country. In middle school, she participated in a mock legislature day where she learned about the legislative process at the state capitol with hundreds of other middle schoolers. Sarah joined the debate team in high school and learned how to research current issues and debate both sides of the issue. In high school, Sarah said that she was involved informally with environmental issues.

She talked about her experience with nature growing up and said that she “never did anything outside when [she] was a kid.” She rode her bike outside and played with neighbor kids, but never really went camping with her family. Her family did travel a lot and took many road trips when she was a child. Sarah credited her travel experiences and family road trips with helping her develop her “global perspective” while also providing her with awe-inspiring scenery. She was “in the car and staring out…watching the landscape change from the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains…that really helped me learn to appreciate and feel inspired…by nature and how it changed.” Sarah began camping and hiking in late high school and into college when she had the ability to do these things by herself. She did not think that her childhood experiences influenced her to be an environmental activist and said that “It was just something that happened by chance and [she] just happens to really like it.”

When Sarah came to Prairie Grass University, she found that people on campus were “really aware about what’s going on and everyone [was] ready to have a healthy debate,” which was a contrast from her rural hometown. Prairie Grass University prided
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itself on being a green campus with green residence halls, eco-friendly buildings, and a “general environmental sustainability focus.” Sarah was a double major in Geology and Environmental Science.

Sarah said that she considered her activism to be political, but “typically works a lot with climate change and environmental issues.” During her first year she “worked up the guts...to start going to weekly meetings” of the local chapter of an environmental advocacy group. In this organization, peers mentored her and encouraged her to continue to be more engaged with environmental issues and organizing. The activities Sarah participated in could be included in the charity, project, and social change paradigm.

Sarah chose to focus on environmental issues that were “very local.” The primary purpose for focusing on local issues was grounded in her belief that in order to encourage others to engage with environmental issues, it was important to “give people a concrete change.” Sarah said, “A lot of people are worried about the environment, worried about climate change, all those things, but a lot of people also think that these issues are really ambiguous and that there’s no way we can actually fix things.” For this reason, Sarah did not focus on issues that could not be tied back to her campus, local community, or state. She continued, saying, “To me personally that is the best way to get people involved and realize what their personal stake in environmental activism is.”

Sarah described her care for the environment in terms of personal stake, in that the environment affects her health through the air she breathed and place she lived. Her environmental worldview could be described as social altruistic. When she was outside in nature, she saw differences in the environment between those that “are kept clean and
When I talk about environmental issues and people just call me a tree hugger, I like to give them a hug, too…I think a lot of people get caught up in the stereotype of a hippie tied to a tree, which I’m not above doing…but one of the issues that I’ve worked on, shutting down coal factories and stuff like that, that’s not always for the environment. I also do it for myself because I like clean air to breathe.

She defined environmental activism as “if we’re looking for action…anything that helps to protect the land, the water, the air…any living or natural un-living thing out there that needs to be protected because it’s being ruined by human involvement.” Sarah recognized that “Environmental activism is interconnected with a lot of different things, as far as, racial and gender equality, economic and social equality.” She found that her experiences overlapped saying, “I’ve helped do campaigns with other groups and other organizations that are campaigning for other issues outside of environmental activism. They all lead one into another.” She continued, saying, “Environmental activism…just came naturally to me because I’m an outdoors person.”

The moment Sarah first saw herself as an environmental activist was during her second year at college when she was asked to be part of a panel that would meet with the Governor. She said that although she was involved with the environmental advocacy group on campus, she was still timid. However, one of her peers asked her to participate and she agreed. The panel she served on met with the Governor in front of a “bunch of college and high school aged students” as part of a youth event at the Capitol. Sarah said her experience was “broadcast over radio and TV, I met the Governor, and that was the
moment that I realized that I really enjoyed doing this.” She continued noting that “Looking at that crowd of young people that was there watching us, seeing how passionate they were about these issues… and these are the people that I’m doing this for.” It was at this moment that Sarah realized that she wanted to continue to work towards addressing environmental issues “whether as a non-professional or just me being an active person in our country.”

Alice

Alice was a student at River University who identified as a woman, Slovakian American, white, and lower-middle class. Alice strongly claimed the identity as woman. In addition to these identities, Alice believed her sexual identity as Queer and generational identity of being a young person influenced her environmental organizing work. Identities were considered by Alice in both the work she did in relation to others identities and to her own.

In the earliest years of her life, Alice had experiences in Slovakia before permanently moving to the United States. She grew up with a single mother and moved several times in her formative years. At one point she was in a broken foster care system, which left a strong impression about oppression with her. These early experiences showed her that “it’s important to fight back against oppressive narratives and experiences” and that she must align her choices with her values. She felt strongly about environmental organizing being approached in a collective way, meaning that people living together in a community needed to work together to ensure they would have “livable communities.”
Alice was most interested in environmental issues that work “to address systems and change and at the time have a specific or concrete way to do that.” She talked about the importance of framing environmental issues and how they needed to be “rooted in race, class, gender, economic, and racial justice.” Alice also stated that it was a “really inspiring way to work to be integrated in your community, to build community.” She continued, saying, “that’s so beautiful about the earth… it brings people together and forces us to slow down….it did all of that for me and compelled me to get involved.” Alice focused on building community in an intentional way while framing environmental issues within a social justice lens.

Alice grew up attending an environmental science elementary school and a Quaker middle school. The experiences in these schools came together to form her values regarding the environment. She stated that Quaker values include “integrity, honesty, peace, justice, and community,” which were “very organizer-like lens kind of values.” She continued by saying:

Integration with the environment, like the healing powers of being connected to the environment, connected to the community, connected to yourself. I think it was just instilled in me pretty young that those are important things and the environment is part of that. That’s where the root of why I got involved with stuff is, I think.

Alice first became involved in environmental activism and community organizing when she was sixteen years old in northern Minnesota. She began with canvassing work for an environmental organization. Alice said, “I feel a really deep connection to the earth.” Her later move to an urban city was difficult because of the environment surrounding her, “[I was] living in concrete…and I am someone who tends to match the
pace of the city that I’m in. It’s also greatly impacted my stress levels and how I eat, and what I do, and my organizing.”

Alice was involved in an environmental advocacy group and the divestment movement at River University. She was involved with the People’s Climate March, has participated in internships, and participated in an environmental justice organization that focused on working in an under-sourced urban area with low-income people of color to reclaim public space for public use. She was interested in a plethora of environmental issues including food justice, food access, and food desert issues. Alice participated in activities in the charity, project, and social change paradigm, but placed the most time investment on activities in the social change paradigm.

Alice believed in creating avenues for engaging students and youth in environmental organizing efforts. An important focus of her work was giving a voice to youth in national organizations and organizing efforts. She stated, “I think that in college we learn all about these big constructs and institutions and have a really hard time translating that into doing something about it or fighting back or resisting.”

Alice described her care for the environment as stemming from her “care about people and about people’s equity and livable situation.” She continued to explain stating, I also really care about people’s connection to the earth…That’s part of the purpose, I think that I feel towards earth… just our connection to or our disconnection from ourselves and our communities I think is also rooted in our disconnection from earth. Those things are really hard to separate. I think that a lot of the problems, like social problems we have today are because of disconnections and actual human interactions with each other.
She finished by saying, “I’m not someone that is compelled by numbers, I guess. I’m compelled by social issues and people issues, or animals.” Alice’s environmental worldview would be described as social altruistic.

In regards to how she would define environmental activism, Alice stated that she had “a hard time with the term activism, because I think that activism isn’t enough. I think activism denotes going to protests or caring about an issue but not knowing why you care about it.” She talked about the importance of being in “really deep relationships with people that you’re organizing with and that [with activism] we are not going to get to a place where we are building the kind of power that we need… to go up against these massive institutions.” Alice believed that organizing was a better term for her work because “It’s a lifelong thing… [and] it does a lot more, it’s a lot more than going to protests, it’s creating people that are people.” Organizing was focused on building community and was grounded “in a set of values or a set of intentions, thinking about how we want to live with each other.” Alice considered herself an environmental justice organizer because she stated, “I don’t think that we can do environmental work without a racial analysis or gender analysis, or class analysis.” She believed an intersectional analysis was critical to her approach to environmental issues.

Aspen

Aspen was a student at River University who identified as white, middle class male in college. He was aware of the way society viewed this identity, stating “I will probably never be able to get rid of that [identity] with the way our society works, so I always have that…white male…there’s white privilege that you have to realize when
you’re working with any issue.” He also discussed how his identity of being a young person influenced his approach to environmental issues, saying that his generation needed to address the issues created by past generations.

Aspen grew up participating in canoe trips through his church where he would spend a week exploring his faith with peers in nature. He also participated in a mission trip where he went to a Native American reservation in Montana and helped scrape paint off of buildings to help improve living conditions for the community. He said that these experiences, being in nature and helping others, occurred through activities his church provided and helped develop his “faith life.” However, he was also aware that there’s “a lot of bad things that Christianity has done in terms of environmental damage.” These experiences were what he believed got him “really interested” in nature. He stated, “Some people don’t like to be outside…so I think that experience helped that, just being outside when I was younger and being connected with nature.” At the same time, he talked about how he saw the environment differently now than when he was younger, partially due to not hearing a lot about it growing up where now he heard more about environmental issues at River University.

Aspen’s parents divorced when he was young. He noted that his mother and father had different political views which helped him see both sides of the arguments. Aspen’s mother was a strong Democrat, an ESL teacher in a secondary school, and was now a pastor. She instilled in him the tenants of social justice, pro-equality, and was active in the local Latino immigrant community. His father was a strong Republican and welder, and instilled in Aspen the importance of logical reasoning. Although Aspen’s parents did
not talk about environmental issues much, his mother did talk about social justice issues. He recalled one conversation with his father regarding climate change when his father stated, “Do you know how big the earth is? There is no way that humans could mess it up.” Aspen said that he used this difference in viewpoints from his parents and assumed that they both couldn’t be right if he was hearing contradicting things. He used this dynamic to argue with his parents about environmental issue and social justice issues. Aspen described this dynamic saying, “I probably didn’t have the best arguments back then. They probably weren’t all the way developed. Being a kid and all, just kind of testing the boundaries, testing the waters…I knew they couldn’t both be right.”

During Aspen’s senior year of high school, he started watching more documentaries and researching issues related to the environment. In addition, during his transition to college, he was very interested in biology. He stated that learning about biology gave him “a really close connection with nature and how that works.” Aspen was pursuing a sustainability studies minor and a major in neuroscience at River University.

Aspen worked at a large department store in a large suburb and started getting frustrated by all the plastic bags he used to bag people’s purchases. He began by asking customers if they would like to purchase reusable bags in order to reduce the use of plastic bags. He even moved some of the reusable bags to his checkout line so customers could easily access them and have the choice of purchasing and using reusable bags. He made an impact with the customers he served and worked with the store to have corporate leaders approve putting reusable bags in all the check-out aisles at his store location. This was one of the moments he felt like he was addressing environmental
Aspen focused on climate change in his environmental work because it was an issue he thought he could do something about. He stated that “Growing up in Minnesota where we have lakes and it seems like the best way…that I would be able to impact, and I also consider it to be one of the biggest problems.” He continued by saying, “Environmental issues don’t only affect the air we breathe [and] the water we drink…the water we drink or the air we breathe affects who’s in poverty because the people who are in more poverty are affected more” by negative environmental impacts. He discussed the conflict he experienced between taking care of the earth and ignoring racism and poverty. When he first started engaging with environmental issues, he felt that the earth needed to be figured out first before anything else could be addressed. Now he believed that care for the earth and respect for others was connected, saying, “It’s all so interconnected and that’s why it’s so complicated.” The transition in his thinking stemmed from his classes, interactions with peers, and organizations he was a part of.

When asked how he described his care for the earth or the responsibility he felt to address environmental issues, Aspen discussed it through a lens of Buddhist tradition and teachings. He described his connection to meditation and specifically to the practice of Metta. “The whole point of Metta is to foster a sense of compassion and caring.” He continued by saying, “So, my care for the earth and my connection to the earth….that’s where it really comes together….trying to be compassionate for myself and then taking
Aspen participated in the People’s Climate March in his first year of college and made connections with other environmental activists. People he met at the march encouraged him to become involved with an environmental advocacy group on campus. His involvement has driven him to be involved in community organizing. The environmental advocacy group focused on social equity, corporate accountability, and environmental issues. The group is involved in Earth Day events, promoted environmentally-oriented speakers, and worked towards safer bikeways around campus. He described his experience as “great, seriously it’s just changed so much in my life, actually working for that, it’s pretty awesome what it can do.” On a personal level, Aspen was a vegetarian, attempted to cook his own food, and bought from good places with local, organic food. He also used his bicycle and public transportation whenever possible. He reported that he recycled, but wished that it was easier to participate in recycling. The activities that Aspen participated in span the charity, project, and social change paradigms while also including everyday lifestyle choices.

Aspen defined environmental activism as “actively trying to help the environment.” He said that “a lot of people would consider themselves environmentalists” and that there were a lot of ways that you could describe environmental activism. Aspen continued by talking about the focus of environmental activism saying:

Are you just trying to save the environment or are you trying to save people that live in the environment…you have to look at what your goals are... some people
are environmental activist but they are really doing it to save the human species...then you realize that saving the human species takes saving other species.

Aspen would consider himself an environmental activist based on his involvement with the environmental advocacy group. His participation with the People’s Climate March was one of the first moments that he felt like an environmental activist.

Kate

Kate was a student at River University who identified as female, Asian American, and upper-middle class. She did not view her racial identity as something that influenced her approach to activism until she got to college. She was adopted at a young age and her identity as an Asian American was not as important to her growing up. She stated that she assimilated to the majority culture while in high school. In college, she has identified more as a person of color through her interactions with peers and involvement in student organizations. She also believed that her identities of being a young person and a citizen of a developed country influenced her approaches to addressing environmental issues.

Kate’s parents took her camping when she was young and she remembered always liking animals and nature. As a child, Kate wanted to be an entomologist and learned about natural systems, living creatures, and the human connections and dependence at a young age. A trip to Costa Rica left an impression on her when she learned about the treatment of animals and the impact cattle have on the environment. Shortly after this trip she decided to become a vegetarian.

In high school, Kate was involved with school groups focused on addressing environmental issues and found mentors in her teachers. Her parents were supportive of
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her efforts related to addressing environmental issues and helped her get rain barrels and learn how to compost at home. When Kate began college her involvement changed slightly because River University was located in a neighboring state from her childhood home.

At River University there were many opportunities to be involved. Kate was involved in several campus organizations including a sustainability student organization, a program-specific club, and a professional development and networking group focused on students of color pursuing careers in environmentally focused areas. She has participated in campus research projects with professors as well. Kate was involved with developing a community garden, promoting sustainable living, participating in Earth Day events, cleaning up a river, conducting a cost-benefit analysis of a local mining project, and developing a new water filtration system to provide clean water for residents in a town in Bolivia. She participated in recycling and composting, and has advocated for planting native prairie grasses at her parents’ home. Kate participated in activities that are included in the charity, project, and social change paradigms. In addition, she participated in everyday lifestyle choices that align with environmental activism.

Kate mentioned two key principles for why she cared for the earth. She believed in first “protecting nature for its own sake” and thought nature “has a truly extraordinary intrinsic value.” She continued by stating, “If we destroy what we have now it will take centuries, if not millennia, to replenish.” Secondly, she believed it’s important to care for the earth because “Our economies, in a very literal sense, depend on our ecosystem services and by ecosystem services I mean the benefits we receive from nature.” Benefits
included biodiversity, clean water, and the ability forests have to sequester carbon and filter the air we breathe. Kate’s environmental worldview could best be described as biospheric.

Kate defined environmental activism as “When someone is aware of issues and then changes their behavior in order to try and solve the issues, or at least make the situation slightly better.” She noted that there were differing degrees of activism but “trying to make change happen is key.” She continued by saying “I generally think of [being] politically active and I haven’t been super politically active…I guess it isn’t a label I often think about.” Kate stated that she considered herself an environmentalist and conceded that by her definition she would consider herself an environmental activist.

**Kathryn**

Kathryn was a student at River University who identified as white European American, upper-middle class, and used female pronouns. Kathryn said that she also used they/them pronouns and when she thought about herself she thinks of herself as a woman. She added that society perceived her as a woman. She emphasized her identity as a college student as a key influence on her ability to participate in environmental work and her approach to this work.

Kathryn came to be involved with environmental issues in high school and then in college. In high school, she was involved in creating a feminism club and credited this experience as the first time she “got the idea that you can do something about the things that we don’t like and things we notice in the world.” The experience in this feminism club was the first time Kathryn considered herself an activist or organizer. At the same
time during high school, Kathryn was growing more frustrated with waste and garbage in her home growing up. She participated in art projects and pulled items out of the trash to use in her pieces.

When asked about her experience with nature growing up, Kathryn talked about how her family went camping, but she “felt more at home and comfortable” in her house. She grew up near a creek and her mom told her to not go by it so she would not get hurt. Kathryn said that nature was “this weird forbidden world” and considered herself “more afraid of nature than grounded by nature.” She posited her impetus to address environmental issues came feeling upset that “The place that nature would have taken in [her] life was replaced with physical things and plastic toys.”

During Kathryn’s first week at River University, she participated in a college sustainability fair. At the fair she saw many organizations focused on addressing environmental issues but many were about recycling or sustainability. She felt that those activities, although good, were not enough to address the climate change crisis. Kathryn met students from the student divestment group on campus and was moved by their cause and motivated by the potential impact divesting could have on climate change. She was involved in pipeline issues, divestment issues, and reinvestment efforts. In addition, she attended events like the People’s Climate March, Midwest Unrest, and other local and regional events. Kathryn was involved in activities that could be categorized as charity, project, and social change paradigm activities. She also made everyday lifestyle choices that aligned with her desire to address environmental issues.
Kathryn talked about her care and responsibility for the earth by saying that since she noticed environmental issues she needed to try and do something about them. Some of her reasons are ideological stating, “Why would we throw something away when we could use it for something else?” Her drive to care for the earth also came from knowing that “We’re all really smart…we all have these great ideas but instead a lot of those ideas are focused on marketing, business, and Wall Street” and “environmental organizing is…the spot where I see us not being as creative or intuitive or not being as much as we can be” and that bothered her. She was not entirely sure why she felt strongly about addressing environmental issues but said it may stem from both noticing these issues exist and the belief that people have the creativity to address these issues. Kathryn’s environmental worldview could be described as social altruistic.

Kathryn defined environmental activism as including activities on a spectrum from buying ecofriendly light bulbs, recycling, participating in community gardens to addressing issues that directly affect people and perpetuate social injustices like climate change and pipeline issues. Kathryn made a distinction between environmental activism and environmental organizing. She described environmental activists as individuals who show up to environmental events in order to address environmental issues but they may not be involved in the planning and organizing of these events. Environmental organizers intentionally think about social implications and environmental implications and focus their work on building community and organizing events and campaigns. Kathryn considered herself an environmental organizer.
Rachel

Rachel was a student at River University who identified as white, female, with a class identity that has changed from lower-middle class to a “separate college student identity.” She discussed how her spirituality of being raised Jewish, but mostly Atheist influenced her approach to addressing environmental issues. Rachel also discussed her Queer identity as important in how she connected to her own sexuality and to the earth.

Rachel grew up in an urban city and has lived in a large city her entire life. Her parents divorced when she was six or seven years old and one of the first things that her mom did was bring Rachel and her sister to an environmental learning center and campground in Northern Minnesota. Rachel recounted this experience saying “the first thing that my mom did as an independent, divorced women, she was really afraid, but she brought my sister and I to a place … in Northern Minnesota. We spent a week there every summer.” The trip up north served as their family vacation. Rachel learned a lot about environmental issues and ecology. She said that this “was the only experience I had of getting to run around in the woods as a kid and it was something that I really loved.” She later went on to be a counselor at this same camp during high school.

When Rachel finished high school, she began to be more politically active. Rachel volunteered during the 2012 presidential campaign and worked with others in the grassroots efforts for the Minnesota marriage amendments. This was her introduction to canvassing, phone banking, and early activism activities. At the same time she realized that “environmental activism is where [she] was most passionate.” Rachel said, “I wanted to do environmental activism but more grassroots environmental activism.”
Rachel studied environmental education at River University and was involved in an environmental advocacy group at her university. She lived in a cooperative house that functions as an economic cooperative and has “a kind of mentality or culture that is pretty environmentally minded,” which was a key lifestyle choice that aligned with addressing environmental issues. At the time of our interview Rachel was working on a range of activities considered to be in the charity, project, and social change paradigms and included advocacy efforts surrounding biking access and safety around campus, divestment, and issues surrounding the reduction of fossil fuels.

The specific activities she focused on included climate change, intersectional issues, and local issues related to climate change. Rachel stated that it was “important to feel like I’m organizing in a way that’s effective” and admitted that effectively addressing environmental issues was difficult because “You want to address this huge thing that’s untouchable and there is no way to really address it all at once.” She felt that it was important to work on local issues that impacted the health of those living in the community saying, “There are some really horrible health aspects and horrible cultural practices that are happening in the place where I live and I feel responsible for that, responsible to do something about that.” Rachel was motivated to work on intersectional issues saying, “especially in an overwhelmingly white, somewhat upper middle-class college activism community…kind of looking at environmental issues in a less white-washed, compartmentalized way and looking at them fully” was important to her.

When asked how she described her care for the earth, Rachel said it stemmed from the responsibility she felt to make change and address things that are unjust:
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I feel responsibility for, firstly as a person living on the planet and specifically as a person with a lot of privilege and a lot of access to opportunities to speak and be heard and hopefully make change. I feel responsibility to speak up when I see things that are unfair or unjust or wrong and I see a lot of those things. I think specifically related to the environment, the way we interact with the environment, it constantly shapes our lives and it is shaped by how we live also, and so I think feeling disconnected from that is a really good way to live or participate in really destructive behavior without realizing it. So, I think that understanding how we are connected to the planet and through the planet to other people and that we have a responsibility to behave in a way that is keeping those people in mind in addition to ourselves…seems like a really simple thing but it’s really, really important to me.

Rachel’s care for the earth focused on addressing environmental issues for the purpose of improving living conditions for the people in the world that are impacted by environmental issues. Her environmental worldview would be considered social altruistic.

Rachel described an experience when she first felt like an activist. She travelled to Washington, D. C. to participate in an environmental protest. She said this event was “engaging and life changing,” and she felt “really empowered by it, learned a lot, and met a lot of great people, and made really powerful connections.” She “felt iconic…young environmental activists being arrested at the White House.”

Rachel defined environmental activism as combining “really complex things…concerns for public health, concern for resources, concern for consumption, concern for food resources, and health, and concern for the future and biodiversity and all kinds of things and then taking that concern to some public forum.” She continued by saying:

I think, for me, the lines between environmental activism and activism can be very blurred because I think that if you are exploring the issues that you are acting on, then you have to recognize that there’s all kinds of other issues at play, like
social inequalities and public health issues...things like that are combined into environmental issues and define how we address them, and whether or not we address them to begin with.

Rachel acknowledged that sometimes she hesitated to define herself as an activist because “I think I have some negative associations with the word activist, to be honest, but I would probably still consider myself one.” Rachel thought that many people considered activism as “an extra thing you do, or an activity or something...it seems normal to me to try and affect change in the world that you live in.” Being active and trying to affect change in her world was not viewed as special for Rachel but simply something she did.

**Laura**

I identify as a white, middle-class, woman and understand the privileges this identity affords me. These privileges ensure that the environment I live in will not adversely affect the health of my family and that if it did, my voice would most likely be heard if I chose to participate in the conversation. My identity as a mother strengthens my belief that we have a duty to our children to address environmental issues both for their health and future stability of society. I believe that we must teach our children about environmental issues and be willing to engage in discussions about complex environmental issues.

I spent a lot of time in nature growing up. My parents were raised on family dairy farms in northern Wisconsin. We often spent our childhood weekends at my grandparents’ farms or in the surrounding wooded lands. I remember fishing, walking in the woods, accompanying my dad grouse hunting, and exploring nature. I was fascinated
by everything I saw from different fungi, exploring a fallen tree, or seeing a fawn bedded down along the wooded path. I have fond memories of playing with milkweed pods, watching caterpillars transform into cocoons, and walking our family’s yellow sugar maple trail in the fall. My childhood home had a creek running through the backyard that contained crayfish and provided an area for my friends to play during long summer days. Throughout my childhood and into my high school years, my respect and awe for the complexity and serenity of nature grew.

In high school, I became interested in making a difference in the world and focused my involvement efforts on opposing animal cruelty and cosmetic testing. High school sparked my inner activist. I gave speeches on animal rights and became a devout vegetarian well into my early twenties. Advocating for a cause publically in high school sparked my interest in activism in general.

I attended college at a four-year public baccalaureate college in the late 1990s and early 2000s when environmental activism was one of several topics for college students to address. The message of environmental justice was not prevalent in my classes as I recall. However, living light on the Earth was a focus of student engagement and activities. I minored in Biology and learned about all living things, from the cellular components and molecules that made up all living things to the ecosystems that they are a part of. I participated in Earth Day clean-ups and adopting-a-highway events but really focused on one-time activities and personal choices. Through involvement in residence life and Greek life, I was able to participate in project and charity type activities. I even led some of these efforts including recycling contests in the residence halls and
educational programming for my floor residents. I found my curricular and extracurricular experiences influenced how I approached social issues inside and outside out college. These experiences in college influenced me to pursue a career in student affairs. I enjoyed my experience as an undergraduate and believed that higher education was a place for students to grow and to develop into engaged citizens.

During my doctoral program I have read many articles about environmental activism and environmental justice. Exploring the field of environmental justice has deepened my understanding and concern for the environment and society. Climate change is a daunting issue for society but it is an issue that disproportionately impacts women, people of color, and the working class. My care for the earth stems from both its serene beauty and also knowing that if we do not address these issues it will have a great impact on nature and humans. I have a sense of responsibility to address environmental issues based on research I have read and learned about the impact and feel called to action.

The term environmental activism is difficult for me to define. I have read many articles and reflected on this question a great deal over the past couple years. My conclusion is environmental activism is acting in a way with the intent of positively impacting the environment. I believe this encompasses personal choices like composting, recycling, and teaching my children to garden. For many, activism goes beyond personal choices. For me it takes the form of educating others, participating in local environmental activities, and considering environmental issues in my community.
Environmental activism is important on many levels including addressing issues of inequality and justice and determining how society will both adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. At the same time, the environmental movement needs to take a deeper look at how intersecting identities impact the movement and what issues are important to address. The task of bringing together a complex society to address complex issues is a hard task but an important one if society is to make the best choices for our environment and society.
Chapter 5: Environmental Activism

In my interviews with students, I unpacked with them their experiences with environmental activism, what their activism looked like, and how they believed their intersecting identities, worldviews, and experiences outside of and in college influenced their approach to environmental activism. Chapters Five and Six present findings that address my research questions. The research questions are:

1. In what ways do students engage in environmental activism grounded in charity, project, and social change paradigms?
2. How do students’ worldviews and experiences outside of college influence their approaches to environmental activism?
3. How do students’ experiences in college influence their engagement with environmental activism?
4. How do students’ intersecting identities influence their approaches to environmental activism?

To begin, I present an analysis of the current activities and issues with which student environmental activists engage. Second, I consider the influence that worldview and experiences outside of college have on how students approach environmental activism. Third, I discuss the experiences students have in college and how the institutional context influences their involvement in addressing environmental issues. In Chapter Six, I discuss the influence intersecting identities played in students’ approaches and abilities to engage with environmental issues.
Environmental Activities: Charity, Project, Social Change, and Everyday Activities

The student environmental activists whom I interviewed participated in a wide variety of environmental issues and topics, which can be categorized into Morton’s (1995) charity paradigm, project paradigm, and social change paradigm. During the second interview students were introduced to Morton’s pro-social paradigms, and they helped me understand where they saw their activities fitting on this continuum. Different participants categorized the same activities in different ways. The difference was often due to the role they played or their level of involvement.

Charity Paradigm

The charity paradigm includes behaviors that are a “direct service where control of the service (resources and decisions affecting their distribution) remain with the provider” (Morton, 1995, p. 21). Students talked about a variety of volunteer activities and the importance of their role in how they categorized their environmental activities. Eileen said she “would consider [herself] a kind of show up and help kind of person.” Jonathan noted that he saw charity as work where “we’re going to show up, we’re going to do it, [and] we’re going to leave.” Sarah talked about how her first year in college. Most of the work she did would be categorized in the charity paradigm, stating, “I would be aware why we were doing [an activity] but then as soon as we were done I would go home and not think about it until the next week when we had our meeting.” Activities that students participated in included helping with a community garden, Earth Day events, holding events to raise money for environmental organizations, tabling at events, and attending river clean-up events.
Samantha discussed planning charity paradigm activities for the student population in her role with the sustainability office. She coordinated bike to work day, buckthorn removal, sorting waste events, and other “environmental volunteerism” activities. She said the purpose was to get people involved “but a lot of times what ends up happening is they just think about it during the involvement and then don’t think about it anymore.”

Alice did not do a lot of charity paradigm type work “because it’s more volunteer work than it is organizing work, and I’m an organizer.” Other participants had issues with the term charity. Morton (1995) cautioned that the term charity depicts a power issue of a privileged provider doing work for an oppressed group of people. Aspen suggested not to think of activities in this paradigm as charity and instead think of these activities as “solidarity.” Aspen described solidarity as working together with the community to complete a beneficial activity or project.

The term charity seemed to tie back to the idea of raising money or saving money for organizations. James discussed how removing buckthorn would be considered charity in his opinion because it saved the institution money. However, I would place James’s work in the project paradigm based on his level of engagement and length of the project. Jonathan talked about his effort to raise money as charity because they were one-time events and they were for a charitable organization. I conceptualized his involvement more in the project paradigm since it was an ongoing effort and his involvement included educating the student population about the global water crisis. Some participants viewed
the term charity positively and linked it to saving money. In particular, students attending
Tamarack College talked about charity specifically in a positive way.

**Project Paradigm**

The project paradigm includes in-depth activities that address a community
concern. Key components of activities in the project paradigm are that participants define
the problem, determine solutions, and then implement a well-conceived plan to respond
to the needs of the community (Morton, 1995). Participants engaged in projects such as
community gardens, safer bikeways projects, planting native trees, engaging with global
water safety projects, and campaigns surrounding community environmental issues,
pipeline issues, and campus sustainability efforts. Participating in a community garden
was viewed by some participants as a project paradigm activity because of their role in
planning the activity and implementing the plan. The community garden Kate was
involved with was considered to fall within the project paradigm because it is on campus
and run primarily by students where they are “digging up the land and then putting in
compost. We’re going to have a vegetable bed garden and fruits and really trying to make
it a learning experience for everyone involved.”

The safer bikeway campaign was considered to align with the project paradigm by
one participant and the social change paradigm by another. The campaign included
students, community organizations, and the greater biking community and focused on
creating safer bike lanes for the biking community. Although the biking community was
involved in developing the campaign, I would argue that the action to create safer
bikeways impacts a wider community where the bike paths exist. Since not all
community members impacted by the bike path changes were engaged in this project, I would place this activity in the project paradigm.

Campaigns to plant native trees, remove buckthorn, install solar panels on campus buildings, raise money and awareness through education for global water issues, and explore a community Styrofoam ban all fit into the project paradigm. In these activities, students defined the problem, identified a solution, and, in many cases, implemented that solution. Kate talked about her effort with an organization to raise awareness about health issues related to contaminated water in another country. Although I have put this activity in the social change paradigm, Kate said that they are trying to address social issues but that the country’s “government isn’t strong enough to reign in [mining] companies, we can’t fix that, and we’re not trying to address that.” Kate’s organization is focused on educating communities about water safety and how to filter water. Since they are not able to address the larger social issues, these efforts would be considered project-based. Sarah talked about her organization’s effort to start conversations with community members regarding their proposal to ban Styrofoam in their community. She said, “We are kind of breaking ground and going around talking to…restaurants that have carryout food and [ask] whether they have ever thought about why they have Styrofoam versus compostable containers.”

Some participants said most of their activities align with the project paradigm with the intent of moving to social change activities. Alice “had experiences within [the] project trying to move to social change” and noted that she thought doing activities in the “social change paradigm [was] actually incredibly hard to do in an organization” because
of the need for engagement and the amount of time that it takes to make social change and build a movement.

One issue of the project paradigm is the concept of the “role of the expert.” Projects are often led by an expert who is not necessarily a part of the community. Having an expert lead the development and implementation of a project creates power issues between those creating and implementing the project and those in the community where the project is being implemented. Participants didn’t talk about the power issues of the “expert” in their project paradigm activities. When projects focused on creating gardens, planning to build wells, or educating about filtration systems without community involvement in developing the project, the role of an expert could potentially lead to oppression of the community being served.

**Social Change Paradigm**

The social change paradigm includes activism, political engagement, and advocacy. Activities in Morton’s (1995) social change paradigm focus on “creating power-neutral learning communities to address root causes to problems” (Weerts et al., 2014, p.5). Many participants invested their energy on social change activities. Alice focused not only on environmental issues, but also “racial justice [and] economic justice work.” When organizing she was “building movements not building campaigns” and believed that this was part of “thinking intersectionally…the issues are not separate from each other and when we demand things that might help us in the short-term or help a certain community but hurting another, that is not the change that we want to see.” It is
important to keep in mind the ways in which social justice issues intersect and impact communities.

The organization Kate was involved in focused on developing a support network for minority students interested in careers in the natural sciences. She said, “trying to promote minorities in the field is trying to promote a kind of social change and there are not many women minorities in the natural resources and related sciences field.” Kate’s organization focused on empowering and connecting students of color with college alumni to build a strong network of professionals wanting to address environmental issues.

Academic programs, classes, and faculty members were considered by participants as focusing on social change activities. Samantha talked about academia saying:

I think to some extent…the way we think about things really has an influence on policy…academia is a place where ideas are produced, a place where there’s criticism of past ideas and reworking of past ideas. I think a lot of that work happens in academia. So maybe that’s part of social change.

Helen said that academic departments and “classes fit under [the social change paradigm because] …the ultimate goal has been to affect how you think and how you relate to the world. We talk about broad scale social change a lot.” Helen’s experience with an urban community farm in California aligned with the social change paradigm. The organization she worked with was a non-profit organization, and she “worked in the youth garden doing education.” Kids would come to the garden and learn about gardening, do arts and crafts, and Helen would “teach lessons about seeds.” She worked to educate the community through her role in this organization. Food security issues and guerrilla
growing were issues Alice engaged in an environmental justice organization. Guerrilla gardening occurs when a group of people go to vacant plots of land in under-sourced urban areas and reclaim the space by planting gardens with the goal of turning the space into something useful and needed by the community.

Choosing to live a vegetarian lifestyle was considered to be part of the social change paradigm by several participants. Helen stated that:

In some ways everyday activities are part of the social change paradigm because …even if it’s not an organized project…that’s how social change happens, right? Some people are doing it, more people do it, more people do it and people will start changing the way that they think…Social change through vegetarianism…social change to eat local…to make local food more affordable.

Eva also believed that everyday choices could be considered in the social change paradigm since they positively impacted the environment and influenced her family’s choices.

Advocacy and political activism are considered social change paradigm activities. One participant shared her experience of participating in Midwest Unrest. This event took a bus full of students from Minnesota out to Washington D. C. with the intent of convincing John Kerry that the Alberta Clipper pipeline was illegal. They stood in front of his house with squawk boxes to deliver their message. In addition, several participants attended the People’s Climate March, which was an event in New York City to address the issue of climate change. Several buses from Minnesota went out to join 400,000 other activists for the march and demonstrations. Other participants engaged in lobbying efforts related to pipeline issues and other environmental issues nationally, regionally, and with the Minnesota legislature.
Divestment was a large issue that students discussed. Divestment is a national and regional movement asking colleges and universities to divest their endowments from fossil fuel companies. This effort is led by Bill McKibbons and 350.org, a national organization focused on divestment. Rachel discussed the fossil fuel divestment movement saying that “In the last ten years [the divestment movement has] become a tactic that students and universities are using to address climate change.” Alice noted that colleges and universities:

Have a really unique situation… where a bunch of students are coming together and living and have put a lot of money into an institution…[They] should have a choice of where that money is going…[not] to fossil fuel companies.

She also said that sometimes she has “had a lot of trouble with the framework of divestment because…you’re taking an inherently [privileged] group of people…and asking them to organize around environmental issues [of which] they are not…directly impacted.” Participants engaged in efforts to ask their college or university to divest from fossil fuel companies.

Rachel said, “We’re working right now to put pressure on various points kind of within the system that might lead us to divestment and also just trying to grow numbers and work from more of a grassroots side.” She recognized that the referendums and resolutions her organization worked to pass through student government and the local city council were moves “to assign some social legitimacy to divestment.” The biggest problem Samantha saw with the divestment movement “is not actually the financial argument but this idea that it’s a symbolic act and because it’s symbolic it’s not powerful [enough to risk] a school’s finances.” Samantha placed divestment in the social change paradigm. She said divestment “is about symbols and it’s about broader global
movements and it’s about climate change. It’s about the way we are as human beings, as Americans, and it is about power.” Most participants understood both the importance of and issues with the divestment movement.

Some students participated in stand-ins aimed at starting conversations with governing boards, wrote proposals for senior administrators, and held campus conversations with key leaders. Helen talked about a teach-in that focused on divestment. They “set up a whole bunch of blankets and had food…on the lawn…it was supposed to be a very informal discussion with students because a lot of students who disagree with it, or don’t really understand it can be really aggressive.” Kathryn noted that “Divestment is a really good way for students to become empowered and actually make change…divestment provides more lasting change and more social change.” Kathryn thought divestment efforts were a “continual systemic push” and not something that would happen immediately.

Some participants discussed the importance of reinvestment as a component of divestment. Kathryn believed new investments should not be with organizations that violate workers’ rights because that would solve one social injustice at the detriment of another. She said the issue of divestment is that “We are not engaging directly with frontline communities and through reinvestment we would.” For this reason, Kathryn described divestment and reinvestment as belonging to both the project and social change paradigms. Kathryn said the key to reinvestment is “building a new community, a more autonomous community. They call it community wealth building in organizer speak.” Alice said, “it’s the idea that we have [the] most impact in our communities, [and] we
have the most impact to organize in our communities.” The divestment and reinvestment movement was a key focus for many participants and aligned with the social change paradigm.

**Everyday Activities**

Students made everyday lifestyle choices related to addressing environmental issues. As Pink (2012) argued, both everyday lifestyle choices and political activities are part of an individual’s environmental activism. Everyday activities were not represented in Morton’s three pro-social paradigms. However, everyday activities were an integral part of the environmental work noted by participants. Some students viewed everyday activities as an important part of their activism work while others believed that small individual choices did not really impact environmental issues.

The importance of aligning their everyday activities with the value they placed on the environment was discussed by several participants. Aspen said he tried to “bring sustainability to every aspect of [his] life.” Helen believed that everyday activities were an important piece of the activism work she did. Eva, Eileen, Jonathan, and James said the everyday small things and lifestyle choices can add up to have a great impact.

Alice saw “everyday activities as an obligation most of the time.” She said that she was “more in the camp of, yea it’s great but we should organize because that’s what’s going to make long-term kind of change.” Rachel said:

I guess I don’t feel very much like the things that I do personally have an impact around the world but they have an impact on the way that I think…in terms of seeing connections between issues and understanding how I personally can live with less and feel good about that.
Regardless of the importance participants placed on their everyday lifestyle choices in relation to their activism, everyone participated in a variety of activities and lifestyle choices that aligned with pro-environmental values.

Many participants felt their food choices were central to addressing environmental issues. Participants chose vegetarian or vegan lifestyles, bought organic and local food, and grew their own food in a garden. Eva said she was “trying to buy organic and local things just because [she] knows that it’s better for the environment, better for the community overall.” As a home gardener, James shared his “produce with whoever [he] knows.” James believed teaching others to garden and sharing what he grew helped others have access to local produce.

Aspen “read a lot [about] being a vegetarian” and that it “cuts down your carbon footprint more than not driving” because the amount of gas that it takes to produce meat. Eileen said her vegan diet coupled with her concern about how “plants and vegetables…are chemically produced” influenced her approach to activism. She also stopped drinking water from plastic bottles and used organic, cruelty-free shampoo and cosmetics. Eileen’s primary concerns included animal cruelty and the idea that chemicals were present in food and personal care products she used. Eva did not eat meat and also used organic products for her shampoo and cosmetics. Helen tried to “more consciously consume” and ate locally and seasonally. She believed her vegetarianism was “both beneficial to the non-human environment and…human environment because of resource use, land use.” Participants understood the environmental impact leading a vegetarian lifestyle had and intentionally chose vegetarianism to make a difference.
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Students participated in gardening, composting, using rain barrels, and planting native plants at their homes. Participants recycled, brought reusable cups to coffee shops, turned lights off when leaving a room, and tried to conserve water by being mindful during showering, doing dishes, or doing laundry. Samantha taught people about everyday activities in her role with the sustainability office and answered peers’ questions related to recycling and green living. A few participants lived in a cooperative housing environment where they composted, reduced waste, and tried “to live with a lighter footprint.” The co-op community participated in “consensus building” and informed the ways in which Kathryn built communities and organized. Students from River University said they used public transportation and their bicycles as their primary mode of transportation.

Greatest Impact While in College

Morton (1995) found that students felt they had the greatest impact on social issues by providing direct service through charity paradigm activities. Participants in my study discussed the impact they could have through direct service activities. They also identified activities in the project and social change paradigms.

Eileen said, “If we can find a way to incorporate [environmental] issues during classes, I think that would be wonderful.” Eva’s experience in the classroom got her more interested in environmental issues. She was in a class where “they mentioned Rachel Carson” and noted that “You don’t have to take an environmental class to know about environmental activism...educating others will definitely make the biggest impact.” Eileen and Eva believed that experiences in the classroom could have the greatest impact on environmental issues.
Kate believed the greatest impact could occur in college by getting involved in organizations that “directly help” populations. Helen thought that “Charity goes a long way really, in terms of habitat species conservation.” Some participants believed addressing specific issues could have the greatest impact and included climate change, divestment, and food justice. Helen said, “The food justice movement… is making an impact right now, a big one” and that “community gardens… have a dual impact on people and the natural environment [and] that is really important. I think bigger than people give it credit for.” Other participants talked about tactical approaches to engage peers in environmental issues. Jonathan suggested choosing activities that people liked to participate in to get people’s attention. He said, “Find things that people like and combine it with what you’re doing… forming different communities, bringing people together in different ways, I chose music because people love music.” Sarah talked about the importance of social media and technology to communicate about environmental issues with her peers. She said, “Social media campaigns [are]… really effective because I think they speak specifically with my demographic.” Sarah said that her peers were always on their phone, tablet, or computer and were very connected through social media so it was a great way to connect with them about issues.

Samantha believed “People do things every day that have the potential to change the world and sometimes things that we think are going to change the world do nothing.” For this reason, she believed people should:

Try in every moment to make those decisions that are better for the world… a few of them will have a small impact, a few of them will have an even bigger impact, maybe one of them will change the world, maybe we’ll have an idea that is just revolutionary.
These ideas may focus on activities in the charity, project, or social change paradigms. Participants in my study discussed activities that could have the greatest impact now while they were in college and could be aligned with each of Morton’s pro-social paradigms.

**Greatest Impact in Lifetime**

Morton (1995) found that students believed activities would have the greatest impact in their lifetime when they focused on direct service or projects. Participants talked about activities they thought would have the greatest impact over their lifetime. Activities described by participants aligned with all three of Morton’s pro-social paradigms.

Sarah said, “I think direct action policies are always a really good way to get people involved.” She continued, saying when “people go and lay down in front of…giant trees [to] try and stop the machines, I think those are positive things, anything that can get someone arrested is always going to draw attention.” Sarah concluded, saying “What really brings people around [is] they’re passionate and they want to influence change” and the “best way to do that…is [to] do something dramatic.” Sarah said having the greatest impact over one’s lifetime would occur by people coming together to large numbers to do things that are dramatic and will catch other people’s attention.

Others talked about participating in activities that were interesting. Jonathan said that “finding things as you go and all of the things you do lead you to something else. It amazes me.” Kate suggested finding environmental organizations to be involved with can...
help you address issues. She said, “that’s one of the only ways to make change is if you find more people who also want to [make change].” Over Eileen’s lifetime, she thought “joining groups, networking, communicating…making sure you surround yourself with people who can challenge your mindset [on] certain issues.” Finding activities that are interesting, finding other interested people, and fostering a network of others interested in environmental issues could have a great lifetime impact.

Aspen said focusing on “Learning and education [could have] a huge impact.” Helen also discussed the impact of education saying “I think it’s so important…I think it’s [learning and education that] are really going to cause the structural shifts in lifestyle and thought.” She continued, saying:

You get those kids at a really young age that have never gone on a hike, have never looked under a log, and you take them out. It’s just like, you see this light bulb or teenagers that have lived in cities their whole lives and have never gone on a hike or have never gone fishing and you take them out to fish and they realize that it’s not really scary and that nature isn’t this horrible place. So I think for the future those are incredibly important.

Eva said, “I’m probably going to always continue to [do] small things, like watch how much water I use and recycle, because I learned [that] from the people around me how important it was and I’m probably always going to continue.” She noted the importance of learning, but said to have the greatest impact you need to implement the things you learned.

Samantha discussed the butterfly effect and said she wanted to live her “life intentionally.” This included “having intentional conversations, trying to be the best person [she] can be, trying to be engaged with people, engaged with other issues.” She believed that these “butterfly effects” were the “greatest impact [she’ll] have in [her]
James had difficulty choosing one thing as having the greatest impact on environmental issues over his lifetime. “Everything that you do to impact the environment is so small and so miniscule, you know what I mean. So to say that one thing is a huge influence…is kind of wrong to me.” He likened it to pulling buckthorn saying, “When I’m taking out buckthorn it’s one tree at a time, not taking out five trees at a time, I’m taking out ONE at a time.” Samantha and James argued that the small things can add up to have an incredible impact over their lifetimes.

Alice believed that “Social change has the most impact.” She said, “I think that’s a really hard thing to build…when I organize I’m thinking about building.” Kathryn said that the greatest impact in her lifetime would occur by “taking a systemic approach…to think about reworking the system we live in.” Rachel also discussed the potential impact of building “communities in the way [where] they manage their own resources and respond to things that are happening around them.” Thinking of building communities in this way Rachel suggested “A more radical roots-based approach to an issue of thinking about environmental issues as they exist in time right now but also thinking about why they manifest the way that they do and who they impact.” The main tenant Rachel said is “putting power back in the hands of communities.” She saw this “very much as an environmental issue [and] something that is powerful to [her].”

Students discussed approaches to environmental activism that had the potential to have the greatest impact on addressing environmental issues over their lifetime. Participants focused on several topics and activities that were considered in the social
change paradigm. Overall approaches with the greatest potential impact aligned with the charity, project, or social change paradigms.

**Specific Environmental Issues**

Students chose to address many environmental issues including pipeline issues, sustainability issues, climate change issues, and global water issues. Rachel said the question about why student activists choose to address specific environmental issues was “important to keep in mind because there are so many issues and sometimes, especially on campus, there’s a lot of small things that can add up.” Why students chose specific topics was related to their ability to impact the issue, where the issues were located, and the ability to enact social change.

**Passion for a Cause**

Many of the participants talked about their passion for the specific environmental issues they worked to address. Eva said the topic of animal rights and veganism “kind of sparked a passion.” Rachel noted that she is “more passionate” and feels that it’s “more important for [her] to work on local issues.” Passion for a cause influenced the topics participants chose.

**Local Issues and the Community**

When asked why they selected to focus on a specific environmental topic, several students said they chose topics that were local or part of the community. Aspen noted, “Growing up in Minnesota where we have lakes, it seems like [focusing on climate change is] the best way that I would be able to impact [change].” Alice said that “localized issues…that have a real impact on people in [a specific metropolitan
area]…like communities taking back and owning their utilities, they’re owning their food, and owning the means of production” were powerful. Sarah said, “I think a lot of people are worried about the environment, worried about climate change…but I think a lot of people also think that these issues are really ambiguous and that there’s no way we can actually fix things.” It is for this reason that she kept the activities of her organization focused on local or state level environmental issues.

Samantha believed that “The best way to make change is through your community.” Being part of a specific large metropolitan community was part of why she addressed the environmental issues she did. Samantha said, “To some extent I’m doing [environmental activism] because that’s what my community is doing.” She continued, saying, “The reason why there is such an emphasis on the local and on the community is...what really needs to happen with a lot of these environmental issues is that we need to change, we need to look inward.” Eileen’s friends and peer community supported and encouraged her to align her lifestyle choices with her beliefs about environmental issues and animal rights. She said, “they kind of influenced me” to be involved through conversation and campus activities.

Creating Social Change

Impacting social change was another reason students focused on addressing specific environmental issues. Alice said, “What is compelling for me are issues that are working to address system change and at the same time have a specific or concrete way to do that.” Rachel noted that it was important for her “to feel like [she’s] organizing in a way that’s effective” and impacting change. She said it’s difficult with “environmental
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issues…because you want to address this huge thing that’s untouchable and there is no way to address it all at once.” Creating change through participating in a variety of activities enables you to address large issues. Kate said, “I wasn’t sure if I wanted to focus all my time on such a narrow topic so I picked [the sustainability club].” Aspen “was kind of interested in other issues besides climate change but thought that was the most important one” and labeled this issue “the big picture.” Education was discussed by Helen, who said she “really wants to focus on a culture shift” and thought it could be done through early education and “exploratory experiences” in nature. Helen believed that “When [she] feels that [she] can teach people,” she can change their mindset in relation to the environment.

Environmental issues often interact with other types of social justice issues. Aspen stated that “when you’re working with environmental activism… [you need] to focus not only on the environmental side but you also have to look at the social and economic side.” Rachel said that “intersectional issues are really powerful to [her and that she feels] …really motivated to work on them.” She considered environmental issues as intersectional issues. “Especially in an overwhelming white somewhat upper-middle class college activism community” she felt “compelled to…address issues of racism and racial inequality in the organizing that we are doing.”

Health Impact of Environmental Issues

The environment negatively impacts individuals’ health from the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat, and the toxins in communities. Unfortunately, these negative health impacts affect communities of color and working class
neighborhoods in greater numbers than white middle class communities. Aspen recognized the disparate impact saying, “Environmental issues don’t only affect the air we breathe, the water we drink [but it] affects who’s in poverty because the people who are in poverty are affected more so by the bad environmental [issues].” Rachel said:

Pipeline issues, Minnesota issues are important for to me because I live in and see the communities that are impacted by…some really horrible health aspects and a lot of really horrible cultural practices are happening in a place that I live. So I feel responsible for that and responsible to do something about it.

Eva noted that “not a lot of people know where we get our food from” and that the food industry was an “obvious problem in the United States.” She continued, saying, “How we produce our food [is] disgusting…sometimes their food isn’t as great as it should be for us.” Jonathan chose to focus on water issues because “People don’t understand that water is your basic need, everyone needs water…there are people that don’t have access to it, there are people that have access to unclean water.” Eileen was concerned about “pollution and water pollution simply because…we don’t really stop to think about the consequences of [big corporations pouring chemicals] into our lakes or rivers and how that can cause our environment or our water to be very poisonous.” Participants were concerned about toxins both in the food supply and environment in which people live.

**Personal Sphere of Influence**

Some participants talked about their ability to do small things that are within their control. Eva said that she “decided to focus more on [her] diet instead of other things because that [was] something that [she] personally controlled.” She recognized that this may be a “small contribution to the bigger problem” but she felt that even “a small contribution [was] something.” James believed that if you know about the issue you
should do something about it. He continued, saying, “if everybody just pitches in a little” you can address important environmental issues. Reviewing the types of environmental activities college student environmental activists engaged with and why they chose specific topics helps to illuminate what environmental activism looks like for today’s college students.

**Conceptualizing Environmental Activism**

In this section, I consider how my participants conceptualized and defined environmental activism, and what tensions existed between previous generations and the new generation who are addressing environmental issues. Participants defined environmental activism differently and how they viewed themselves as their activism. Tension existed between how students viewed their environmental activism and the stereotypes of environmental activists. Kathryn said, “The problem with a lot of environmental organizing and environmental activism is that it’s this big huge thing...it’s the entire environment.” Rachel said that environmental activism “combines a lot of really complex things; concern for public health, concern for resources, concern for consumption, concern for food resources...concern for the future of biodiversity and all kinds of things.” Rachel continued, saying, that environmental activism is taking these concerns “to some public forum.”

Actively addressing environmental issues was a key piece of the participants’ environmental activism definitions. Eileen defined environmental activism as “trying to be more engaged and involved in issues that would help our environment as a whole.” Eva defined environmental activism as being “aware that there is a problem in our
environment and to at least try to contribute a little bit.” Sometimes the small things can be considered activism Eva noted saying sometimes activism is “seen as protesting and being zealous about an issue but even if you just recycle, that is being active.” James said it was straightforward and defined environmental activism as “acting to make a difference in your environment.” The term action or acting was an important component of the definitions students proposed.

Sarah described environmental activism as “looking for action...anything that helps to protect the land, the water, the air...any living or natural unliving thing out there that needs to be protected because it’s being ruined by human involvement.” Jonathan said that it’s “being aware of an environmental problem and going out and doing something about it.” Kate said that environmental activism is being “aware of issues and then changing their behavior in order to try to solve those issues, or at least make the situation slightly better.” Adding the concept of “being aware” was another important component of participant definitions.

Levels of Activism

Kate identified “different degrees of activism,” including “low level” activism like turning off the lights when you’re leaving a room and “really intense activism like Aldo Leopold and John Muir where you devote your life to trying to change an issue for the better.” Kathryn saw pro-environmental behaviors on a “spectrum of environmental activism” including consumer choices of buying eco-friendly light bulbs as being low level, then “people working on recycling, community gardens, and things that are kind of creating a new way of working with the world” were considered mid-level activism.
“People directly affected” by environmental issues and addressing these social issues would be participating in more engaged levels of activism.

**Are You Saving the Planet, People, or Both?**

Participants considered what the focus of environmental activism was, to save the non-human world, people, or to do both. Aspen asked questions when trying to conceptualize the term environmental activism:

Are you trying to save the environment or are you trying to save people that live in the environment, you know, you have to look at what your goals are and so some people are like, there are some organizations that are, like Earth First, ‘forget humans, we’re just trying to save all these other species that we’re killing.’ Then for a lot of people that argument doesn’t do it. A lot of people are like, ‘why should the bear be put before humans, aren’t humans more important?

Aspen recognized that “Some people are environmental activists but they are really doing it to save the human species... [and] saving the human species takes saving other species.” He saw the connection between saving the environment and mitigating negative environmental impacts on people.

Helen considered the impact of environmental issues on humans as “something that’s really important that’s happening right now in environmental activism” and considering the human impact was something that Helen “buy[s] into….to involve people in environmental activism, is working to make the world a better place for people and non-human nature to live together.” She continued by saying, “I never felt like I’m doing environmental activism unless I’m thinking about how people are going to affect the situation [and] how the situation is affecting people.” Helen said that “It’s a huge misunderstanding to think... [of the] dichotomy of people and wilderness or people and
nature. I think we absolutely have to look at people and nature as part of each other…to
fight for one of them is to fight for the other one.”

Social Justice Activism

Participants discussed the relationship between environmental activism and other
types of social justice activism. Rachel noted, “The lines between environmental activism
and other kinds of activism can be very blurred.” She continued, “If you are...exploring
the issues that you’re acting on, then you have to acknowledge that there’s all kinds of
other issues that play between social inequalities and public health issues…that are
combined into environmental issues.” Rachel said these intersecting issues “define the
way that we address [environmental issues] and also whether or not we address them to
begin with.” Participants saw social justice issues intersecting with environmental
activism and argued to address environmental activism, activists must also attend to other
social injustices.

Sarah said, “Issues for equality are really interlaced with environmental activism.”
She noted that her “generation [is] passionate about...social issues [that]...can be
intertwined [with] environmental issues.” Samantha discussed how as an activist you
need to “spend some of your time doing this work because it intersects with other work
and it all comes together.” Kathryn was moved by social justice issues and saw the
connection between social justice organizing and environmental organizing. For these
participants, environmental activism was connected to addressing other types of social
justice issues such as racial equality and public health issues.
Concerns with Terms

A few participants hesitated to use the term environmental activist and other terms used in the environmental movement. Alice said, “I have a hard time with the term activism because I think that activism isn’t enough. I think activism denotes going to protests or caring about an issue but not knowing why you care about it.” She preferred the term “organizing” because “it’s a lifelong thing” and focused on addressing “oppression and oppressive acts...organizing [to give] people that power back.” Organizing was “a lot more than going to protests...it’s also a set of values or a set of intentions, [it’s] thinking about how we want to live with each other,” Alice said.

Rachel often heard people define environmental activism as people “speaking for the earth that can’t speak for itself” but she hesitated to use the “language that’s been used to talk about speaking for marginalized people… [and she] shies away from that being a voice for the trees kind of identity.” Samantha was careful to use “words like sustainability and environmentalism” because they were “big buzzwords and right now [at her college] they are really associated with privilege and nobody wants to be seen as being privileged, nobody wants to be seen as supporting a system that privileges people over other people.” When terms were linked to stereotypes of environmental activism or implied privilege participants were uncomfortable using the terms to describe themselves or their approach to environmental activism.

Building Community

The idea of building community and working together to address environmental issues was important to several participants. James noted that most environmental issues
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“aren't really solvable by the individual. No one person can change the environment. It takes social change.” Alice believed in forming “really deep relationships with people” and that “all the power needs to be given back to communities.” When organizers worked towards reclaiming power from “massive institutions” they were “telling [their] stories and that corporations are telling stories.” Alice unfortunately felt that the large corporations “are winning with their stories right now because of what is happening in the environment.” Alice was concerned that the power corporations have and the stories they tell negatively impacted the environment and communities.

Aspen said that “Community was key… [and] fundamental. If you don’t have a community working with you...you can’t get any work done in this huge world.”

Samantha talked about community saying it was a “key motivator and the key way that [she] decide[d] what to be involved in.” She visualized different levels of community including being “a global citizen, a part of [her] family, and a part of [Parkview College], and part of Minnesota, [and metropolitan area]” and she called these “multiple scales of community.” Participants believed that being embedded in local and global communities was critical to their motivation and effectiveness in addressing environmental issues.

Thankless Job

Two participants talked about environmental activism as being a “thankless job.”

James said that being an activist was a “thankless job” and that strangers do not notice the work of environmental activists. He provided an example saying:

People clear invasive species in other states, like water chestnut or water hyacinth. They’re sitting in canoes paddling around just picking up loads of crap out of the swamp and it’s like nobody is thanking them for doing this. They are going way out of their way to go and pull this junk out.
When invasive species are not cleared from swamps, lakes, and forests, the natural ecosystems are damaged. Samantha talked about activists not being recognized for their work. She said:

I think a lot of people are finding that they can affect most change if they go after their own communities rather than trying to take on oil companies alone, it’s really hard to do, it’s lonely if you do that too. I think a lot of environmentalists can be lonely and it’s exhausting and it’s unrewarding. You don’t see...a cause and effect. You don’t do something and then see climate change. You are just operating on faith. I think you really need a strong support system to do that kind of work. This kind of work requires a huge commitment of time and energy. It’s not necessarily valued, I mean I don’t think I would feel comfortable putting [my divestment organization] on a resume for most things...I mean it’s not really rewarded by society. You’re doing this work for other reasons.

Sarah discussed this idea saying, “It’s hard work being an activist. You have a lot of negativity surrounding you but once you realize how passionate the people are around you, it just makes you want to get that next achievement.” James, Samantha, and Sarah recognized that the efforts of environmental activists often goes unnoticed and can be surrounded with negativity and loneliness.

I Am an Activist

Most participants viewed their pro-social environmental behaviors as some form of activism or organizing. Participants first started seeing themselves as an environmental activist after a specific event they attended or described a gradual development into being an activist. Most participants used the term activist or organizer to describe themselves. This was true even when some said they did not participate in stereotypical activities, such as protests, typically associated with environmental activists.

Specific events in high school or college defined when participants first started thinking of themselves as an activist. For Eva, her experience in high school of leading a
“Meatless Monday” campaign was the first moment she felt like an activist. She did not specifically think of this as activism at the time but she remembered thinking, “Yea, I think I am [an activist].” The first experience James had with environmental activism was volunteering for a recycling drive at a local church raising money to build a school. He saw himself as an environmental activist, which he defined as anybody “that changes the environment...in a positive way.” Although he was an activist, James said he was not the “type of person to protest.” He did not “think it’s worth [his] breath...to go and stand outside the state capital. They aren’t listening anyway.” In retrospect, Eva and James viewed their activities in elementary and high school as activism. James carefully defined the label of activism to ensure I understood that being a helpful person and not someone protesting was how he conceptualized activism.

Aspen said he considered himself an activist, but was an environmentalist for much longer than he was an activist. The first time he felt like an activist was “when [he] actually started going to events and [went] to the Climate March.” Aspen said that “in a moment [the People’s Climate March] kind of changed my life and sparked [him] to do more stuff.” The “pyramid of sustainability” framed his participation in the climate march and included “social, economic, and environmental” components. He described his experience saying, “It had a social side of being present with my peers and 400,000 people…an economic aspect [as] I paid money to be there...it shut down streets so people were mad because they couldn’t make it to their job...and then it had the environmental aspect [since that was] the whole point of it.” Aspen was excited to be a part of this event and believed this was the moment he first felt like an activist.
Sarah pinpointed a specific experience when she first thought of herself as an environmental activist. A peer asked Sarah to serve on a panel to meet with the Governor to discuss environmental issues. The panel spoke with young people and the Governor. She said, “It was broadcast over radio and TV, [she] met the Governor, and that was the moment that [she] realized that [she] really enjoyed doing this.” She noted, “looking at the crowd of young people ...seeing how passionate they were about these issues ...that’s really when I realized that this is something that I want to keep doing.” For Sarah, this moment was when she first felt like an environmental activist.

The first moment Rachel felt like an activist was when she attended a demonstration in Washington, D.C. Rachel said we “zip tied ourselves to the White House [gate].” She felt “very iconic and we were young environmentalists being arrested at the White House and people kept talking about hippies and...this is what young activists are doing.” At this point she thought, “Oh wow, I’m an activist now, I’m so involved, I’m already getting arrested.” Students’ first moments of identifying as environmental activists varied from a gradual development to a key event. Others made clear that their involvement in environmental activism was not stereotypical.

Not your Stereotypical Activism

Some participants said they did not participate in stereotypical activist behaviors or approaches. Helen said, “The kind of activism I do...is really different than a lot of how people think of activism...when I think of the word activism in my head I think of people protesting, sit-ins, walk-outs.” Helen proposed “that teaching is very much a form of activism...when you’re teaching [it] involves ethics, and lifestyle and ideology.” For
Helen, her journey to becoming an environmental activist could be pinpointed a “few different times [where she] felt like she moved up a level” in her engagement and included when she gave away native plants in high school and participated in a dorm trash sort in college.

Kate admitted “that by [her] own definition [she’d] be an environmental activist.” She said that “It’s not one of the labels I generally think of, for some reason, I have an image in my mind of an activist as politically active. I haven’t been super politically active.” She continued, saying, “I definitely consider myself an environmentalist and by my definition I would be an activist.” Upon reflection Kate said that a trip to Costa Rica, where she learned about the environmental impact of raising cows, influenced her to become a vegetarian.

Eileen hesitated to define herself as an activist. When she grew up, she would have said, “Oh, oh, no [I’m not an activist] because I wasn’t aware of a lot of things.” Now she considered herself a “semi-activist.” She said, “It will take a lot of me, more of me engaging in actual issues, me putting myself out there a lot more….right now I don’t consider myself that big of an activist.” Eileen was beginning to view herself as an environmental activist but felt she had more to learn before fully using the term environmental activist to describe herself.

Rachel also hesitated to define herself as an activist, saying, “I see...a lot of negative connotations with environmental activists.” She said, “I think I have some negative associations with the word activists to be honest, but I would probably still consider myself one.” She noted that many people talked about activism as “an extra
thing that you do” but for her she said, “It seems normal to me to try to affect change in the world that you live in.” Rachel was aware of the negative stereotypes assigned to environmental activists but would still label herself as an environmental activism.

Samantha did not discuss a specific moment when she was first felt like an activist. She does not “identify with the environmental movement of the past.” Samantha “disagree[d] with [her] dad on a lot of environmental issues” including the amount of time and energy put in to opposing the cell phone tower in the Boundary Waters. Samantha said the cell phone tower issue was not one “we should be wasting our energy on.” We “idealize wilderness” and “There is this wilderness purity that’s really exclusive and we rate environmentalists on a scale based on their ideology about wilderness.” Sarah said she saw this as “totally irrelevant to what is actually going on” with environmental issues today. Samantha proposed a new environmentalism which focused on social justice issues within the environmental movement and said she considered herself an environmental activist in the new movement.

**Environmental Organizing**

Kathryn delineated between the terms activism and organizing. She said that organizing included building community, “deep caring about the people [and] deep caring about the way that we want the world to transform into.” The skills learned through organizing can address other social issues. Kathryn said, “Organizing is dynamic in that way.” Kathryn conceptualized activism differently saying “Being an activist is being task oriented….attending a certain event…. [or] taking on delegated tasks.”
Rachel’s approach to organizing was “very community based, so the people that I organize with and the people that I meet are a really big part of why I do it.” Rachel said, “I really like marching and doing public things, and I think those are an important part of making change...for me making change through people is inspiring to me and moving to me.” Early on Rachel canvassed and phone banked. Rachel said, “I knew that even when I was doing those things that I wasn’t interested in being overly involved in the politics and policies side of things. I wanted to do environmental activism but more also grassroots environmental activism.” Rachel conceptualized her activism as environmental organizing, which focused on addressing environmental issues and worked on building strong communities to address these issues.

Alice considered herself an “environmental organizer.” She thought “part of [her] grew up as an organizer.” Her early experiences of attending a Quaker school instilled in her values of “integrity, honesty, peace, justice, and community,” which Alice said were “very organizer like lens kind of values.” Alice said her early childhood experiences made her feel like “It’s important to fight back against oppressive narratives and experiences and abuses.” Organizing has helped her “work through things and...been incredibly healing to start to work through our oppressions.” Alice concluded by saying “organizing has shaped who I am.” For Alice, organizing values were fostered through her early childhood experiences and informed how she approached environmental issues.

Kathryn also viewed herself as an environmental organizer. She said that being an organizer was “contained so much in...small moments” of responsibility. By this Kathryn meant that “as soon as the responsibility is issued to you, whether it’s a small task or a
small thing” you as the organizer were responsible to take it forward. Kathryn said, “Organizing is interesting because there is no binding quality to it.” For Kathryn she organized because she “care[d] about [the issues] and that’s why [she was] taking the responsibility.” She had a slow “trajectory into organizing” that began by leading the feminist club in high school. Since starting college she learned from her work with “very brilliant organizers.” Participants discussed varied approaches, definitions, and ease with specific terms surrounding environmental activism.

**Tension between Generations**

Samantha witnessed tension between what she termed the “old environmentalism” and the “new environmentalism.” Samantha grew up in a neighborhood affected by toxins from a former auto plant. The type of activism she described was grounded in environmental justice values. She was conflicted by “almost completely dismissing the old environmentalism” because she loved to spend time outdoors and witnessed the impact spending time in nature can have on individuals.

Samantha said:

For me to say...we don’t have time to worry about our national parks anymore, that’s something that my head says maybe that’s going to be necessary with the problems we’re facing but I think my heart really says but this is where you were inspired to be a part of all of this...a lot of inner conflict I have.

Samantha said her friends were “frustrated with the old environmentalism” and talked about the “new environmentalism.” People still “believe in what the Sierra Club is doing...they believe in the wilderness, believe in that kind of environmentalism” but Samantha’s generation was trying to find new ways to be involved. Samantha said the issue with the Sierra Club was that it was a “good old boys club” comprised of white
males over the age of 50. Samantha suggested the Sierra Club “need[s] to start hiring people [her age]...because they are part of this new environmentalism, because they go to Black Lives Matter rallies in addition to working for the Sierra Club.” She contended “I think you see a lot more student activism in newer organizations like 350.org” and although the Sierra Club is collaborating with these new organizations they still have work to do to “attract people beyond [the] white middle class.” Samantha’s dad was not “fully behind the new environmentalism [and]…still really believes in environmentalism,” which she attributed to being a “generational thing.” The organizations and environmental movement supported by past generations was considered by the current generation as not attending to the complexities of current social issues.

Sarah noticed the “generational gap” between “a lot of older people that are passionate about environmental issues” and “what [the younger] generation is passionate about.” She said:

Historically, I always learned about planting baby trees [and] air pollution…people in their 50s, 60s, 70s mobilized around those issues…The only thing I can think about the rest of it is just stereotypes of like a hippie tree hugger or like a flower child.

Aspen said that “activists kind of have our roots back in the 60s with all the hippies...they kind of ruined a lot of things for us...they could have done things differently but they didn’t know any better.” Participants saw the environmental issues and approaches of previous generations as not being able to make change in the way that included social justice and equity issues. For this reason, participants suggested thinking about the current movement as the new environmental movement.
Samantha articulated her vision for the new environmental movement. She described the current movements saying:

The environmental movement and the environmental justice movement [have] distinct origins...so the environmental movement I see as having its origins in the John Muir mythology, it’s very American and it’s around the stories that we tell about American identity with the environment, national parks, that kind of thing. The environmental justice movement was born mainly from the Civil Rights movements and was very different people at first who [were] doing this...these two movements have to come together in order to solve the environmental problems that we are facing today.

The new movement’s focus was “not saving beautiful places anymore, I think there’s three big umbrellas that you can talk about...climate change, food systems...and land change and extraction.” She continued, saying, “There is going to be a new environmentalism and I feel like I’m a part of that new environmentalism that combines these movements.” Samantha contended, “We need a new way of talking about it but I think most of that is people who aren’t interested, who aren’t environmentalists, who don’t identify in the same way as environmentalists in the past have. [These people] are now becoming engaged in these issues...I think it’s a social movement now...I don’t think you can just constrain it into the environmental movement anymore.” Participants envisioned an environmental movement focused on attending to the complexities of social justice issues and how they intersect with the environmental movement.

**Urgency of Issues versus Slowing Down**

Alice discussed that environmental issues required a sense of urgency to address because they increasingly impact the places in which we live. She said, “It’s just like urgency, needing to constantly be going and be working and [my mom] has worked with me a lot to figure out why all that pressure is there.” Eva noticed the issue of urgency
saying “I can see how there is urgency in addressing issues in the environment. We all know there is global warming, that bad things are going on, and we’re not taking care of the environment.” Participants recognized the urgency of addressing environmental issues due to the negative impacts environmental issues have on the earth and people living on the earth.

However, participants considered how to slow down and be intentional in how they approached environmental issues. Aspen said, “It’s kind of obvious what we need to do about it...it’s not so obvious how you approach that.” Although he felt a sense of urgency, he could not “push people” really hard to act in ways that he wanted. He noted that being too insistent was counterproductive and made people not want to listen. He said, “You can’t be too urgent [but] at the same time...It’s also not good for yourself because if you’re trying always to battle everybody then you are estranging yourself from everybody” and won’t be effective. Balancing urgency and intentionality in addressing environmental issues was key for participants’ to be effective.

While addressing environmental issues carried a sense of urgency, participants emphasized intentionality in addressing these issues. Kathryn said that “If you’re going to rush through [things], it just doesn’t feel like it will be effective.” Her “viewpoints fall in being more intentional” even if it took more time. Rachel discussed this saying:

I think that in general around climate change, especially for young people we’ve sort of grown up with this really catastrophic [issue]. The world is going to end and it’s going to be horrible and everything is going to be on fire. These ideas about...scientific and hard to understand research...doesn’t get people to change their lives or change their habits. You know even on an intuitive level too it means that we need to talk about things in a sort of calmer and more relatable and less huge scary way.
Rachel noticed a “shift that’s happening [now] towards intentional conversation” focused on what can be done today.

Samantha said she saw in herself and her peers an effort to “step back and slow down.” Samantha said, “I am trying to take care of myself [and] not spend so much time throwing myself at this brick wall...I still want to throw myself against this brick wall but it’s exhausting and I need to take care of myself.” Helen talked about how incorporating “everyday activities of environmental activism can fit into that slowing down and taking care of yourself.” She said some activities can be therapeutic “and help you slow down, like having a garden and growing your own food.” Stepping back and taking care of oneself while participating in activism was important for participants to maintain their determination to focus on environmental issues.

Taking care of oneself was of particular importance for Aspen. He practiced mindful meditation that is grounded in Buddhist traditions. Aspen said that “part of [being] a sustainable person, an environmental person [is]...taking time for myself and resting and taking time to put down my environmental activist side.” Meditation helped Aspen take a break and take a step back.

Samantha said, “I think people have slowed down...even though there is still this underlying sense of urgency.” Eileen believed that the “balancing issue is definitely the hard part” of environmental activism. Kathryn said at times the work of organizers looked urgent saying:

From the outside it looks like people are being angry and protesting but protesting is only happening because one group is like ‘let’s have a protest’ and then they email people and email people, meet with people and talk about it and make the signs...People take environmental activism and organizing at face value. So they
are thinking about all the work that goes into it, which when you get into the work it is a really slow and begrudging process of organizing.

Participants balanced the urgency of addressing environmental issues with the intentionality of how they approached them. Taking care of oneself was essential for participants to sustain their energy and drive to address environmental issues.

How participants conceptualized environmental activism included how they defined activism, saw their involvement, thought about the environmental movements, and believed they could affect change. This section discussed the wide array of definitions participants thought about when they think of activism. Students viewed themselves as environmental activists and environmental organizers focused on addressing issues that mattered to their generation. Tension existed around the terms used to talk about environmental activism and how generations think differently about what’s important to the environmental movement. Regardless of these disagreements and tensions, student environmental activists found ways to engage with each other to address issues of environmental and social injustice. Now that more is understood about what students mean when they discuss environmental activism, I will review what experiences outside of college contribute to how students come to address environmental issues.

**Experiences Outside of College**

Students shared their experiences outside of college including experiences in nature, relationships with family and friends, and educational experiences in K-12 institutions. Participants’ experiences influenced how they came to participate in environmental activism and how their engagement manifested. The way students viewed
the environment and described their care for the earth is important to consider when thinking about students’ approaches to activism.

**Childhood Experiences with Nature**

Living in northern Minnesota during her childhood, Alice said she grew up with nature surrounding her. Alice said, “I feel a really deep connection to the earth” and that moving from northern Minnesota to a major metropolitan area impacted her stress level. Aspen spent time in nature growing up on canoe trips with his church. He said that he was able to spend a week “with a group of people and you’re kind of exploring your faith.” These experiences got him interested in nature and made it so he was “not afraid of going outside and being in nature...just being outside when [he] was younger and being connected with nature” influenced him to feel comfortable to address environmental issues.

Rachel went to a wilderness camp in northern Minnesota for the first time after her parents were divorced. Rachel said it was the “first thing that my mom did as an independent divorced woman. She was really afraid but she brought my sister and me to this [wilderness camp].” The camp was part of her youth from family vacations, to later attending camp herself, and finally becoming a camp counselor. Here Rachel learned about nature through their environmental education program and activities.

Helen was “very interested in wildlife in general” and thought she was going to be a veterinarian when she was older. Kate went camping as a child and wanted to be an entomologist when she was younger. She “was always looking at ladybugs, trying to save
spiders, and earthworms.” Helen and Kate thought about how their interest in the natural world could turn into a future career.

Samantha came to address environmental issues from a “pretty conventional route.” She said:

When I was growing up [my parents] brought me to Boundary Waters community and we would go on trips to National Parks. My dad...loves doing that, it’s almost spiritual for him. He has stories he would tell, which are mythology, it’s like the environmental mythology of the United States really.

She loved to hike, camp, and this past summer worked at a summer camp leading canoe trips for youth. She said, “I’ve seen how transformative [being in nature] is and it’s not something that you can really put into words...I know that going to places like that really changes kids’ lives, I’ve seen it happen.” Although Samantha had experiences with nature, she also grew up in a neighborhood that had been contaminated from toxins emitted from an automobile facility decades earlier. She said, “We can’t grow vegetables in my backyard because we are within the radius of an old car plant that submitted awful things in the air.” She noted, “I feel like in the 90s we didn’t think about that at all. Like all the toys that people played with in the 90s, kids like me have been like, it’s wild the stuff that was in our food.” The paradox of transformative nature experiences in wilderness and living in a neighborhood affected by toxins created “inner conflict” for her in regards to why and how she addressed environmental issues.

Kathryn’s experience with nature was different from other participants. She talked about how her lack of being in nature drove her to be involved in environmental activism. She said:

My family and I went camping and doing all of that stuff but I felt more at home and comfortable in my house….That’s something that I’ve noticed around a lot of
people growing up nowadays. It’s lots of phones and houses and I almost don’t go outside unless you ask me. Everyone is worried that the world is dangerous. So, I think just feeling a lot of anxiety or lamenting about the fact that I didn’t. We lived right by a creek and my mom’s like ‘don’t ever go down there.’ So it was this weird forbidden world. I don’t know, I’m still kind of fuzzy where that comes from because I mean I would consider myself more afraid of nature than grounded by nature, which is probably why I do it too. I’m frustrated by that feeling. I feel like...I think it’s me feeling upset that the place that nature would have taken in my life was replaced with physical things, and like plastic toys and all that stuff. I think that’s some where it comes from. I’m still trying to figure out what that’s all about.

Kathryn was frustrated by her lack of experience with and fear of nature as a child. She believed her drive to address environmental issues stemmed from the frustration she felt that nature was portrayed as a dangerous place during her childhood.

Eva said that she did not think her “experience as a child with nature really affected the way [she is] now.” Compared to her sister’s generation, she spent more time “outside playing and rolling in the dirt,” but that “kids now growing up in this generation have other things, like there are video games, iPads, and iPhones. Technology kind of distracts them...they don’t really need to be outside if they don’t want to.” Jonathan “played outside all that time” building forts and playing with his friends when he was growing up. His family occasionally went camping, and they recently purchased a canoe. Jonathan said that he did not think spending time in nature as a child “really influenced me as much as just been kind of a joy to me.” Eva and Jonathan both spent time in nature as children but did not attribute these experiences to influencing their environmental activism.

Eileen did not spend much time in nature until she moved to Minnesota from California. She said it was less of a culture thing because “Hmong people are very outdoorsy people” but she never spent time in nature growing up in California. Eileen
said that moving to Minnesota made her realize “how beautiful everything is and how we need to take care of it.” She posited that not being in nature as a young kid may be the “reason why I’m figuring these things out now too because as a younger kid I didn’t really have opportunities to do those little things. I didn’t realize how important they were and I wasn’t exposed to these environmental issues like I should be.” When Eileen moved to Minnesota and was more exposed to nature, she developed a stronger urge to address environmental issues.

Sarah called herself “the weird one [that] never did anything outside when [she] was a kid.” She said, “A lot of people think it’s weird that I didn’t spend every weekend in a tent somewhere.” Sarah spent time in nature growing up but her family did not really enjoy camping or hiking. It was not until college that she discovered her love for hiking, biking, and kayaking. She shared that her parents took her on a lot of road trips. She remembered “I think being in a car and staring out and like watching the landscape change from like the great plains to the Rocky Mountains...helped me learn to appreciate and...get awe inspired by nature and how it changed.” Many participants talked about their experiences in nature while growing up including camping, canoeing, or simply playing outside near their home. Other participants did not spend time in nature growing up and suggested that their experience with nature as a child did not necessarily influence their engagement with these issues now.

**Family Members**

Helen said her dad and grandfather influenced her ideas about the environment. She said her dad was “a horticulturist, he really modeled to me how to be kind to the
earth and work with it instead of against it.” Helen’s grandfather was a role model for her. One of the leaders of the Farm Worker’s movement to boycott table grapes because the pesticides being used on the grapes made farm workers sick. For Helen, learning about the Farm Worker’s movement, her grandfather’s involvement in the movement, environmental justice, and that the environment can negatively impact human health influenced Helen’s approach to activism.

Jonathan’s parents supported him in addressing environmental and other social justice issues. Jonathan felt supported and said his parents supported him even if they did not fully understand or agree. They let him make his own decisions. Kate said her parents were supportive of her environmentalism. They were patient and helped her pursue her ideas. She said, “Once I got in my head that we needed to make our own compost bin so my dad helped me make that. Then I wanted rain barrels so we went to a rain barrel workshop.” Supportive parents encouraged Jonathan and Kate to participate in environmental activities that interested them.

Alice admitted that she could get wrapped up in the urgency of addressing environmental issues and struggled with self-care. Alice said, “My mom has been really supportive [which includes] challenging me.” One of her challenges was “it’s really easy for me to get caught up in my head [and] not living in the moment and in my heart.” For Alice, her mom challenged her to be present in her work and not let it consume who she was.

Sarah said that her parents “love what [she’s] doing” and that when she lobbied at the capitol her mom was excited to hear about her experience. Growing up in a
conservative state with liberal parents gave Sarah a unique experience. She learned about both the political process and how people approached both sides of an issue.

Aspen’s experiences with his parents helped him learn how to build his argument and think through issues. His father was a strong republican and his mom was a strong democrat and divorced when he was young. Aspen grew up with two different parental viewpoints. His father instilled in him logical reasoning, while his mother impressed the importance of social activism. Aspen said since his parents were divorced he used one parent’s viewpoint to debate issues with his other parent. He figured they could not both be right and through these debates honed his debate skills.

A few participants said their parents were supportive, but did not understand why they felt so strongly about addressing environmental issues. Eva’s parents were supportive but “at first didn’t understand” why she recycled and chose to not eat meat. She attributed this misconception to “a cultural thing,” saying, “I think my parents didn’t really see the point. It’s embedded in our culture that we have meat every day. That’s a routine. They didn’t understand what was the point of recycling. They didn’t really see any kind of benefit to it. It was just kind of a hassle.” She noted that “Throughout the years I feel like my parents have been very supportive,” but clarified “if it’s not embedded in your family life, like if your parents don’t recycle or don’t buy organic then you’re most likely not to do it.” Eileen was still trying to help her family understand the choices she was making. When she talked about her new vegan lifestyle, her family said, “That’s not natural because you’re a Hmong girl, you’re supposed to eat meat...our whole cultural food comes with [meat] you know.” Eva and Eileen had supportive family
members but they did not understand why they chose to address environmental issues. The misconception family members had as to why environmental issues were important for Eva and Eileen, fostered challenging conversations and interactions between participants and their family members.

**Friends and Peers**

Several participants talked about the importance of their peers in both supporting and conceptualizing environmental work on campus. Sarah pointed to “the people I work with on my campus” as supporting her environmental work. Kate said that her “fellow students have really pushed [her] forward.” Samantha found a network of fellow environmental activists through her work in the sustainability office. She also met an upper classmate that helped mentor her in environmental issues during her first year at Parkview College. Samantha said, “It all just sort of happened where you’re with the communities.” When Helen arrived at Parkview College, she said that she “had no idea that...people were going and protesting pipelines or doing teach-ins.” Joining the Parkview College “community of environmentalists” was important to Helen and exposed her to a variety of opportunities.

Eileen said that she was slowly finding friends interested in these issues. At the time of our interview she said, “I wish that I would be able to engage in such conversations [with] those that actually care about what’s going on.” Eileen said when she engaged in conversations about environmental issues it was with individuals “of different ethnic backgrounds.” She said, “In my culture it’s just not something we talk
about. It would be ruled as weird to talk with another person about this topic.” For this reason, Eileen found herself talking mostly to peers at Tamarack College.

Eva and Eileen’s friendship and group of friends served as a support network for them to talk about and explore environmental issues. Aspen said his friends both in the activist community and outside of it were important in supporting him. He said, “They influence me and I influence them.” Relationships with peers provided participants opportunities to discuss and expand their understanding of environmental issues.

The difficulty some participants had in influencing peers not involved or passionate about addressing environmental issues was frustrating for participants. Eileen said that “her generation doesn’t care about [environmental] things” and that she wanted “to make [her generation] care more about what’s going on” with the environment. Aspen found that “it’s hard to tell people what [they’re] doing is wrong” and that you need to lead by example. Helen noted that “it’s hard to get people interested who are not already looking” to get involved in these issues. Participants were supported by friends in their environmental activism and tried to influence others to be involved.

**Mentors in Environmental Activism**

A few participants identified individuals in their regional activist network that were influential in their activism. Kathryn said that the “organizing community in [a large metropolitan area]” and her peers were influential in her growth as an organizer. Sarah met a lot of people “at the state level” with the networking she did. Regionally she met a lot of fellow students that were “so passionate about what they are doing,” she said this influenced her to continue her work. Alice said that “people in [her] life who have
mentored [her] in organizing...have been obviously influential.” She said, “community members that I look up to and am inspired by and want to be like. Living out my vision for the world in collaboration with their vision for the world” influenced her.

**Experiences in K-12 Education**

Experience in K-12 institutions that focused or aligned with environmental values influenced participants. James attended school in an under-sourced urban school district as a child. At a young age, his mother was in a terrible car accident and was hospitalized for several months. As a result, James moved in with his grandmother and attended a large suburban school district for a year. When he returned a year later to the urban school, he noticed that the students in his class had not learned anything new and they were learning the same material as when he left. When he was offered the opportunity to attend a charter school in ninth grade, he signed up. The charter school focused on agricultural and natural sciences education. As part of this school, James was a member of Future Farmers of America (FFA) and participated in FFA competitions. His experience in the charter school exposed him to being a steward of the environment and land.

Alice grew up “always surrounded by nature.” She attended an environmental science elementary school and a Quaker middle school. The “really big core values of those schools were integration with the environment, the healing powers of being connected to the environment, connected to the community, connected to yourself.” Alice concluded that environmental values were “instilled in [her] pretty young that those are important things and the environment is part of that.” Alice said, “That’s where the root
of why I got involved with stuff is I think.” Her values were shaped by her experiences in
and values of the elementary and middle schools she attended.

Many participants were involved in projects and campaigns that got them
interested in addressing environmental issues. Helen was involved in a high school
environmental club where she refurbished the school’s greenhouse and raised native
plants to give away to community members. She said that this experience “sparked [her]
interest, especially in environmental education.” Eva participated in a senior project
where they facilitated a “Meatless Monday” campaign. While Jonathan was exposed to
the water non-profit organization, he was passionate about through the work his high
school’s student council did with this organization. Samantha remembered using class
projects to present information about the environmental movement. A speech for “a talent
show [was] about polluting the ocean” while her ‘history day project was about Rachel
Carson.” Sarah participated in a mock legislative day in middle school which taught her
about the political process from drafting mock bills to processing them through the
legislature. In high school, Sarah joined the debate team and learned how to research
issues and build arguments surrounding specific topics. She said, “My parents were really
insistent that I understand the political structure of our country and that eventually led me
to be involved in environmental issues.” School experiences gave participants
opportunities to engage with environmental issues and build skills around implementing
campaigns.

A few participants did not remember discussing environmental issues in school
prior to college or noted that they got misinformation. Aspen said, “We didn’t really learn
about that in school…you didn’t hear about what’s going on with pollution or climate, or environmental justice issues.” Eileen said that what she learned about climate change in high school was either wrong or she did not understand what the teachers were trying to teach her.

Participants had teachers, advisors, or other mentors who played a role in their life during early educational experiences. Eva and Kate had supportive advisors in high school who helped them move environmental initiatives forward. Jonathan talked about the support his student council advisor gave him on addressing global water issues. Institutional values, opportunities to engage with environmental issues, and teachers and mentors influenced participants. Some participants noted their engagement in high school shifted once they came to college.

**Shift from High School to College**

A few participants talked about the difference in how they approached environmental issues from high school to college. After high school Rachel started “being more politically involved and…was realizing that environmental activism was kind of where [she] was most passionate outside of campaigning for politicians.” Samantha said that in high school she “struggled the most with…the leadership and putting myself forward,” but in college “decided I was going to go for it. I joined a bunch of organizations, went to workshops, and my confidence improved.” Sarah was not politically involved in high school, but when she came to Prairie Grass University, she “worked up the guts…to start going to weekly [environmental advocacy] meetings.” She
used the term “passively involved” when she described her involvement in high school, meaning the issues were important to her but she did not do anything about them.

Eva was more vocal in high school, “It was in high school when I went to that conference and I took workshops...we had the Civics project we had to do.” She said in college she was not involved in “talking to people and almost trying to convince them of things.” She was not “forced to do a project” and took the relational approach of talking about her lifestyle choices when the topic arose at Tamarack College.

Participants’ experiences with nature and support of family, friends, and mentors helped them grow as activists. Early educational experiences exposed participants to new ideas and opportunities through conversations, class projects, and encouragement by teachers. The next section considers participants’ worldview and how this serves as a foundation to address environmental issues.

**Environmental Worldview**

How individuals viewed the world and their relationship with it illuminates foundational values participants used to determine why they address environmental issues. As was discussed in Chapter Two, there are three main ways to think about environmental worldview. These include anthropocentric or egoistic, focused on the importance of human consumption over nature, biospheric, focused on the importance of saving nature for its own sake, and social-altruistic, looked at saving the earth for a greater good or benefit of society (Plumwood, 1996; Schultz & Zelezny, 1998; Stern, et al., 1999).
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

In my research, the participants’ worldviews aligned with biospheric and social-altruistic values as suggested by the work of Schultz and Zelezny (1998). No participants described worldviews that aligned with anthropocentric. It is important to note that my determination of each student’s worldview was done by considering their response to the question of how they described their care or responsibility for the earth. Most participants talked about the importance of addressing environmental issues for humans and all living beings in some form. The key difference between those who were placed in biospheric versus social-altruistic worldviews was how they described their connection to the earth.

**Biospheric Worldview**

A biospheric worldview is characterized by seeing value in the earth for its own sake (Stern et al., 1999). Thus, students that wanted to address environmental issues for the intrinsic value nature offers or to care for the earth were considered to have a biospheric worldview. Kate considered two ways she thought about care for the earth which included the intrinsic value and the benefits nature provides including filtering water and sequestering carbon. She discussed at length the importance of ecosystems and habitats and said, “If we destroy what we have now, it will take centuries if not millennia to replenish that.” Kate concluded saying “I think there is a high intrinsic value to the land. As a species that is very heavily influencing and in many cases destroying many sections of our planet, I think that...we should be stewards of the land.”

Some participants discussed spirituality in relation to the earth. James felt “pretty deeply connected” to the earth. He said that he was not religious but would consider
himself a “naturalist” and believed that “everything comes from the natural world and we come from that.” James believed doing small things adds up to make collective change.

Aspen used the tenets of meditation and explained his connection to the earth was grounded in his compassion for the earth. He said, “My care for the earth and my connection to the earth...trying to be compassionate for myself...taking care of the earth in little ways.” The focus of compassion was “not harming anything, any living being.” The tenants of meditation helped Aspen better “connect to caring for the environment.” Aspen said, “We’re all connected and our actions somehow affect everybody on the planet. Whenever you do this one thing, it will ripple out and it will come back to you.”

Connection to and compassion for the earth characterized Aspen’s worldview.

Helen talked about being connected to the earth and that “If [she] had any kind of spiritual leaning it would be with nature.” She said, “I feel like nature gives us so much and if it’s not our responsibility to give back to it or say thank you, then whose responsibility is it?” The work she did “feels very innate to [her]” and it made her happy. She felt like she’s “doing something that is worthwhile.” Helen recognized that environmental issues affected people and thought this was important to consider in environmental work. However, when asked about her worldview she focused more on nature and her connection to the planet. I used biospheric to describe Helen’s worldview even though it could be argued she is grounded by social-altruistic values as well.

Samantha’s worldview has changed over time from biospheric to social-altruistic. Before college, she focused on the intrinsic value of nature. Now in college she was motivated by “the fact that environmental problems are directly linked to inequality.”
Social problems can be tied to environmental problems Samantha contends. “Gender inequality, racial inequality, just the first world third world binary...it’s a way we oppress people” and addressing oppression was her focus. She said, “I...have environmental privilege...I think that if I just stand still, I’m a part of it, perpetuating the system of oppression. I’m actively fighting against it in order to not be a part of...that system.” Samantha’s shift from biospheric to a social-altruistic worldview was not unique. Several participants spoke about the care they had for the earth in similar ways that sometimes spanned both the biospheric and social-altruistic worldviews.

**Social-altruistic Worldview**

Several participants wanted to make the earth a better place for all living beings, including humans in society. Kathryn said, “My desire for a better world [drives] me...I see environmental activism as a place where I can plug into help with this transformation of a better world.” Considering social inequality and the environmental impacts on health and living conditions were important concepts for participants.

Rachel’s view of how people are connected to the planet and each other influenced her to do something. When she saw something unjust she said she felt she needs to do something about it. She described her worldview by saying:

I feel responsibility for, firstly as a person living on the planet and then specifically a person with a lot of privilege and a lot of access to opportunities to speak and be heard and hopefully make change. I feel responsibility to speak up when I see things that seem unfair or unjust or wrong. I see a lot of those things. Rachel said that “The environment is a constant part of our lives and it’s shaped by the way we live.” If people feel disconnected from the earth then they start participating “in really destructive behavior without realizing it.” She asserted that we need to understand
“The way that we are connected to the planet and through the planet to other people…we have a responsibility to behave in a way that is keeping those people in mind.”

Connections to the planet and other people was central to Rachel’s worldview.

Eva emphasized the importance of doing small things because “with all of our environmental issues going on you never know what our world is going to be like in the future.” She felt that her generation would need to “recover [from] past mistakes that our society has made.” Eva worried that if her generation does not do something about environmental issues they will continue to get worse and that “in the future we might not even have...a healthy place to live in.” The impact environmental issues could have on health and living conditions for individuals in society concerned Eva.

The connection between water, people, and the planet was discussed by Jonathan. He said, “I am privileged to be in a place where access to water is not a problem... The more I learn...the more I appreciate what I have, and the more I wish someone could share in what I have.” Jonathan wanted his work to impact people’s living conditions globally by improving access to clean water.

Alice said, “I come at [environmental issues] from a place that I really care about people and about people’s equity and livable situation. I also really care about people’s connection to the earth.” She thought “Our connection to or our disconnection from ourselves and our communities...is also rooted in our disconnection from earth.” Alice believed that a lot of the social issues that occur in society are due to disconnections. She said, “I’m compelled by social issues and people [and animal] issues.” Alice considered social justice issues as central to her worldview.
Eileen felt it was her responsibility to let her family and friends know more about environmental issues and to do her part. She participated in the activities she did primarily because it linked back to health issues. Eva was concerned about toxins from plastic water bottles, and in food. She made personal choices and tried to influence her family and friends to make healthier choices.

Sarah’s worldview focused on the health impacts of environmental issues for herself and other members of society. She said, “Environmental activism is interconnected with a lot of different things as far as racial and gender equality, economic, and social equality.” She continued, saying, “I also think environmental issues, outside of affecting the environment...affect people really severely in often unseen ways.” Sarah said she cared for the earth so we could have clean air to breathe. She said, “When I talk to people about environmental issues and people just call me a tree-hugger, I like to give them a hug too” because the work she did focused on making the environment better not just for the earth but for members of society.

Kathryn cared about environmental issues because she learned “about...social injustices caused by environmental injustice [and she] just could not imagine [herself] not doing anything about it.” She believed members of society had the ability to come up with great ideas to address environmental issues. She said, “I see us not being as creative or intuitive or not being as much as we can be...being really lazy in a lot of ways.” Kathryn believed that society had the ability to address environmental issues in a creative way that could alleviate social and environmental inequalities.
The way in which participants approached environmental issues is grounded in their environmental worldview and how they see their place in the world. Participants’ experiences before college and while in college shaped their worldviews. At the same time, these worldviews also shaped how participants approached environmental activism.

**Experiences in College**

Colleges and universities work towards addressing environmental issues through the campus activities and initiatives they support, sustainability offices they fund, research they engage in, and by adding to the larger conversation regarding environmental issues in society. Participants in my research came from four different types of institutions that fostered different experiences. As a reminder, Tamarack College was an associate’s institution, Parkview College was a private baccalaureate college, Prairie Grass University was a public baccalaureate college, and River University was a research university. Some participants’ experiences were similar across institutional type while others were unique based on the institutional context. Throughout this section, I present both an overview of the students’ experiences while intentionally discussing differences observed within different institutional contexts.

The institutional context in which student environmental activists worked to address environmental issues had varying influence. Participants talked about both the availability and the lack of environmental campus activities and groups. They also considered classes, majors, and faculty members to be influential to their activism. Finally students discussed experiences they had with sustainability offices, governing boards, and key campus administrators.
Tamarack College

Participants at Tamarack College said not many opportunities to get involved in environmental issues existed. Eileen said that “Sustainable University is doing a decent job, but I think we could do so much more.” She wished Tamarack College would have more opportunities to be involved. She said that there was a “lack of support that you see [and that] it’s something we definitely, definitely need to work on.” Eileen suggested if students were offered more support they would “feel comfortable with becoming more active in [environmental] issues.” She continued, saying that “When I look around…I see good things but then those are minimum things only.” Providing different bins for trash and recycling are recognized by Eileen as “extremely cool, how they are trying to encourage recycling and stuff like that but other than that you really don’t hear anything much [or] see anything much.” Eileen wanted to participate in a sustainability club but it closed before she could join. She said, “When I was interested in joining that club, the club started dying down.” For this reason, Eileen suggested that perhaps the college “needs to incorporate more of what’s going on inside the world with inside class learning.” Participants at Sustainable University wanted the institution to provide more involvement opportunities. Eileen suggested Sustainable University could encourage faculty to introduce students to environmental issues in class.

Jonathan noticed the small number of ways to get involved with environmental issues and said, “It’s just a hard time finding things to get involved… I never [see] anything that’s like environmental science, activism kind of thing.” If he did see these things he said, “I would be there.” James said that the “college [served] as an outlet to
do...what I wanted to do...It has to come from within. It wasn’t that the College gave me ideas.” He continued, saying, “I don’t really know what the College has in the plans...I know what I have planned.” Participants at Sustainable University focused on their activities and led change related to the environmental causes they were passionate about. They wished that Sustainable University afforded them more opportunities to be involved but recognized the institution was trying to address environmental issues in a minimal way.

**Parkview College**

Parkview College was a small college that focused on addressing environmental issues inside and outside the classroom. One aspect of Parkview College that was important to recognize was the strong environmental studies department. Both Samantha and Helen talked about the impact the department had on the learning experience for students. Helen said, “The environmental studies department at [Parkview College] really, really, really, strives for social change.” In addition to a strong environmental studies department, the campus offered a variety of student clubs and initiatives that focused on the environment.

**Prairie Grass University**

Prairie Grass University was unique in that Sarah talked specifically about the campus culture being “a big influence” on her environmental activism. She said, “Our campus prides itself on being a green campus” and had green dorms, and “all sorts of fancy do-dads that make us more green.” Sarah said that the “general atmosphere on campus is very environmentally aware” and thought “that attitude on our campus is really
unique [and] helps push efforts from my organization” forward. She admitted the institution can improve and be greener in some areas but that’s where her organization comes in. This “vibe” of sustainability permeated campus from administrators to new student recruitment efforts. Faculty members engaged in research projects surrounding sustainability and clean energy.

**River University**

A large number of opportunities were available for participants at River University. Kathryn’s earliest experiences at River University included attending a welcome week sustainability fair. It was there that she met fellow students and found the divestment student group on campus. Rachel connected with students having similar environmental interests. She was “learning about Tar Sands extraction and pipeline issues in Minnesota and [she] was really upset about them.” At the time, she looked for other people who were concerned about the same issues. Rachel said, “I plugged into all these things that were already happening and so that was really influential for me...I was looking for something that already existed.” Kate said that River University “has so many groups” and opportunities to get involved with.

At the same time, Rachel said that “being around a lot of young people” was influential. She was critical of some of the “practices of [River University] and the culture of the [school]...seeing on a really big scale....a gross scale of people milling around...doing upsetting things, or like all the fast food restaurants.” She said that when you looked around you saw a “huge disconnect of like a lot of people that are participating in just like [a] very consumptive culture.” Rachel said, “A lot of
people...have different worldviews and a different introduction to a lot of the things...than I do.” Alice talked about stepping back and thinking about how “We are creating channels for students to get into environmental organizing and what is inherently unique about student organizing.” River University provided many opportunities for students to connect with other students interested in environmental issues. At the same time, participants were concerned about the consumptive culture the institution cultivated in some instances.

**Majors and Classes**

Many participants had a major or minor related to the environment including sustainability studies, educational studies and environmental studies, global studies certificate, environmental education, horticulture, geography, and environmental science. Other participants’ majors were in the arts, medical field, and liberal arts. Whether a student was in an environment-related major or not, each talked about classroom experiences within environmental studies, other sciences, and outside these areas.

At Tamarack College, Eileen’s biology class gave her the opportunity to complete an extra credit project on the Greenhouse effect. She participated in the extra credit project and realized what she had learned about the greenhouse effect in high school was not correct. She said, “I think that was what really was eye opening for me that I really don’t know what is going on and things are being told to me [that] might not be accurate.” Jonathan’s astronomy professor discussed the global water crisis. The topic of water wars fascinated Jonathan and made him think why is “no one thinking about it,
why is no one talking about it?” Eva took an English and the environment class which exposed her to the works of Rachel Carson and other environmental activists.

At Parkview College, Samantha learned about environmental issues in her classes. She said, “I came to have a lot of problems with the environmentalism I had subscribed to...I learned a lot about John Muir that...I wasn’t necessarily too fond of.” From this she realized that “environmentalism was a movement that you follow along with [and] it was something that is being created in new ways right now. I wanted to be part of that.”

Coming to Parkview College Samantha realized that she “needed to have a voice” and that she “couldn’t just inherit what the environmental movement had been before because it wasn’t right and...wasn’t working.” Samantha’s first environmental studies class “started by talking about racism for a week...institutionalized racism...and I was like these are the conversations we should be having in environmental studies.” Helen took several classes offered through the environmental studies department and said the goal of these classes was “to affect how you think and how you relate to the world. We talk about broad scale social change a lot and I think it’s really effective for the people that take the classes.” Classes at Parkview College showed participants new ways to conceptualize the environmental movement.

At River University, Rachel’s environmental education classes spent a lot of time talking about “current environmental issues.” She said being on a college campus and learning was exciting because when she talked to people, they said, “I took this one class, and now I’m totally really turned on to all this stuff and I want to talk about all these issues and have this new language to talk about it.” Aspen took courses in sustainability,
ecology, and others. He learned about food systems and production in the United States
and around the world. One of the biggest things he learned was “knowledge about what is
actually going on and … where I should direct my energy.” Kathryn also mentioned that
“the classes have been really helpful.” She took a Political Ecology of North America
class and learned about fracking, food deserts and said it was “really helpful.”
Participants learned more about environmental issues and emerging topics in their classes
at River University.

**Internship Experiences**

Students at River University and Parkview College talked about internship
experiences. Alice participated in an internship that prepared Minnesota students to
organize for the People's Climate March. She also engaged in work surrounding
environmental justice issues in an under-sourced urban area. Kathryn participated in an
internship that worked towards advancing workers’ rights.

Helen participated in several internships and said they were all different and
“really opened [her] eyes to a lot of different forms of environmental activism.” She
participated in an internship with a wildlife sanctuary doing environmental education
with youth in New Zealand. Helen said her experience “had a huge influence on” her.
Conservation activism was important to the culture in New Zealand, and it was “life-
changing to live somewhere for a semester where conservation is just part of the blood of
the people that live there.” She explained that:

They really pride themselves on their native birds because before Europeans came
t here weren’t any mammals, there were just birds and reptiles. There were two
water mammals, they had sea lions and seals I think, but they don’t eat the birds.
Birds are like their national treasures and then Europeans came and brought
mammals and they just decimated everything. Now anyone who has a remote sense of national identity or pride is trying to eradicate the mammals, it’s kind of sad because there is a lot of mammal killing. [It is] just so incredible to see that a whole country can be behind an environmental issue or a conservation issue...I can’t even imagine a situation where the whole country is fighting for the same environmental issue. It was incredible.

As part of this internship Helen led a program focused on equity and access that brought “low-income schools in the area for free” field trips and visit days. Helen had another internship at a community farm in California where she did youth garden education. Kids of any age and their families came to the garden and learned about seeds, gardened together, and participated in learning through exploration. Issues of equity, access, and education were incorporated into her work with the community farm.

Helen’s most recent internship with the Fish and Wildlife Service focused on urban outreach. The area surrounding the refuge she worked at was quite diverse including “a large Hispanic group, a large East African group, Hmong people,...a large African American group, and generally with a much lower average income than the regular visitor, and much fewer years of formal education.” The issue was the population that currently visited the refuge was “white, upper-middle class, [and] male.” A big disconnect existed in the activities the refuge advertised and who participated in those activities that included hunting, fishing, and bird watching.

Each of the internships that Helen participated in provided a unique opportunity for her. She noticed that the approaches to environmental education in New Zealand compared to the United States was different. Where New Zealand was much more focused on letting children explore and “whatever they discover, they discover.” In the United States, she followed a detailed curriculum that included outcomes and was “super-
structured.” Both approaches were effective but just in different ways. Through each of her internships, Helen kept equity, access, and education at the center of her work.

**Faculty Members**

Faculty members supported participants’ growth in environmental activism. At Tamarack College, students said their faculty members were “passionate” and “awesome.” Eva, Eileen, and Jonathan talked about how faculty members incorporated environmental issues into class projects, discussion, and lecture.

At River University, all the participants talked about specific faculty members being supportive, helpful, and described them as mentors in relation to their environmental work. Kate talked about the research project she did and the faculty member that helped her define the scope of her project. She said that the faculty member had “been [a] really wonderful mentor” and that she couldn’t have done it without her support and guidance.

The participants at Parkview College talked about the environmental studies faculty members. Samantha said, “My professors talk about [environmental issues] in a way that is radically new...I think the faculty are very forward thinking and very responsive to what’s going on in the world and changes that are happening with environmentalism.” She continued, saying, “The fact that we have such a great faculty that are so engaged and not caught up in the past, is like one of the reasons why [Parkview College’s] environmental studies department is so good.” The environmental studies department provided students with internship information and hosted a weekly speaker events to help engage students with environmental issues.
Sarah discussed the professors at Prairie Grass University as being supportive of her involvement in environmental activism. She said, “The professors on this campus are extremely supportive of students being involved in a lot of different ways.” Sarah often missed class due to her lobbying efforts and faculty understood about her absences. In addition, the sustainability vibe that Sarah described at Prairie Grass University extends into faculty research. The research faculty engaged with often focused on renewable energy or environmental issues and provided students at the university the opportunity to assist in these projects.

Administrators, Sustainability Office Staff, and Board Members

Participants conceptualized administration as including staff members of the sustainability offices, members of governing boards, and key campus leaders. Sustainability offices were included here because students said they were an “extension of administration” since they are funded by the college, staffed by the college, and did what administrators would like them to do. The following discussion will focus on these areas and present how students view their relationship with these campus leaders.

A few institutions had designated sustainability offices on campus that helped to coordinate events, speakers, and campus sustainability initiatives. The benefit of having a sustainability office was that students eventually graduate and it was important to have a staff members that can continue projects and support students in the activities and campaigns they want to do. Helen mentioned that the sustainability office staff members were beneficial because they supported a lot of the environmental work on campus. However, she also said that staff in the sustainability office limited what her organization
could do. On campus there were so many activities going on that she thought there was
“some stepping on toes.” She said that one thing that frustrated her was if an organization
has an idea and staff members from the sustainability office is already doing something
similar the organization is not allowed to do their event. Helen said if “they already have
an idea for a project or if they are already doing a project we can’t...it’s going to be
pointless for us to do it. We can support [the sustainability office] but our plan is dead
basically.” The issue was that organizations could not always pursue the activities they
wanted in the ways in which they wanted to if staff in the sustainability office had already
planned a similar event.

The events that sustainability office staff members were “random volunteer
opportunities, but I don’t know what projects they are working on or what they are trying
to get accomplished” Helen said. Samantha also discussed activities coming from the
sustainability office and said it was mostly student run. They worked on composting,
recycling, campaigns to off-set emissions, and working with campus food service and
library on paper reduction. She asserted there was “no silver bullet” when it came to
approaching environmental issues and it needed to be approached in multiple ways. She
admitted that the staff in the sustainability office would not be able to support divestment
since it was essentially part of campus leadership and the issue of divestment was
controversial. Samantha said that sometimes she got frustrated by “how the
administration approaches sustainability like...what will look the best on paper...not
because of what would have the most impact.” She said sometimes she got fed up with
“recycling and composting” because “there are other ways to make more of an
impact...like recycling was radical in the 90s. We’re in a new place now. Maybe they are still thinking about environmentalism in that way.”

Alice talked about the sustainability office, saying that “I guess in my experience there’s different environmental work at a college...that is often times [tied to] money….they have speakers come...have all this staff, and they have a huge budget.” She said that “A lot of students have protested their events...and had a lot of problems working with them.” She suggested that a “clear channel of communication...and feedback” would be helpful. Kathryn said that “The framework of the institution and the recycling, and the culture of sustainability they have [she didn’t] think [was] very helpful.” She continued, saying, “I think it’s actually kind of hurtful. They are putting Band-Aids on stuff. Like look we’re recycling, we have these hybrid buses, when they could be making such a huge difference by divesting.” She said when she saw the buses she “sees lots of hypocrisy.” Kathryn said the recycling and composting programs were great but “it’s secondary to the things that they actually need to address...I don’t feel particularly excited about that stuff.” The activities sustainability office staff sponsored did not always focus on what students found most important in the environmental movement.

Rachel’s organization participated in an action at their institution’s governing board by doing a stand-in. She said it was “fairly low escalation” and a “polite request” to talk with them about divestment. Governing board members did not respond to the group. She was waiting to see what would come next and concluded, “We need to be a little bit more loud I think than we have been.” Kathryn’s experience of attending a governing
board meeting after a staged action to ask the institution to divest did not produce the response the group had hoped for. The students held banners up at the board meeting and were told that they needed to put them down or they would be escorted out of the meeting. They put down the banners and “just stood there.” Kathryn said, “They didn’t acknowledge us at all really...they haven’t contacted us at all or talked to us.” Kathryn said a board member attributed the action to “us being in our ‘college stage’ trying to fix stuff...we got hybrid buses. What more do you want?” This was very frustrating for the divestment organization and Kathryn.

Samantha also had experiences with speaking with administrators regarding divesting from fossil fuel companies. Her organization had written up a proposal to give to college administrators and board members but was stopped in the process by members of another committee. Samantha said that she was fortunate that administrators at her institution would meet and talk with members of her organization but it was mostly symbolic. The people she was meeting with did not have the power to make the kind of decisions her organization was asking the college to make. She noted that her organization’s experience was slightly different from others across the country because administrators were at least willing to have a conversation.

When it came to campus administrators, students wanted to engage in conversations focused on issues that were important to their generation. Participants recognized that recycling, composting, and other efforts by staff and faculty members at colleges and universities were important but contended they did not address the most important environmental issues. The response or lack of response participants received
from staff members, administrators, and board members left participants feeling frustrated, misunderstood, and dismissed. The participants wanted to engage in conversation and hoped that campus leaders would be willing to have these conversations with members of their organizations.

**Conclusion**

Chapter Five presented key findings related to my first three research questions. Participants were engaged in a variety of activities that surrounded Morton’s three pro-social paradigms of charity, project, and social change. Everyday activities were also discussed by participants as simple things they did because they felt both a sense of responsibility to do them and in some cases had the intent of making social change.

Participants came to be involved in environmental issues through experiences growing up in nature, during their K-12 education, and in college. Family, friends, teachers and mentors supported their growth in environmental activism. Participants’ worldviews illuminated their environmental values and why students chose to address environmental issues. The environmental movement that participants discussed focused not only on environmental issues but also social justice and environmental justice issues.
Chapter Six: Identities

Participants acknowledged the tension they saw between the environmental movement of the past and the current movement. They were compelled to address environmental and social justice issues and how they chose to approach them demonstrated this tension. I asked participants about their identity to address my fourth research question which was, “How do students’ intersecting identities influence their approaches to environmental activism?” This section will present what I heard from participants related to their identities, how they intersect, what challenges they have experienced related to their identities, and how participants viewed oppression and privilege in relation to environmental activism.

Gender

Some participants spoke about how gender influenced their approach to environmental activism. Rachel said her “female identity…speaks to [my community building].” She organized using an ecofeminist approach. Alice discussed how gender intersected with being in spaces that are predominantly people of color. She said:

It intersects with gender in a complicated way that I don’t really know how to talk about a lot of the time…Often times when I’m in doing environmental justice work organizing and there is a lot of men in a place, people get talked over all the time…There are all these intergroup dynamics that are influenced by gender and patriarchy. Race is the first thing that gets talked about. I think I see a lot of women and women of color get really frustrated by that, especially around pipeline issues and things that are affecting water quality and birth and reproductive issues.

Alice’s “gender is important but not as important as [she] would like it to be [for her].”

She wished there was more support for women environmental organizers available. She
liked the idea of “women’s caucuses” that gave women in environmental circles greater support than was currently available.

Other participants said their gender was not a big factor in their environmental activism. Sarah has not “had to think about [her] gender” when it comes to addressing environmental issues. She said, “As a woman, I really haven’t had conflict with people not respecting me...That’s never been an issue because I work with a lot of women.” Sarah said, “Overall, I don’t feel like my gender puts me in any advantage or disadvantage than any other genders.” Kathryn said she was “not super attached to [her] gender” and talked about using she/her and they/them pronouns. She viewed herself as a woman but did not feel this identity informed her approach to environmental activism.

Eva did not think her gender identity influenced her approach to environmental activism.

Race

Race was discussed by itself and as intersecting with other identities. Kate discussed her race of being Asian American and that this identity influenced her more so when she came to college. She was adopted when she was young and said that “I knew I was Asian American, but I would almost sometimes forget because I very much assimilated” into school. In college, she received a scholarship and her advisor encouraged her as part of that scholarship to join a networking group focused on minorities in natural science careers. After joining this group she started “identifying more as a minority.”

Eva said that environmental activism and “being Latina don’t really go together...I come from a minority background and...being a vegetarian is something that
is super weird to my parents and to the Latino culture. It’s something that they don’t really understand.” Eileen identified as Hmong and discussed her culture. She viewed all of her identities as coming together to address environmental issues and therefore will be discussed further in the section focused on intersecting identities.

Several participants considered what it meant to be white in a movement focused on environmental issues and social justice issues. Race influenced Rachel’s “understanding of environmental issues...[her] early experiences with environmental awareness and things like...going to a place in the woods and hanging out there, [was] a very western, very white understanding of the environment. ” Rachel noted that being white was one part of her identity that influenced her exposure to nature at a young age.

Alice believed framing environmental issues is important. An example she provided was, “How are you going to tell someone that can’t afford to pay their utility bill that month that if you just put a little extra this month it will be better in the long run, long-term versus short-term are really important.” Alice said that “As someone who’s white there are a lot of things that come with being white and being in interracial spaces or predominantly people of color spaces.” Being white and working in spaces that predominantly involved people of color “has affected work that I have done around environmental [issues], especially like food access and utility stuff.” Alice said that “a lot of the folks that show up are white students” to participate in the environmental advocacy group. “What does that mean to be a group of white students who are working on specific issues?…What issues are we working on?...Who's’ involved in them?” These questions “about dynamics and demographics [are] issues that are important to a campaign.” Alice
was concerned about the difference in the identities of those involved in the environmental advocacy group and those impacted by environmental issues.

Sarah said that “a lot of the people that you see doing environmental activism work at…the frontlines...are white and we’re white people working for issues that affect non-white people.” She said that people of color are involved in environmental activism but “it’s very much to say that they don’t necessarily have the spotlight.” Sarah recognized a disparity between the identities of those impacted by environmental issues and those involved in addressing these issues.

Alice and Aspen talked about heritage. Alice said that “No one can ever deny white privilege and that white people have privilege but what’s the difference between claiming your European heritage and claiming white heritage, and white being the absence of culture.” It was “more tangible for” Alice to consider heritage and helped her “relate to race in a different way.” She said, “there is nothing to celebrate being white, historically in truth whiteness is an oppressive awful thing” and so by examining heritage Alice found pieces of her identity to consider. Aspen noted that “You also have heritage. So I kind of have been interested in learning what…separates me from being [a]...stereotypical white male.” White participants talked about what their racial identity meant for them in a movement predominantly led by people with similar identities.

Class

Several participants found it difficult to discuss their class identity and how it influenced their approach to activism. Alice said class was “more of a hidden” identity and that she didn’t think people were “very comfortable talking about class.” She said
that people do not talk about class very much, “especially in college” and in organizing spaces. Kathryn, Kate, and Samantha discussed how their class identities of upper-middle and middle class provided them with privilege to attend the institution they did, which in turn provided them to learn about environmental issues and time to participate in student organizations, research projects, and internships.

Kate identified as upper-middle class and said this identity allowed her to camp as a child and spend time in nature. Experiences in nature influenced Kate’s interest in addressing environmental issues. She said that her class “has made me more capable of [engaging with these issues], because I am so fortunate enough to not have to constantly have to worry about what I’m going to eat next.” She said that “I’m able to focus more energies on environmental issues where as if I didn’t have enough food I would probably spend much more of my energies on that.” She continued, saying, if she had a lower income she “wouldn’t have nearly as much time to focus on environmental issues” and would find it necessary to work to support herself.

Sarah was concerned that the issues she addressed, including campaigning to shut down incinerators and power plants, created internal conflict for her in regards to her identity of being middle class. In this case Sarah said, “Being middle-class kind of strikes me as a little more of a barrier between my organizing and the people that I’m organizing with or for.” Shutting down the incinerator or power plant primarily impacted poor communities of color. Sarah was concerned that community members may come up to her and say, “You’re a middle-class white woman why do you care about what happens here? Why do I have to listen to you?” Although she had not been confronted by
community members who identify differently than her, Sarah said, “I am always aware that it could happen and that at any moment anybody could come up to me and accuse me of not really understanding an issue.” Sarah also discussed how her identities of being a young person and student intersected with her class identity. She noted that her interest and ability to address environmental issues was different than her peers that did not attend college. In college Sarah learned about environmental issues in the classroom and had the time and opportunity to engage with these issues. She was aware that her privilege as a student, which I argue also intersects with her class identity affording her the means to attend college, enabled her to engage with environmental issues in a more in-depth way compared to her peers that did not attend college.

Rachel’s class identity was influential and “formed a lot of the identity that leads [her] to activism.” She said, “I think a lot of my early ideas about injustice and fairness were formed kind of from growing up in poverty next to a lot of people who are much more comfortable economically than I was.” Rachel’s environmental activism was informed by her experiences related to her class identity and her feeling of injustice.

Eileen said that for her the “most important [identity] is class because those with less privilege have less opportunities” to buy quality food. She said, “When you’re from a lower class, middle class you don’t have the funds you need in order to go with certain options that may help the environment.” Eileen said that money influenced how she could participate in environmental issues saying “if you’re from a lower middle class...you don’t really have the luxuries of those that have more privileges than you do.” She asserted that class identity determined her environmental activities.
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

Eva said that “class...has a bigger impact on the way that [she] acts as an environmental activist...because...whether we like it or not, finance has a lot to do with the way that you live.” She said she comes “from a lower income family” and that she thought that “It’s harder for people who are low income to contribute to environmental activism because they can’t buy organic meat for five dollars or you can’t buy local for cheap.” Eva was concerned that factory farms in America produced affordable by lower quality meat to meet the large demand. She also noted that buying organic competed with the need to pay for tuition and textbooks.

Jonathan’s identity of being lower class influenced his viewpoint that “class has the biggest impact on how people view things.” He worked twenty hours a week as a tutor at Tamarack College and worked as a waiter. He also played music on the street for additional money at Twins games and other large events. He wished he could work more hours at the college, but he could not because of work study regulations limiting students to work twenty hours a week during the year. Balancing these sources of income was “getting old” and he said he would “rather be an activist.” Having the ability and time to do environmental work impacted how much Jonathan was able to engage in this work.

Jonathan said that “I can’t change my gender, I can’t change my race, but I can try and change my class.” Jonathan said class “has an incredible impact on anyone...it impacts people’s educations, it impacts people’s views on life, it impacts what they get involved with, how they get involved with things...money is incredibly important.” Class identity was important for participants and affected their ability to afford eco-friendly, healthy
products and determined the amount of time they were able to participate in activism efforts.

Sexuality

Identities of sexuality are complex. Three participants in my study discussed Queer identity and heterosexual identity. A few participants discussed Queer identity as influencing their approach to environmental activism. Rachel said, “connecting with my own sexuality and connecting that with a feeling of being natural…or what is natural” has been central for her. She said that “understanding the way that…oppression towards certain sexual identities or identities in general can also relate to environmental oppression.” Some of Alice’s first political activism experiences were campaigning for the “Minnesota United Vote No” marriage campaign. Alice noted that in general she has experienced a lot of “really tight communities around identities of certain sexualities.” For Alice, sexuality was prominent in her community building since communities around specific sexuality groups were strong and modeled how to foster communities in environmental activism.

Student and Young Person

Participants talked about their identities of being a young person and student. Several participants noted their generation is the generation that needs to mitigate climate change. Aspen’s biology textbook said, “if you were born in the late 1990s or 2000s, you’re living in the generation of climate change and you’re going to be living in the era of climate change.” He also saw a TedTalk featuring a 20-year old inventor who developed a contraption that collects and recycles plastic in the ocean. The speaker
opened his TedTalk saying “We are the generation that is going to have to deal with
[climate change].” Eva asserted that it was her generation’s responsibility to address
these issues. In her environmental ethics class, they discussed that the “younger
generation…has that duty of repairing the harm [of] past generations.” Kate said that her
generation would “hopefully…be one large influencer of events for the next couple
decades” and added there was “a lot of pressure on [her generation] or responsibility
to…to do something good.” The participants’ generation understood their responsibility to
address environmental issues and did not take this duty lightly.

Samantha said her generation looked at the world in a different way than previous
generations. “There’s a kind of cynicism but also idealism that’s pretty prevalent.” Some
of Samantha’s earliest memories were of when George W. Bush was president, the Twin
Towers fell, and the United States went to Iraq. These experiences impacted how her
generation approaches the world and environmental issues. She said, “my hesitance…with
[the] Sierra Club, and my belief in community, my belief [in] connecting with people,
even people from other countries, people from other backgrounds” stemmed from her
generational experiences and was similar for her peers.

Aspen noted that businesses and government entities are interested in knowing
more about the younger generation, such as, “What are they doing? Where are they
going? How are we going to sell to them?” The next step for his generation would be to
graduate from college and become leaders in the community. Aspen was adamant that the
younger generation needed to make sure “to not let the older, the big wig politicians,
push [them] over” rather they needed to adhere to their identities of being young people.
For Eva being a student provided activities to be involved in, a peer group to have conversations with, and a learning environment in which to think more deeply about environmental issues in classes. Eva was the first in her family to go to college and said, “you’re kind of exposed to a lot of different things” in college. Her role as a student had “a huge impact on the way that we go about doing and caring about the environment.” Having friends from different backgrounds involved in different environmental activities gave her the opportunity to have conversations and participate in activities she would not normally seek out, such as participating in buckthorn removal.

Sarah’s identities of being a young person and a student were connected at times and not at other times. She noted that some people in her generation were not concerned with environmental issues but were not necessarily students and for the most part she engaged with other students. On one hand, “A lot of it is the work...I am able to do...a lot of campus work versus community work because I am a college student” but on the other hand “the power and the drive that I have to do these things comes from being a young person.” The generational gap Sarah saw between the “15 and 30 year old” activists and the people her parents’ age in the legislature who were “50 or 60 years old” manifested in the generations thinking differently about reform, government, policies, and environmental issues.

An example Sarah discussed was her experience advocating to bring more wind energy to her region and to implement buffer zones for local farms. She said:

I went to a town hall meeting with our district representative and it was a lot of college students from my chapter versus all of the farmers, all the 60 to 70 year old farmers in the room, and we were being mediated by our 50 something representative.
Sarah grew up in a small farming community and lived in a similar farming community. The “environmental stewardship of farmers versus the environmental stewardship of environmental activists” had always interested her. It amazed Sarah “how something as simple as a buffer zone could bring up this huge battle line.” Farmers who “are so dedicated to having land were not onboard with buffer zones.” She recognized that farmers were concerned with “giving up [land] that they’ve earned” and were “flabbergasted that the government was asking them to give up their land.” The different experiences of previous generations could impact the gaps she saw in what was important to each generation. Sarah’s grandparents’ generation grew up during the Great Depression in a world with “so many different heartaches and struggles in their lifetime” that her generation had not had. She said, “Aside from the financial collapse in 2008, my life has been fine.” The older generation used the lack of lifetime experience against her generation as a way to say “that we’re too young, we’re naive, we don’t know what we’re talking about, we haven’t really...lived [and that] we should just shut up and go back to school.” The disconnect that existed between generations was unfortunate but Sarah knew that it stemmed from her stake in addressing environmental issues being different from “Farmer Joe down the road.”

Being a student influenced participation in the divestment movement since the movement focused on students organizing to ask the college or university to divest its endowment from fossil fuel companies. Kathryn said that the divestment movement is a “very student led movement.” For her, the “student piece [of her identity] is the strongest” for her.
Spirituality was discussed by several participants some of whom believed it was part of their identity and others who said they were more spiritually connected to the earth. Aspen said that one of his identities was spirituality. He said, “spirituality isn’t a skill but it’s a base of knowledge that I have that not everyone has...everybody has different things that they have they can bring to the table.” He said, “faith… I would include in my upbringing, with church stuff just because of the nature stuff....and then with the meditating...kind of seeing how I relate to the way I’m doing work in the world.” Rachel said her spirituality influenced her environmental activism. She said:

I was raised kind of Jewish, mostly atheist… I’m more in like a Pagan, Jewish, undefined realm but kind of looking for spiritual practice and finding it is earth worship or reverence for the natural world is something that has definitely influenced me, been an important experience for me and a really joyful experience, which makes me even more invested in the natural world and feeling connected to it.

Rachel was influenced more by her feelings of reverence for the earth and felt less strongly that any affiliations with formal religion influenced her.

Helen said that “something that I try to think about that’s really hard to think about is culture and...one that goes along really closely with that is religion.” She noticed through her environmental work that “people relate to nature differently depending on how they relate to religion.” Helen said that “if she had any spiritual leaning it would be with the earth.” James said he was “not a religious person” but would consider himself a naturalist “as opposed to an atheist.” He believed that “everything comes from the natural world and we all come from that.” Participants believed spirituality was tied to one’s connection to the earth and some described their spirituality as being one with the earth.
Samantha noted that many of her peers “don’t want to talk about religion or spirituality because it seemed to cloud the reason…logic” related to environmental issues. Samantha said, “we evolved from the natural world, we’re definitely a part of the natural world, we can’t separate ourselves from the natural world.” She continued, saying, “It’s not really something that I can think about logically [and] there is nothing wrong with that.” Spirituality was central to participants’ connection to the earth. Sometimes participants experienced spirituality through religion while others described their spirituality as being a part of the earth or deeply connected to the earth.

**Intersecting Identities**

Alice talked about how a “really big part of [her] identities are in the intersectional work that [she is] doing.” Intersectionality showed up due to “the space that I’m in because that is what organizing is.” Alice moved the advocacy organization “towards relational organizing and ...towards a more broad racial equity analysis.” Historically, the organization was predominantly white. Members participated in trainings and worked with community organizations to “build coalitions around issues rather than being the only organization working on an issue.” Organizations provided opportunities for conversations about intersectionality and held trainings to help members gain skills.

Alice said that one challenge she saw in relation to identities was the question “are we all impacted by the environment because we live on the earth versus are we impacted differently by environmental issues?” This question examined the intersections of gender, race, and class. Alice said:
I think that there’s been a lot of spaces where students of color have felt like it’s not a campaign that they should be a part of or isn’t directly affecting issues and is a solidarity tactic and not necessarily a campaign that is addressing real issues and communities.

It was important to have a diverse movement that was also “real and honest and truthful to what our world actually is.” Alice finished saying, “Our world is burning. This is all of our issues...I have just as much right to be at the front of the room, or leading this march as an indigenous woman...There is a lot of tension.” The intersections of gender, race, and class aligned with a diverse society and added complexity in navigating environmental issues.

James said his identities “come together as one” when doing environmental work. When asked about whether his identities influenced his environmental activism he said, “No, everyone is real inviting, positive attitude, and it’s not like I’m a threatening person...people in the circles that I would hang out in don’t judge, they don’t judge.”

James said that his identities did not influence his environmental activism. However, I would posit that his early experiences in the under-sourced urban school district, permeated with structural racism and classism, influenced him to choose to attend an agricultural focused charter school. The values held by the charter school informed James’s environmental work.

Rachel viewed all of her identities as “really important or are a pretty significant lens that I work through.” She said that the oppression she experienced related to her gender, class, and sexuality have influenced her to be involved. She specifically discussed her drive to address oppression and things that she saw as unjust and unfair. This drive stemmed from the intersection of her oppressed identities.
Eileen’s “identities all together influence” how she addressed environmental issues. “Growing up in a [Hmong] household, not an average American household, growing up middle-class too, it was just harder to find the resources or even an educational point-of-view.” Eileen’s had difficulty adhering to “core values at the same time [as] still trying to incorporate the same values of everyone else,” and it was especially difficult “when you are surrounded [by] a family that doesn’t believe in those certain things or doesn’t have that strong belief as you do, or isn’t supportive of it as much as they should be.” Eileen’s identities of being Hmong and from a middle class intersected and influenced how she approached activism. Her experience at college was different from that at home where her identities shifted. Being surrounded by a Hmong family that doesn’t understand environmental issues or the environmental work she was doing made it difficult for Eileen to adhere to her environmental values.

Eileen said that her primary challenge related to her identities was her “cultural background, roles and values….even my class...being middle class.” She said that in the Hmong culture she did not know if “there was a definition for” environmental activism because they “don’t think about those things.” Eileen said it was interesting because her mom hardly cared about what was going on with environmental issues and she came to the U. S. when she was three years old. Her mom was “more in tune with [Hmong] traditional values.” Eileen did not know why her culture did not think about environmental issues but suggested “maybe more Americanized, more modernized youths of my culture” thought more about these issues.
Eva believed the big influence her identity as a student had on her environmental activism really “opened up her knowledge” about environmental issues. She then said:

I feel like my identity at home is different. Where it’s more of a struggle to try and contribute...It’s difficult for me at home...for like my whole family to say that ‘oh, we want to buy organic and we want to buy local.’ We do it as often as we can but it would be different if we could completely buy organic and local. So, I think...my influence at home and how I identify myself at home definitely has a big impact. Whereas, if my family was upper class it would be completely different. Maybe I would be more involved or less involved because I had privilege of having access to that kind of quality food.

Eva’s identities of being a Latina, female, from a lower class family influenced her approaches to environmental activism at home. Her cultural identity of being Latina and having to teach her family about these issues intersected with her class identity which impacted her ability to afford local organic food. She struggled to influence her family to make different food choices because they did not have unrestricted funds to access organic local food or a deep knowledge about why making these choices were good for their health and environment.

Eva experienced interactions similar to Eileen’s experiences when she discussed environmental issues with family. Eva said:

At first it felt challenging [to be an environmental activist]. I didn’t really fit into this whole thing but now I see how you have to feel some sort of interest in doing it...I found ways to be active and still try to balance the whole race and class with things that I felt passionate about.

When Eva started engaging with environmental issues, it was difficult at first “convincing [her] parents to even be open to the idea of recycling and eating less meat. That was definitely a challenge.” Also her identity at home and identity at college were different. She said:
My identity that I relate to at home can sometimes clash with my identity here being a student...When I first started this whole thing, being interested in the food industry was because as a student I wanted to be so engaged and so informed. When I went back home I had a hard time trying to explain it to my family....The student in me wanted to teach my parents these new things but the daughter in me wasn’t able or wasn’t successful in convincing my parents to be more informed about the environment.

Eva’s identities at college and home differed somewhat because she needed to shift to her cultural identity when she arrived home.

Kathryn said her student identity was the most salient for her environmental work. She interned at a workers’ rights non-profit and said, “I felt like it wasn’t my place to be there, as it was my place to work within being a student...taking hold of my student identity and using that.” Her identities of being a white upper-middle class female did not necessarily align with the primarily working-class Latino clients. She said:

I don’t feel like I did any harm or anything wrong by being there. I think that I did help...I think for me it makes more sense to organize around divestment and raise student awareness because that is such a strong part of my identity, being a student.

For me, I understand that student identity was important for Kathryn’s environmental work. At the same time, it could be noted that her identities align with others’ identities involved in the environmental and divestment movement. She said that her identities “work together in a lot of ways.” Kathryn said, “I think being white and working on environmental issues is always really sticky because it’s like ‘Oh, you only care about the environment’...like being white and only caring about the environment and not caring about social injustices.” Being white in a predominately white movement felt natural for her to participate but she also reflected on how her identities informed her participation in divestment.
Kathryn considered difficulties related to her identities and who was also involved in divestment. She said:

We've had a lot of internal discussions about why...aren’t people of color joining our group, not like how can we get them to join our group, but why aren’t they in the first place? What about divestment in that way is exclusive...it’s about money, it’s about already having the privilege of being a student at [a university]. That’s where we are thinking about reinvestment...you can use your student identity to get the [institution] to divest from fossil fuels...and then reinvest in communities, which is an equity issue, a race issue, a class issue.

Recently the divestment organization Kathryn was a part of restructured their campaign around the topic of reinvestment. Kathryn said focusing on reinvestment was not “for the sole purpose of getting people of color in [our organization], we’re trying to work on this goal of a better world that we all have and that includes including people of color. Making sure they have voices and they are equally represented.” Kathryn noted that reflecting on which identities were present in the environmental movement and how to diversify this movement were key issues addressed by activists.

At first, Aspen thought activists should focus on the earth first and “ignore racism, ignore the poverty for a while” but now he believed we cannot “move forward [or] take care of our earth until we learn to respect ourselves as a global community...despite color of the skin or social status.” Aspen’s identities of being a white middle class male made him consider “how [he’s] being viewed.” He said he needed to be mindful and intentional about how he participates in environmental issues. “I can’t be too pushy...I can’t push my ideas out there, I can’t take over too much...at the same time the environmental activism comes behind that when I’m being mindful.” He admitted that sometimes you need to “make people mad a bit,” but that he approached activism “mindfully.”
Aspen said he could lead group discussion but tried “to refrain from doing that because of [his] gender, race, and class identity.” Aspen said:

When I’m in a conversation...either about the environment or about race issues or economic issues...I have to realize that I’m a white male. Historically...white males have controlled and really dictated what’s happening in the world...so when I go to events and I talk, when I am involved in conversations and discussions about these issues...when I’m in a room full of diverse people I can’t be taking up too much room talking. Even...if I had good ideas, I can’t be the one spilling out my brains and trying to like push everything a certain way because that’s not really fair...It’s easy to take up a lot of space just because we’re in the society we live in.

Aspen said the most challenging thing he experienced in relation to his identities and addressing environmental issues was pulling himself back and letting others talk. He said:

When you go into a conversation about environmental justice and it’s talking about issues of poverty, class, which are usually things that don’t affect the white demographic as much, then it’s especially important to hear other voices. This is not just people of color but like women, white women, or women of college. I can’t be stepping on their voices either or shutting them out….That’s the biggest struggle honestly.

Aspen noticed his peers take up too much space in meetings and said, “I think the struggle for white males is coming to terms with their privilege and learning how to address that in conversations about environmental justice.” Aspens identities of being a white middle class male intersected to form what he termed privileged identities. His approach to environmental activism influenced his mindful approach in how he engaged in conversation and project development.

Kate believed her intersecting identities of class, country, growing up in western society, and being highly educated afforded her privilege. Her class, country and education provided her with the availability and knowledge to address environmental issues. Kate felt privileged because she “was born in China” and adopted at a young age.
She said, “If I’d stayed there I would just have a tiny fraction of the opportunities that I’ve had here. I don’t even know if I would be involved in environmental issues.” Kate considered “Being adopted into this country, into such a high class, was completely extraordinarily lucky for me.” As she reflected on this experience, she saw her intersecting identities of class, county, education, and race come together in a way that was unique for her.

Sarah’s identities of being a white middle class female defined “who [she] can work with openly or easily.” Working with people that have similar identities to herself she could “walk into that group very open mindedly and just be there and participate immediately versus people who identify differently.” At the time of our interview, she was trying to diversify her organization because there were very few “people of color involved in [their current] environmental campaign.” Sarah thought about “how to fix that because I think it’s really important [to have students of color involved] because a lot of issues…I am fighting are issues that aren’t necessarily affecting white people.” As an organizer Sarah was always thinking about race and how it fit into her environmental organizing. She said:

Thinking specifically about people of color and activism, I’m not a person of color. I don’t have those same experiences as them but even if we’re working on a similar campaign we are going to come at it with different mindsets. I think that’s something that I’m always thinking about.

Sarah talked about two issues that she experienced based on her identities. The first goes back to the idea of the generation gap. The disparity she experienced when she was “talking to legislators, who think I don’t understand an issue because I am young.” She said, “that argument coming from an elected leader telling me I don’t understand…
issues that I’m dealing with” was frustrating. She said the responses she got when she lobbied was “well we were too young, you don’t understand the issues” when in reality her generation will be the one addressing these issues. Sarah also said that she felt like a hypocrite because she encouraged others to participate in everyday activities but as a student she was not able to participate in many environmental everyday activities. She lived in a small community where public transportation was not readily available and local businesses did not offer eco-friendly ways to consume. Since she was renting and had limited financial resources she was not able to compost, grow her own vegetables, take public transportation, or lead a “no trash lifestyle.”

Samantha said that “any part of [her] identity that gives [her] privilege over other marginalized people” was important when she was participating in environmental activism. Her privileged identities included being white, middle-class, and being an American citizen. She felt like she was “part of a system that is causing these environmental problems.” Samantha said, “my identities as a person of privilege is the main reason why I’m a part of environmental issues.” Samantha emphasized the importance of approaching environmental problems as “systems of privilege and oppression.” She said she tried to “dismantle privilege [and]...dismantle oppression…[and] dismantling systems of oppression is different from how you would save wilderness.” In the past, decisions to create National parks were not a social movement because the decision was made at the top. The difference with the environmental movement now was it’s focused on equity and social change which requires “more people to...rally to its cause.” Samantha said, “You can’t just have one person buy
organic and have that make a difference...it needs to be social...it needs to rally a lot of people.” Samantha was worried about the roles oppression and privilege played in policy decisions and how they informed others’ approaches to environmental issues.

Samantha’s organization had intentional conversations about how to “create a more inclusive environment” for others to engage with environmental activism. Members of her organization were trying to create “space for being allies for other social movements.” Samantha said:

We went to the Black Lives Matter rally together intentionally and we are really trying to be allies for other people. This idea of inclusivity and looking at ourselves and realizing that we are predominately white, our leadership is predominately male, there’s not really a space for Queer people in the environmental movement, and...realizing that and to create a more inclusive environment [was important].

Samantha said her organization wanted to reach out and support other groups before they needed something from them. “It’s really hard because these issues have so much urgency [but we need] to slow down and build relationships that are actually going to do something.” Being intentional in building relationships with other social justice student groups was central to her organization’s effort to create space for more diverse voices to be engaged in environmental issues.

Helen said that when she worked on environmental issues she thought a lot about race and class. She said, “I’m almost always thinking about race and class, and I think first class and then race. Especially thinking about access to services and ...outdoor opportunities.” Helen had an interesting perspective on her identities and the challenges she faced related to environmental activism. She identified as mixed race but said, “I think about other people relating to me because I think a lot about the fact that people
who just meet me off-hand...probably don’t assume I’m mixed race.” Helen said her “biggest challenge has been wondering whether or not I am okay doing activism or doing these activities in a situation where I feel like my own racial heritage is not represented.” She identified as half Mexican and said her ethnicity “is probably the most underrepresented in environmental issues and activism.” Helen was trying to determine if she was comfortable being involved with a movement that “is so one-sided and really led by one kind of identity.” She said this has been “a crisis in [her] head” with what she was seeing at her internship with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Helen tried “to point out, not in a critical way, but an observation-y way, like look at this population that is in this room right now.” She said she tried to use her own identity “to express how maybe it’s not as comfortable a place for everyone or maybe everyone can’t feel understood in the same way” because she admitted at times she felt uncomfortable. Especially when someone said something about a person of color and assumed that she was not a person of color. Helen said, “I think I need to get better at bringing those things up and using them to kind of bring people’s awareness to the situation who’s involved.” She admitted “It’s really hard to do it in a way that isn’t critical and that doesn’t make people feel like they have to be really defensive. I think it’s totally understandable for people to get defensive. It’s not their fault they’re white.” She thought it was meaningful work to get white environmental activists to think about the spaces their organizations create and whether it was a comfortable space for students of color. Helen tried to challenge her organization to think about the spaces it created for students of color to participate but recognized it was not easy.
Helen also noted that her culture of being “raised with this mixed salad culture” was “really valuable” for her. Culture was considered different from race because it encompassed “your traditions, your lifestyle, your values, and how that fits in with a group.” Helen said she was “raised very mixed culturally. I had a parent from the United States, a parent from Mexico, and really close family friends from Vietnam. I have family in Japan... which has been really valuable to me.” Growing up surrounded by individuals from different cultures informed her ideas about the role of intersecting identities in the environmental movement.

Helen also talked about the challenge she had with gender stereotypes related to which types of sciences women could pursue. She said sometimes “I feel vulnerable because I don’t have a degree in biology and I’m not going to... I’m kind of playing into that stereotype like ‘of course she’s here, she’s doing outreach in education.” The hard sciences, like biology, are stereotypically pursued by men while the education fields are pursued by women. Her fear was that she was “playing into those gender stereotypes” even though her interest was in environmental education.

Helen believed that the two most important things in environmental activism was “education and [equity in] access and opportunity.” Lately she was “grappling with a lot... is the demographic of who’s involved in environmental activism.” At her summer internship she looked around and gathered that “99% of the people at work are white upper-middle class, older people” and she was “really conflicted” by this. During her summer job, she tried “to focus on who is already involved in these issues, who has access to learning about the issues, who has time to learn about the issues, [and] who is
Helen also thought about whether people of color in the surrounding communities had the time or money to visit the refuge and if they did have the resources to access the refuge, would they feel comfortable working or being in a place “where everyone else around” them was white and upper-middle class.

Jonathan said, “I try not to show my identity through my class.” He was concerned that events he hosted charged a few dollars and thought it was possibly a class issue. He said, “community colleges...promote students from lower classes trying to get an education” and students often do not have the financial means to pay for extra things which included fundraisers for his organization. He shared an experience from high school related to his class identify saying:

That’s still a big one for me. I try not to show my identity through my class-thing is a huge thing. When I was in high school I used to go to Savers and I’d buy suit coats. I was like ‘I look fly, I look real good, I don’t look like a poor boy from a really crappy home.’ No one ever, if I had friends over they’d be like ‘this is not where I expected you to live’ because one of the houses I lived in was slanted, like it’s sinking into the ground on one side. So like, if you spill water it would roll all the way to the other side of the house. And everyone was like ‘I thought you’d, you know big house, I thought your parents were like Engineers’ and I was like ‘Nope, nope my mom sells floors and my dad is unemployed half the time.’ They were like ‘wow, I didn’t, like the way you present yourself is not like a kid from a hard place.’ So, I think that’s a really true [statement] about myself.

Jonathan was concerned about how some of his organizations charged dues and that not everyone had the money to pay dues. These people “deserve all those things that don’t have [the money].” With his effort to raise money to support building a well in Africa, Jonathan said money “is less of an issue if you’re just doing the work but when you’re trying to do...fundraisers and you’re trying to do things that involve...money in some way, it gets a little tricky.” Jonathan’s class identity influenced the way he thought about
students’ access to participate in organizations and activities surrounding environmental issues.

**Conclusion**

Chapter Six presented key findings related to my final research question related to how intersecting identities influence student environmental activists’ approaches to activism. The intersecting identities of participants influenced how they thought about, discussed, and participated in environmental activism. The complexity of intersecting identities made each participant’s experience and lens for how they saw environmental issues slightly different. Many students talked about the impact of class on their availability to participate in environmental behaviors. In addition, several students talked about the issues they saw with the environmental movement being primarily led by white middle class individuals. Students of color and white students acknowledged this tension and suggested new ways to think about the environmental movement that included what issues to focus on, how to approach these issues, and who needed to be engaged in addressing them. Chapter Seven will provide a discussion related to the key findings and how they relate to the literature and college student environmental activism.
Chapter 7: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the way students approach environmental activism and what influenced their engagement with environmental issues. I explored four research questions including:

- In what ways do students engage in environmental activism grounded in charity, project, and social change paradigms?
- How do students’ worldviews and experiences outside of college influence their approaches to environmental activism?
- How do students’ experiences in college influence their engagement with environmental activism?
- How do students’ intersecting identities influence their approaches to environmental activism?

The study included 12 student environmental activists from four different types of institutions including an associate’s institution, a private baccalaureate college, a public baccalaureate college, and a research university. Participants were engaged in a variety of environmental issues. Experiences outside of college, their worldview, experiences in college, and intersecting identities influenced participants’ approaches to environmental activism. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the key findings as they relate to my four research questions and conceptual framework.

Conceptualizing Environmental Activism

Participants generally defined environmental activism as being active in addressing environmental issues. Researchers suggest that environmental activism
included participating in pro-social behavior with the goal of improving the environment (Seguin, Peletier, & Hunseley, 1998) or simply not wanting to negatively impact the environment (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Student environmental activists in my study participated in activities they felt would have a positive impact on environmental issues. Concentrating on local environmental issues mattered to participants because they were more likely to influence other community members’ participation if they could see the impact addressing these issues had locally.

Participants focused either on saving nature for its own sake or addressing the negative health impacts environmental issues have on people. They were passionate about different types of environmental issues including climate change, decreasing the use of fossil fuel, increasing food security, engaging in sustainability, removing invasive plant species, and conserving wildlife and habitats. Environmental justice activities focus on mitigating health impacts of environmental issues that disproportionately impact communities of color and working-class neighborhoods (Cole & Foster, 2001). Several participants engaged in environmental justice issues including reclaiming land in an under-sourced urban area, working with community gardens, and working on projects to address pipeline and climate change issues that disproportionately impact frontline communities who were often working-class and communities of color. Participants said that creating social change and addressing the health impacts of environmental issues influenced why they chose to address environmental justice types of activities.

Participants acknowledged that different levels of activism existed including low-levels of activism such as consumer purchasing decisions and recycling to more engaged
levels of activism where social issues were the focus. Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) recognize that college students participate in both community service activities and civic/political participation. Several participants took part in political actions in the public sphere, such as protests, stand-ins, and marches, which are considered environmental activism according to Stern (2000). Dono, et al. (2010) found a relationship between environmental activism and pro-environmental behavior which supported why participants thought of themselves as environmental activists based on their pro-environmental activities.

**Differences in Pro-social Behaviors and Everyday Activities**

Morton (1995) organizes pro-social behaviors into three paradigms including charity, project, and social change. Participants’ activities that fell in the charity paradigm included Earth Day events, buckthorn removal, community gardens, river clean-up events, fundraisers for non-profit organizations, recycling campaigns, environmental volunteer work, and tabling at environmental events. Project paradigm activities included community gardens, a bikeway project, planting native trees, global water projects, campus solar campaign, local community campaigns, and addressing pipeline issues. Activities in the social change paradigm included food justice activities, divestment and reinvestment efforts, and political demonstrations. Participants discussed the same activities in different ways based on their role and level of involvement with the activity. For example, the activity of being involved in a community garden appeared in all three pro-social paradigms based on the individual’s time investment, level of commitment, who developed and implemented the garden, and which communities intended to benefit.
Weerts et al. (2014) suggests that some student environmental activists participated in activities from all three of Morton’s pro-social paradigms including charity, project, and social change and, because of their broad activism, termed them “super-engagers.” All participants from four-year institutions in my study would be considered super-engagers since they were engaged in activities found in each of Morton’s three paradigms. Student environmental activists from Tamarack College, an associate’s institution, participated at varying degrees, but did not participate in all three pro-social paradigms.

Each participant at River University, Prairie Grass University, and Parkview College talked about being involved in either the divestment movement or activities aimed at creating social change by addressing environmental issues. Many participants viewed the divestment movement as part of the social change paradigm and aligning with the environmental justice movement. Divestment focuses on addressing climate change and mitigating the disproportionate impacts on oppressed communities. A few participants problematized the divestment movement noting that it is a movement by students with “educational privilege” attending institutions with larger endowments. Kathryn and Sarah said the divestment movement was attempting to address environmental issues that impacted frontline communities even though the communities themselves were not specifically involved in the movements’ efforts. The educational privilege participants had included attending a selective four-year institution and having the time to discuss and address these issues. For the most part institutions with large endowments and divestment campaigns are four-year colleges and universities.
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

Participants at Tamarack College did not participate in the divestment movement or other activities that fell within the social change paradigm. Rather, the everyday activities of participants at Tamarack College were viewed by some students as social change activities given that their intent was to have a bigger impact on society. However, activities should be working towards fighting systems of oppression and working with affected communities in order to align with the social change paradigm. Instead, participants at Tamarack College focused on everyday activities, volunteer opportunities, and/or projects. Student environmental activists at Tamarack College emphasized their everyday lifestyle choices related to veganism and vegetarianism, water conservation, recycling, and gardening. Everyday activities do not fit into one of Morton’s three pro-social paradigms because they are considered private sphere behaviors. Participants at Tamarack College viewed everyday activities as an integral part of their environmental activism.

Pink (2012) suggests that individuals can have an impact through small everyday activities and that environmental activism included both everyday activities and political actions. Student environmental activists at Tamarack College not only participated in everyday activities but discussed their private sphere behaviors with peers and family members. One component of relational activism is participating in private sphere behaviors and moving them to the public sphere through personal networks. (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). Participants at Tamarack College said their everyday choices characterized their environmental activism. However, only using Morton’s three
pro-social paradigms may neglect to demonstrate the important role everyday activities play in students’ environmental activism.

Most participants at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University also participated in everyday activities, but they conceptualized how these activities fit with environmental activism differently. Alice, Rachel, and Kathryn participated in a variety of everyday activities but did not believe these made a huge difference in addressing environmental issues. Helen, Kate, Samantha, and Aspen joined the students of Tamarack College in feeling differently about everyday activities. Samantha described it as the butterfly effect, Aspen called it the ripple effect, while others simply said the small things can add up to make a big impact. They saw the potential of how small everyday activities can add up and have an incredible impact while in college and over their lifetime.

Environmental activists in my study believed they could make a difference in environmental issues. Some participants contended that small actions add up to make big change while other participants focused on the one area that had the potential to make the greatest change. Lubell, Zaharan, and Veditz (2007) describe collective action and contend that individuals participate in activities when the act of participating creates greater value for members of society than not participating. Student environmental activists participated in private and public sphere behaviors. Activities align with Morton’s (1995) charity, project, and social change paradigms while also considering the important role everyday activities played for many participants in student their environmental activism. Students participated in activities that aligned with
environmental issues they were concerned about. As was previously noted, student environmental activists focused on a wide array of environmental issues. Not all of these issues are the same issues addressed by previous generations. The shift in what issues college student environmental activists focused on and how they approached them creates tension between generations.

**Tension between Generations**

As was presented in Chapter One, the environmental movement was complex and previously conceptualized in different ways including preservation, conservation, ecofeminism, and environmental justice. The components of the movement often run parallel with one another throughout the decades with an occasionally intersection (Cole & Foster, 2001; Mann, 2011; Walker, 2012; Wellock, 2007). Many thought the environmental movement was built on the values of conservation and preservation. In the 1960s and 1970s, the movement grew to focus on Earth Day, teach-ins, and hippies (Switzer, 2003).

Some participants were concerned with the term environmental activist and some hesitated to identify with a movement grounded in the 1960s and 1970s movement. A few participants thought the previous generations gave the environmental movement a bad reputation. Allen, Daro, and Holland (2007) suggest that terms related to environmentalists had negative connotations. James, Eileen, Eva, and Kate did not consider themselves a typical environmental activist in that they did not engage in protests or sit-ins. Other participants recognized the term environmental activist was equated with negative connotations and the idea of a person only caring about the
environment, hugging trees, and not caring about people. Kate and Aspen said they were environmentalists, while Alice, Samantha, and Kathryn called themselves environmental organizers.

The emergence of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* tied environmental issues and health impacts together (Unger, 2004). In addition, the environmental justice movement focused on the disproportionate impacts of environmental issues on health of oppressed communities. Participants were driven to address social change and oppression related to environmental issues. When participants learned about the negative health impacts stemming from environmental issues and the disproportionate community impact they wanted to concentrate on ameliorating the hazardous health impacts created by the environment and community in which one lives.

Several participants recognized they are the generation of climate change and felt called by society to address these issues. Student activists of the 1990s believed that they had the responsibility to fix social issues perpetuated and ignored by previous generations (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Environmental activists in my study felt the same responsibility to fix issues that were left unaddressed, in their opinion, by previous generations. Thinking about the responsibility they felt to address climate change issues, several participants discussed their conceptualization of the current environmental movement. The tension experienced between the current generation and the previous generations focused on a disagreement regarding the scope of the environmental movement and participants not feeling like previous generations took them seriously. Saving wilderness was a part of what participants focused on, but many believed this
focus would not generate the kind of impact needed to mitigate the seriousness of current environmental issues. Rather, many participants focused on pipeline issues and climate change issues which they viewed as having a greater impact.

Why participants were involved with environmental issues was different from previous generations. In the past, people engaged in environmental issues to save the planet, wilderness, and animals. In fact, I remember growing up as a child and focusing on these topics. The current generation of student environmental activists believed that protecting nature was fine but the issue that warranted their attention was the health issues that stemmed from climate change. The impact of health issues on society and marginalized communities materialized in dramatic ways and informed the environmental work of some participants by influencing them to concentrate on social justice issues at the same time as environmental issues. Participants at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University used social justice values as a foundation for addressing environmental issues. Participants at Tamarack College discussed social justice issues not specifically related to environmental justice. The tension between generations stemmed from their approach and focus to addressing environmental issues. The current generation saw their focus on social justice as a marked difference from what the previous generations are trying to address in the current environmental movement.

The scope of the environmental movement was complicated in how it focused on multiple issues and was approached by participants in different ways. In addition, participants believed that their conceptualization of environmental activism was different from previous generations. Participants engaged in everyday activities and charity,
project, and social change paradigm activities. They were compelled to address
environmental issues because they believed their generation was responsible to address
the global climate crisis left unattended to by previous generations. The impetus to
address environmental issues stemmed from participants’ experiences with nature as
children and their worldview and spirituality.

**Developing an Environmental Worldview**

Worldview is defined by Webster (2016) as “how someone sees the world.” The
experiences students had growing up served as a foundation for developing their
environmental worldview. Developing ideas and values about nature stemmed from
spending time in nature, exposure to environmental values during K-12 education,
influence of family members, and development of spirituality. Clayton and Myers’s
(2009) research suggests that childhood experiences with nature influenced individuals’
relationships with the environment in later years. Most participants in my study said
experiences growing up in and around nature laid the groundwork for their current
environmental work. The participants who described their childhood experiences with
nature as minimal or did not see these interactions as influential to their current
engagement still discussed how their relationship with nature was influenced by either
their disconnection from, fear of, or inexperience with nature as a child.

**Nature and Place**

Many student environmental activists camped, canoed, and played outside when
they were children. For the most part, the places that students grew up in and were
exposed to informed their environmental work and how they conceptualized their
worldview. Growing up in Minnesota gave participants ample opportunities to experience nature. Clayton and Myers (2009) advocate for colleges and universities to consider the concept of place when developing policies related to sustainability initiatives. Many participants focused on addressing local issues. Sarah emphasized the importance of concentrating on local environmental issues in order to encourage other college students to participate in campaigns, actions, and activities. Seven participants chose to focus their environmental activism on local issues they found compelling.

Clayton and Myers (2009) use the concept of “place identity,” proposed by Proshansky. Place identity contends that an individuals’ physical environment informs one’s beliefs, values, and behaviors related to the environment (Proshansky, 1978). Most participants in my study emphasized the importance of place on their experiences, environmental worldview, and how they viewed their connection to the earth. Alice, Rachel, Aspen, Kate, Samantha, James, and Helen came to be interested in environmental issues by first being introduced to nature and environmental issues as children by spending time in nature, K-12 educational experiences, or discussions with their parents.

The participants who did not have experiences with nature through camping, hiking, and simply being outdoors said their path to environmental activism was somewhat unclear. Kathryn, Sarah, Eileen, Eva, and Jonathan came to be involved in environmental issues specifically during college. Kathryn thought perhaps her reason for participating was grounded in the frustration and fear of nature she had as a child. Sarah was unclear about why she was passionate about environmental issues and posited that she started to be involved and realized it was something she enjoyed. Eileen said she did
not spend time in nature until moving from California to Minnesota. Eva and Jonathan
spent time outdoors as children but did not attribute this experience to why they care
about environmental issues. The connection or disconnection from nature appeared to
influence most participants’ involvement in environmental activism.

**K-12 Education**

Several participants said early educational experiences with student clubs,
learning about the political process, class discussions, and senior projects influenced their
involvement. Alice and James attended K-12 institutions whose unique mission and
values focused on the environment and agriculture. Each of these experiences provided
them with some of their earliest experiences thinking and talking about environmental
issues. Neimi and Junn (1998) found in their research that K-12 students learned about
social issues when teachers fostered supportive classrooms that allowed children to
explore and think critically about environmental issues. Alice and James had the unique
opportunity to deeply learn about and discuss the impact of environmental issues during
their K-12 experiences. Both participants viewed these early educational experiences as
aided in their development of values related to the environment.

**Family**

Many participants were introduced to environmental activities, exposed to nature,
and supported in their activism by family members. Parents encouraged participants to
learn more about the political process and address social issues that were important to
them. Parents brought participants into nature during their childhood and helped them
develop values and a worldview aligned with valuing the earth and connection to nature.
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

Research suggests that children are more likely to participate in environmentally friendly behaviors if their parents and other family members do (Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; Pancer & Pratt, 1999). Eileen and Eva, who identified as Hmong and Latina, had challenges communicating about environmental issues with their families. In the Hmong and Latino cultures, they said environmental issues were not discussed or viewed as important. These two participants tried to teach their family members about environmental issues and the actions that could be done to address them. In general, they described their families as supportive but discussed the additional energy they put into explaining the importance of environmental issues and how everyday choices impact these issues. Eva influenced her family to participate in environmentally responsible behaviors while Eileen was still acting alone in her activities while at home.

Spirituality

A few participants discussed their own spirituality and environmental activism. Aspen and Samantha discussed the connection between experiences with organized religion they were exposed to during their formative years and their care for the earth. Opportunities provided by churches to attend camps, take canoe trips, and spend time in nature shaped their environmental values. Alice attended a Quaker middle school. She said Quaker values were instilled in her at a young age and strengthened her connection to the natural world. Rachel, Helen, and James did not specifically identify with organized religion but said the spirituality they felt aligned with their care for the earth. The feeling of being spiritual was discussed by several participants but did not necessarily align with organized religion. For some individuals these feelings came from
early experiences with organized religion but for others spirituality was experienced by being in nature, meditating, and believing in something larger than themselves. Regardless of how student environmental activists came to conceptualize their spirituality many said their connection to the earth was powerful, spiritual, and often difficult to explain.

Conceptualizing Worldview

The values and ideas about the natural world were influenced by early childhood experiences, family, and spirituality. Participants’ experiences with nature as a child fostered a deep connection to the earth and other people living on the plant. Spending time outdoors, learning from or teaching family members about environmental issues, and participating in unique K-12 school influenced how participants viewed the earth, shaped their values, and saw their role in the natural world.

Traditionally environmental worldviews were sorted into two viewpoints. One saw nature as a resource and the other believed nature should be taken care of to protect its inherent value (Clayton & Meyer, 2009). The biospheric worldview is grounded in the belief that the ecological environment is valued for its own sake (Stern et al., 1999). The social-altruistic worldview focuses on acting in environmentally positive ways in order to benefit society and people that are a part of society (Stern et al.). The other worldview considered is the egoistic or anthropocentric worldview, which viewed nature as a resource for human consumption with humans being more important than nature (Plumwood, 1996; Stern et al.). Individuals with a biospheric or social-altruistic
worldview were more likely to participate in pro-social environmental behaviors (Schultz & Zelezny, 1998).

Participants in my study described their care for the earth in terms of improving the environment for its inherent value, which was considered a biospheric worldview, or to benefit health and social justice issues in society, which was considered to be a social-altruistic worldview. Egoistic or anthropocentric worldview are negatively correlated with individuals’ participation in pro-environmental behaviors (Schultz & Zelezny). Student environmental activists in the study did not describe their worldview in terms of egoistic or anthropocentric.

**Influence of Institutional Context**

Colleges and universities are expected to address environmental issues through research, developing solutions, and educating students to be well-informed citizens (Bardaglio & Putman, 2009; Barlett & Chase, 2004; Creighton, 1998; Kezar, 2005; Wright, 2004). The charge for colleges and universities to address social issues is referred to as an inherent social charter (Kezar, 2005). Institutions are engaged in reducing their carbon footprint through climate commitments and initiatives facilitated by the ACUPCC and AASHE. In addition, colleges and universities influence a critical mass of people by providing educational experience in and out of the classroom (Colby et al., 2007; Levine & Dean, 2012). This is relevant to influencing engagement with environmental issues because research suggests that educational attainment is positively correlated with individuals’ participation in pro-environmental behaviors. However, depending on the institutional context, participants thought about their involvement with environmental
activism in different ways. Institutions provided different contexts in which students participated in environmental activism.

Sarah uniquely described Prairie Grass University as having a “vibe” of sustainability that influenced the work of faculty and promoted engagement of students. She also noted that faculty research often focused on environmental issues and provided students with opportunities to engage in this way. Prairie Grass University is viewed as a leader in environmental initiatives and was discussed in a positive way.

Parkview College and River University had several similarities including existing sustainability offices, sponsored speakers, and projects to address environmental issues. Participants from these institutions did not talk about the institutions being recognized as green or sustainable amongst student environmental activists. Participants from Parkview College and River University talked about the influence of faculty members in the environmental education and studies departments. The relationships participants had with the faculty through their classes and programs helped them expand their thinking surrounding environmental issues and how they intersected with other social issues. In addition, students at Parkview College and River University discussed internship and research experiences. Some participants’ experiences with internships and research projects exposed them to new topics and provided them with experiences to critically think about environmental issues while getting hands-on experience.

Tamarack College had campus-wide initiatives and a climate committee but participants did not feel like they were part of a robust network of environmentalists. Students wished the institution would provide more extensive campus campaigns and
involvement opportunities. Participants at Tamarack College discussed a few friendships that supported their involvement but did not see these relationships as a robust network. Most participants discussed the importance environmental activist communities and building relationships had on their environmental activism.

**Environmental Activist Communities and Networks**

Building relationships and community was thought to have the greatest potential impact on environmental issues while in college and over participants’ lifetimes. Some participants focused on relationships and community building when they discussed their approach to organizing around environmental issues. For many participants in my study, building community was key to impacting environmental issues. Relationships and networks through relational activism supported the growth of environmental activists and provided an opportunity for them to work together to address issues that were important to them.

Participants at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University were involved outside of the classroom through student groups, organizations, and campus initiatives. Student groups and organizations provided participants with involvement opportunities and enabled them to engage with environmental issues on campus. Participants at Tamarack College wanted more opportunities to get involved since environmental groups did not exist on campus. James and Jonathan created student groups and led conversations around environmental issues but did not find an existing network to join. The general student population was more concerned with other issues, like the cost of attending college, than with environmental issues. Without an existing
support network or structure created by the college with which students could connect, it was difficult for some to take the lead and create these opportunities themselves.

The importance of communities and networks both influenced participants’ environmental activism and allowed them to grow in their work. All participants described a specific peer, group of friends, or the institution’s student environmental activist community that informed and supported their environmental activism. Relationships and networks afforded participants the ability to talk through environmental issues and be exposed to new ways of thinking. At the same time, the environmental activist network was a community of students with the capacity and drive to identify environmental issues, develop a plan to address them, and implement the plan.

The central role relationships and networks played in participants’ environmental activism can be described through the concept of relational activism (O’Shaughnessy & Kennedy, 2010). Relational activism recognizes the importance of building community and networks in order to work together and make change. Grounding participant responses in the work of O’Shaughnessy and Kennedy help described why participants attending institutions with robust environmental activist networks were more deeply involved. For example, students at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University easily found students with similar environmental interests. Conversely, students at Tamarack College did not find an existing environmental student network. What relational activism argues is that activism flourishes through social networks and building relationships. At Tamarack College student environmental activism existed on a
smaller scale partially because the group of environmental activists was small and large environmental groups did not exist.

The availability or lack of availability of environmental student groups and networks influenced participants’ ability to connect with other environmental activists. Institutions with many student groups and a plethora of involvement opportunities also had participants that were deeply involved in addressing environmental issues. Participants at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University said the environmental activist networks or communities influenced them to participate in environmental activism. Participants from Tamarack College where these opportunities and groups were lacking, wished more opportunities were available and found it difficult to be involved and find other students interested in environmental issues.

**Academic Programs, Classes, and Faculty**

Many participants across all institutions said their experiences in classes and with faculty members introduced them to environmental issues and provided them with opportunities to discuss these issues with peers. Lang (2002) found a relationship between majors and environmentalism, while Kaplowitz and Lavine (2005) found that students with majors related to natural resources, science, or medicine scored higher in their environmental knowledge than those that had undeclared, business, education, or nursing majors. Many participants had majors or minors that focused in some way on environmental fields.

Research suggests that experiences in the classroom related to discussions, journaling, and projects helped students increase their environmental knowledge,
environmental literacy, and participation in pro-environmental behaviors (Balgopal, Wallace, & Dahlberg, 2011; Hsu, 2004; Mobley, Vagias, & DeWard, 2009; Teisl, Anderson, Noblet, Criner, & Rubin, 2010). Engaging in classroom discussions and projects helped students learn more about environmental topics by challenging them to think about environmental issues in new ways. For example, Samantha recalled spending the first week discussing racism in her environmental studies class. Incorporating racism in the conversation opened her eyes to how these two social issues intersected. Helen and Samantha said the faculty in the environmental studies department at Parkview College were progressive in their thinking by emphasizing social change in addition to environmental issues.

At River University several students spoke highly of faculty members in their majors, courses, and collaborators with research projects. Sarah also discussed the faculty engagement with environmental issues in research and the classroom at Prairie Grass University. The passion of faculty members and opportunities to explore environmental topics through an extra credit project, research project, or internships helped participants think about environmental issues in new ways.

At Tamarack College, participants learned about environmental issues in their classes. Eva, Eileen, and Jonathan did not have majors specifically tied to environmental studies but learned more about issues in classes. Eileen admitted that her interest in environmental issues partially emerged from an extra credit project she completed on the greenhouse effect. She felt that environmental issues should be incorporated into classes at Tamarack College to provide students with opportunities to learn about environmental
issues that they may not seek out on their own. Eva and Jonathan also learned about environmental issues in courses that were not necessarily focused on the nature.

Many participants discussed the importance of being exposed to environmental issues in their classes and majors. In addition, the role faculty members played by providing students opportunities to talk and learn about environmental issues was key in furthering students’ understanding of these issues and influenced their approaches to activism. Students at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University mostly had environment-focused majors and learned about oppression and the environment, health impacts of climate change, and critical issues. Therefore, students that were interested in environmental issues for a major or career were also gaining skills and knowledge to address critical issues in their field. Participants at Tamarack College had fewer experiences in classes and with faculty discussing environmental issues than their peers at four-year institutions. They emphasized the importance of discussing environmental issues in classes at Tamarack College because their peers did not know a lot about environmental issues and did not have time to seek out learning opportunities if not incorporated in their courses. Participants said being exposed to environmental issues in the classroom challenged them to think about issues in new ways and served as an impetus for conversations amongst their peers.

**Sustainability Offices and Relationships with Administrators**

Participants at each institution recognized that colleges and universities are trying to address environmental issues in a way but contended that the institution’s approach did not always produce the greatest impact on addressing environmental issues.
Organizations invest time and budget dollars into greening campuses through supporting sustainability offices, campus building projects, and promoting student engagement with environmental issues through institutional campaigns (Creighton, 1998). A few participants at Parkview College and River University recognized that the efforts of sustainability offices were grounded in environmentalism, everyday activities, and environmental volunteerism.

Several participants at Parkview College and River University believed the work of sustainability offices was one approach to addressing environmental issues but not the approach they suggest would mitigate climate change. Participants focused on social change issues and divestment issues because they believed these issues can enact the greatest amount of change. A few students recognized that sustainability offices cannot join students in their call for divestment since the offices are part of administration. Since divestment is a political issue, if sustainability offices support divestment they would have a conflict of interest between being a part of administration and fighting against administration. Students recognized why sustainability offices do not engage in divestment conversations but also admitted divestment issues are central to students’ current efforts. Some participants at Parkview College and River University felt that the environmental volunteerism work sustainability offices on campuses did was fine but this work did not align with the environmental activism surrounding divestment and social change that was most important to many participants.

Interactions with administrators and/or governing board members were often frustrating for participants. Samantha’s organization engaged in several conversations
with key administrators. These conversations did not result in divesting the institution’s endowment from fossil fuel companies but at least the conversations were actively occurring. Members of Samantha’s organization felt heard by administrators and viewed their relationship as positive.

Rachel and Kathryn felt ignored or dismissed in their calls for divestment. They were labeled by administrators and board members as being too young to fully understand the impact divesting would have on the institution. However, the participants I spoke with were well read and educated about climate change and the economic impact divestment would have for institutions. A few participants also discussed the importance of being thoughtful about reinvestment if an institution was to decide to divest from fossil fuel companies. The theme that emerged from my interviews was that students wanted to be heard. Participants recognized that interacting with administrators around divestment was a political issue but simply wanted to be given the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with administrators. Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, and Aaron (2008) found through their research that when activists were met with resistance from administrators, students engaged in “bottom-up planning.” The “strategy selection can move from a positive compliance-gaining strategy to a negative one” when activists engage in bottom-up planning (Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron, p. 340). Being ignored, dismissed, or minimized added to the frustration that several participants felt in their relationships or lack of relationship with administrators.

Sustainability office and relationships with administrators were important for individuals because they viewed these entities as having the power to help them enact
change. Participants believed the work of sustainability offices was fine but were frustrated that the focus was on environmental volunteerism or everyday activities, which would not have a big impact on climate change. Interactions with administration were both frustrating and encouraging. Participants wanted opportunities to openly engage in discussions related to environmental issues that were important to them without being dismissed or ignored.

**Identities and Environmental Activism**

The final research question to examine is how the identities of student environmental activists influence their approaches to environmental activism. Much of the research surrounding identities and environmental activism focuses on one aspect of identity including gender, race, or class. Participants chose to talk about their identities in both a singular and intersecting way. In this section, I discuss how participants’ identities influenced their environmental activism. To begin, the concept of biographic availability is discussed as it relates to how a student’s time and resources influences their ability to be involved with environmental activism. Then an in-depth summary related to how experiences of oppression and privilege influence why students are compelled to engage in environmental activism and how these experiences shape their involvement. Finally, how intersecting identities are conceptualized while participating in environmental activism is discussed.

**Biographic Availability**

Several participants said that their ability to be involved in environmental activism was connected to whether they had the time to participate. On one hand, several
participants said their involvement in environmental activism was only possible because of their identity of being a young person and namely a student which gave them the luxury of available time. On the other hand, a few participants’ class identity influenced their biographic availability in a different way. A few participants found it necessary to work while going to college, and this time spent working could have otherwise been dedicated to activism.

Students’ biographic availability or time to participate in environmental activism was directly tied to their identity of being a student and to their social class. “Biographic availability” refers to the concept that individuals are more likely to participate in social movements and activism if they have the time available (McAdams, 1986; Petrie, 2004; Schussman & Soule, 2005). Biographic availability manifested differently for each participant. Sometimes their identities gave them more biographic availability while at other times their identities limited the availability to participate in environmental activism.

Some participants at River University, Parkview College, and Prairie Grass University wanted to do as much with environmental activism before they finished college because they had the time now as college students. Several participants at Tamarack College reported not having as much time to be involved in environmental activism because they had to focus on course work, family commitments, or work commitments.

Kate, Kathryn, Sarah, Samantha, and Aspen who identified as middle and upper class said they were privileged to have the time while in college to participate and focus
on environmental issues. Some students, Jonathan and Eileen, who identified as lower and middle-lower class talked about their need to work while in school or focus on their classes. Students found it necessary to work to pay for their tuition, afford books, and wanted to make sure that they were investing time in the courses they were paying for. Students at Tamarack College in particular talked about the need to work or make consumer choices. They did not talk about the same concept of biographic availability that the students at four-year institutions.

**Oppression and Privilege**

Oppression and privilege are key constructs that undergird the environmental movement and intersectional analyses. Several participants discussed how experiences related to their identities, oppression, and privilege compelled them to address environmental issues. Most participants discussed their desire to address environmental issues because if they were not addressed, the cycle of oppression and privilege would continue. The identity of race and class was problematized in the environmental movement because the movement has been characterized as a white, middle- and upper-class movement (Allen, et al., 2007; Meyer, 2009; Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). At the same time, gender and sexuality may also be linked to experiences of oppression and environmental issues (Gaard, 2004).

When considering identities related to oppression and privilege, women did not discuss oppression related to their gender. Participants were not asked specifically about their sexuality identity but a few discussed it when I asked if there was anything else that I should have asked or they would like me to know. Alice, Rachel, and Kathryn
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suggested that ecofeminism may influence why they participated in environmental activism but at the time of the interviews they could not articulate how. Alice and Rachel identified as Queer, which partially influenced why they were compelled to participate in environmental activism. Oppression stemming from their sexual identity which intersected with their gender identity made them feel like they better understood oppression of the earth because they experienced oppression personally. Ecofeminism links oppression between gender and ecology by arguing that women and nature experience similar lack of voice and inequities (Gaarder, 2011). Participants that discussed sexuality also pointed to oppression and ecofeminism to frame why they addressed environmental issues.

The remaining participants that discussed sexual identity and gender identified as either heterosexual, cisgender or both heterosexual and cisgender. No one who identified as heterosexual and/or cisgender said sexual or gender identity influenced their work as an activist. However, Aspen viewed his male identity in an intersectional way. Aspen recognized that his identities of being a white, middle class, male provided him with privilege.

Eva, Eileen, and Helen talked about difficulties they experienced related to their race but did not specifically tie it to oppression and privilege. However, these women’s lived experiences differed based on their identities of race, culture, and in some instances class and they were treated differently and had different experiences because of their identities. Helen’s experience with white peers in the environmental movement was challenging related to their assumption that she was not a person of color. Peers asked
inappropriate questions about people of color and she felt responsibility to confront her peers on their comments. Eva and Eileen had to switch their approach to environmental issues between home and school. Their experiences at home were challenging because they had to explain why they valued the environment and why they participated in addressing these issues. Since environmental issues were not an integral part of each of their cultures, they had to explain their values at home which they found challenging. While at school, Eva and Eileen more easily aligned their behaviors with their environmental values. For these participants it was more difficult to participate in environments where they viewed their race in a collective way because their race and culture at home did not understand the importance of environmental issues. Both Eva and Eileen felt responsible to influence family member’s actions since their families did not participate in environmental activism. At school, they switched from their race or culture being the most salient to their approach to activism to their student identity being more salient. Student identity provided participants the opportunity to connect with friends with similar environmental values. It was easier to talk about and participate in environmental activism at college because they could focus on their activities and did not have to convince others that their environmental activism was worthwhile.

Most white participants were cognizant of the link between existing privilege and being white in a stereotypically white movement. White participants at the four-year institutions talked about their desire to not focus on preservation and conservation in the environmental movement. Participants conceptualized the environmental movement to include mitigating climate change, improving the environment in which we live, and
reducing the health impact of environmental issues. Social justice was important for Rachel, Alice, Helen, Samantha, Sarah, Kate, Kathryn, and Jonathan to consider in their approaches to environmental activism. Intentionally incorporating social justice and environmental justice values into their approaches to activism was different than the approaches of previous generations. To fight against privilege, several white participants focused on social justice issues in spaces occupied predominantly by people of color.

The low engagement of people of color with environmental organizations and issues concerned most participants. Participants at River University, Parkview College, and Renewable College attempted to create space for students of color in the environmental movement. A few participants noted that environmental issues and the environmental movement may not be compelling for people of color because many other social justice issues warranted attention. Research suggests environmental activists focus on saving nature while environmental justice activists focus on the impact the environmental issues had on communities (Allen et al., 2007). In my study, most participants focused on the tenants of environmental justice activism and valued conversations with their peers, experiences in their classes, and conversations with faculty members.

Participants involved in the divestment movement admitted it was a privileged movement focused on colleges and universities divesting monies from fossil fuel organizations. Divestment seeks to address climate change, which disproportionately impacts oppressed communities. Kathryn, Sarah, and Rachel noted divestment efforts were led by individuals with educational and student privilege on campus. Most white
participants recognized their own white privilege and talked about their race in a movement characterized by whiteness. Jonathan was the only participant that did not specifically talk about his identity of being white but discussed the impact of his class identity as being more salient when thinking about privilege and oppression.

Participants struggled with the concepts of oppression and privilege in their activism work. Whether they experienced oppression based on one or more of their identities or if they were driven because they recognized their own privilege, the environmental movement is infused by experiences of oppression and privilege. Many participants became involved with environmental issues and social justice issues because of oppression they experienced related to their class, race, or sexual identities. Other participants recognized the privilege they experience related to their identities allows them to be intentional about addressing these issues and creating space for those oppressed by the environmental movement. Today’s generation of college students are moving the environmental movement to align more with the environmental justice movement than the environmental movement of the past primarily concerned with saving wilderness.

**Intersecting Identities**

When considering the intersecting identities of participants, students described their experiences and identities in different ways. Intersectionality is defined as “relationships among multiple social dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Participants were asked about their identities of gender, race, and class. The ways in which individuals experience
intersectionality is unique based on the salience they assign to their identities and the
text in which they engage in activities (Crenshaw, 2009; Griffin & Museus, 2011;
Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011). Participants presented their identities and
environmental activism in a unique way.

Environmental issues impact everyone and not solely the white middle- and
upper-class, but making these issues more relevant and inclusive of working class
individuals and communities of color is difficult. Several participants said that framing
environmental issues in an intersectional way could help encourage more individuals
with diverse identities to participate.

Some participants said their identities came together as one to form the lens they
used to address environmental issues. When participants experienced oppression through
their intersecting identities they discussed how their experiences influenced them to
address situations and issues that oppressed others. Participants, with what they
considered as more privileged identities, said they were influenced to address
environmental issues in an intersectional way. They recognized the privilege they had
and knew that if they do nothing to address these issues they will be part of the system
that is perpetuating oppression. Participants did not want to be part of the system of
oppression that historically existed around addressing environmental issues.

Some participants who identified as students of color talked about all their
identities being important in addressing environmental issues. However, when we
discussed challenges they experienced, they often discussed their race and culture. For
the most part, challenges emerged when participants experienced clashes between their
environmental values and the values of their culture and family. With environmental issues stemming from a movement led primarily by white people, the tension students of color experienced related to their race and culture may have been related to historical structural oppression and exclusion of people of color in the environmental movement (Bullard & Johnson, 2000; Pezzullo & Sandler, 2007). Doetsch-Kidder (2012) explored intersectional activism and suggested that individuals with intersecting oppressed identities were marginalized in social movements historically because they were not focused on one specific oppressed identity.

A few participants said that it was natural and easy for them to participate in the environmental movement because they identified as white and middle- to upper- class. Participants with identities that traditionally defined the environmental movement admitted that because their identities aligned with the movement it was easier for them to be involved. At the same time this problematized the movement because identities of environmental activists were often privileged.

Aspen’s identities of being a white, middle class, male influenced him to be intentional about reducing his participation in order to make space for others’ voices. The focus of many participants was to be critical of who was involved and who had a voice in the environmental movement. They worked toward a more inclusive and intersectional way to address social justice issues while also addressing environmental issues. Participants were careful to discuss environmental issues and identities because they did not want to perpetuate the stereotype that addressing environmental issues was only addressing white issues. Many participants believed that addressing environmental issues
also included social justice issues because environmental issues impacted communities of color and working class neighborhoods.

Marginalization of working class communities of color historically influenced educational opportunities. James came to environmental issues through his experience with a poor school district and what I would argue is structural racism. The participant may not have decided to attend a charter school focused on the environment if it wasn’t for the experience he had in an under-sourced urban school district.

Some women of color discussed more challenges related to their identities than the one man of color participant. Crenshaw (2009) found that women of color do not experience racism in the same way that men of color do. Although participants did not label their experiences as being related to racism, having to address misunderstandings of white students and being challenged by members of their own culture may be explained by patriarchy perpetuated by intersecting oppressed identities.

Conclusion

The way in which college student environmental activists approached their activism was influenced by the participants’ experiences, institutional context, and their intersecting identities. Students conceptualized the environmental movement in a new way and recognized tensions in the way previous generations approached environmental issues. Several participants talked about the importance of student networks and clubs, experiences in classrooms and with faculty members, and their sometimes contentious relationship with administrators. The experiences of environmental activists differed depending on the institutional context. Student identities intersected in unique ways
related to biographic availability, oppression and privilege, and contributed to how students approached activism. In the final chapter, I discuss implications and recommendations for how my research can both expand the academy’s understanding of student environmental activists and inform policy and program development.
Chapter VIII: Implications and Conclusion

The key findings in my study suggest ways in which colleges and universities can fulfill the inherent social charter of fostering students’ development as engaged citizens prepared to address social issues. The term environmental activist was explored during my study and each participant discussed it in slightly different ways. However, after my conversations with participants about environmental activism I came to my own definition of environmental activism. Environmental activism is trying to positively change the world by addressing environmental issues. This can be approached through advocacy, protesting, and lobbying efforts or through a person's everyday lifestyle choices. Environmental activism has changed for college students over time from a focus on saving wilderness to a focus on climate change and social justice issues that intersect with environmental issues.

In a broader higher educational context, it is critically important for colleges and universities to create ways for students to learn about and address social issues. Whether students are interested in addressing racial equity, workers’ rights, or, in my study’s case, environmental issues, colleges and universities can provide experiences to help students prepare themselves to engage in issues about which they are passionate. Although not every college student will become an activist, students should have the opportunity to better understand social issues and determine ways they can enact social change. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to prepare engaged people with the capability to address social issues. The following implications and recommendations outline what colleges and
universities can do to better engage students to engage in social issues, to include environmental issues.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Students’ environmental activism is influenced before they come to college and while in college. Traditionally, students come to campus with a set of values related to the environment. This was true for many participants in my study, including experiences with nature growing up, support from family members, and experiences during their K-12 education. However, this is not the case for every participant. Participants who identified as a student of color, female, and from a lower-middle or lower class did not have the same experiences that white middle- and upper-class students had at home and in K-12 education. The students that had these experiences arrived at college with values that supported and informed their involvement in environmental issues.

Students engaged in a variety of environmental activities and often wanted to engage in these activities with others outside of the classroom. Participants’ environmental activities ranged from everyday activities to engaging in efforts to address oppression through community engagement. The issues participants engaged with varied from conservation to environmental justice. Most of the participants wanted to find a community of peers who were interested in addressing environmental issues when they arrived at college.

Participants at the associate’s institution expressed the lack of an existing club or group of peers to address environmental issues. Some of the participants took the initiative to create a club or lead an activity, but it was not as easy to get involved at
Tamarack College as for students at other institutions. Participants from each of the four-year institutions, regardless of institutional size or location, talked about how they were able to find an existing student group or network of environmental activists to connect with. Having existing groups and networks of students involved in environmental issues provided students the opportunity to talk about these issues and develop projects to address their concerns. Colleges and universities need to be open to supporting a variety of student groups and networks in order to accommodate the varying levels of engagement and different interests of environmental activists.

Education is important in addressing environmental issues. Classroom experiences, interactions with faculty members, and opportunities for internships and research projects expanded students’ understanding of environmental issues. Participants at each institution talked about how their experiences in the classroom were critical to informing their environmental activism work. Faculty members exposed students to new ideas or presented information in new ways that challenged their current way of thinking about environmental issues. For some participants, experiences in the classroom were the first time they engaged with environmental issues. For others, discussions in the classroom or with faculty members gave them the opportunity to challenge their previous ideas about the environmental movement. Some participants said that before college they viewed the environment in a privileged way where the earth should be saved for its pristine nature. Overlaying concepts of racism, environmental justice, and the negative health impacts of environmental issues on communities expanded students’ understanding of the complexity of environmental issues. Their concern shifted from
thinking about saving nature for its own sake to addressing environmental issues because they negatively impact the health and living conditions of people.

Students discussed the importance of internships and research projects on their learning while in college. Several participants had the opportunity to participate in an internship or research project that focused on the environment in some way. Internships and research projects were seen as opportunities to engage with communities addressing and impacted by environmental issues. Colby et al. (2007) emphasized the importance of providing structured opportunities for students to participate in civic engagement opportunities. The faculty members participants interacted with appeared to understand the shift in the environmental movement from a focus on preserving and conserving to a call to address environmental issues in the scope of intersectional social justice frameworks. Institutions should support faculty members to facilitate interdisciplinary discussions around environmental issues. The expertise and research of faculty provide students the exposure to and growth in their thinking around environmental issues. In addition, continuing to offer and expand classroom and internship opportunities more intentionally into associate’s institutions could provide students from more diverse backgrounds the opportunities to engage in environmental work in the field.

The colleges and universities in my study were engaged with AASHE and the Presidents’ Climate Commitment. Through this work campuses focused on reducing energy consumption, purchasing renewable energy, and providing organized opportunities to participate in recycling, composting, and water reduction. Depending on the institutional context students viewed institutional efforts differently. At Tamarack
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College, students wished there were more opportunities to be involved in environmental activities. At Prairie Grass University, the campus was known as a green campus and students were proud of the work of the campus and saw the students’ role of taking over where the campus initiatives ended. Sarah viewed her organization’s role as addressing divestment and pipeline issues and picking up where campus-led initiatives stopped. She was not critical of the institution’s approach and saw the relationship between the campus and her organization as complimentary to each other.

Many participants at River University and Parkview College were more critical of the work coming from members of sustainability offices and campus climate committees. The sustainability offices’ campaigns were characterized as not addressing the real environmental issues. By real issues participants meant the issues of divestment and how to address environmental issues in an intersectional way in order to address social justice issues. On these campuses, participants said that the activities from members of the sustainability office were good, but did not have the ability to address environmental issues in the way that needs to happen. Colleges and universities must consider the activities they support through their sustainability offices and strive to meet climate reduction commitments. However, students did not believe the approaches of colleges and universities would necessarily impact change. Campus commitments were developed primarily by members of the previous generations’ conceptions of how society ought to address climate change and did not necessarily represent what was subscribed to by the current generation of student activists. Leaving room for students to address environmental issues important to them and in their own way may allow new ways of
thinking and approached to emerge. For this reason, it is important to keep students involved in campus climate conversations.

Administrators should be open to having conversations with student environmental activists about the issues of divestment, environmental justice, climate change, and how student identities influence the approaches to addressing environmental issues. Participants had positive and negative experiences when they engaged with administrators and governing board members. Some participants felt heard and respected when allowed to have conversations with administrators even if their conversation did not lead to a specific action or decision. Other participants attempted to engage with administrators and were ignored and dismissed as being too young to understand. Being ignored or dismissed led participants to be frustrated. The frustration students felt led them to consider how to escalate their next interaction to be louder and more insistent.

Colleges and universities should continue their work to reduce their carbon footprint through campus committees and sustainability offices but should not expect student environmental activists to be excited by this work. Student environmental activists wanted to address issues that were different than those being addressed by college and universities. Again, administrators should be open to engaging in conversations with student environmental issues. Administrators and governing board members should provide students with opportunities to discuss issues that are important to them and to recognize that the current generation does not necessarily see the environmental movement in the same way as previous generations. Allowing opportunities for student environmental activists’ voices to be heard may allow them to
be more engaged with environmental issues the institution is addressing and assist them in their civic development. Ignoring and minimizing the issues seen important as important by activists may contribute to escalation of their environmental activism.

Students were thinking about environmental activism in new ways focused on mitigating climate change and addressing social injustice. Participants were part of the generation of climate change and felt responsible to address environmental issues that were perpetuated and ignored by previous generations. Recognizing their unique vantage point of being charged to address climate change allows colleges and universities the ability to determine what skills students need to prepare themselves to lead the environmental movement. Participants are educating themselves in community organizing work and focused on building strong communities. In addition, student environmental activists were aware that when they were addressing environmental issues they also needed to be cognizant of social injustices that were perpetuated by environmental issues.

Many participants recognized that identities influenced who was involved in the environmental movement. Many student environmental activists are calling for the movement to shift its focus from saving the environment to also consider the negative impact environmental issues have on society and those that are oppressed. As campuses are becoming increasingly diverse, institutions need to understand that student environmental activists’ experiences are not the same. Identities influence who is involved in addressing environmental issues. Some participants criticized the environmental movement for being a movement composed of privileged identities, which
aligned with some of the participants in my study. Students had different experiences based on their intersecting identities. Some students found it easier to participate in environmental activism because their identities aligned with the identities that typically comprised the environmental movement. Other participants were uneasy about their organizations being comprised primarily of white students. Participants discussed the importance of addressing environmental issues in intersectional ways. Participants’ experiences related to oppression and their identities influenced their drive to address environmental issues in an intersectional way.

Participants in my study discussed how race, class, sexuality, and being young intersected to inform their activism work. The issue for colleges and universities was that activities were promoted by members of the sustainability office and campus initiatives such as recycling, composting, and providing alternative transportation did not necessarily address intersecting oppressed identities. It is important for sustainability office staff members to intentionally engage in discussions with students about how privilege and oppression influence both who is involved and how they are involved in the environmental movement. Recognizing privilege and oppression in the environmental movement would help inform and align the activities led by members of the sustainability offices with the current desire of many environmental activists. An aligned approach would promote further collaboration between activists and campus staff. In addition, current environmental activities emerging from sustainability offices may influence a student’s biographic availability if they are on campus, but how does it address challenges of shifting environmental values between home and school or a student’s
ability to have the means to afford organic local produce? Although participants shared a collective identity of being a student, their race and class impacted how they participated in environmental activism. Students’ identities influenced their biographic availability, means to make more expensive and environmentally-friendly consumer choices, and how their participation was perceived and encouraged.

Colleges and universities need to continue to recognize the shifting focus in the environmental movement and that individuals’ experiences with the movement are different based on their identities and oppressions/privileges they experienced. Students of color and white students discussed their interest in engaging with these issues and helping revamp the environmental movement to be one that addresses environmental justice and social justice issues. Colleges and universities can engage students in these conversations. Faculty members are starting this charge and giving students frameworks to think more critically about environmental issues in an increasingly diverse society.

Future Research

Future topics emerged as warranting further research through this study and analysis. My research focused on the experiences of student environmental activists and what influenced their approaches to environmental activism. Some participants talked about their interactions with administrative offices on campus. Further research could be done to understand both sides of this relationship. My study only provided a glimpse into students’ reactions to the activities and communication of administrative entities of colleges and universities. Understanding more about both sides of this relationship could foster stronger relationships and communication avenues for student environmental
activities and administrators, which could enable initiatives starting with either constituent being more impactful.

The existence of the connection between social justice and environmental work is clear from the conversations I had with participants. Further research could be done to better understand the other social justice work students are engaged with and how it interacts with their environmental activism. My study focused on environmental activism and recognized that participants were interested in and participated with other social justice issues. A more in depth study with focus on the intersections of environmental activism and other social justice types of activism could provide a more holistic picture of students’ participation in activism.

Participating in activism and pro-social behaviors relies on both an individual's inclination and capacity related to knowledge and skills. Another future research topic could focus on how colleges and universities can promote students' capacity-building so they could participate more efficaciously, specifically related to social change and organizing efforts. Further understanding how institutions could assist students build these skills would help institutions prepare students to engage more deeply in social issues.

The role of technology in higher education is also on the forefront of changing how activists communicate. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms helps activists organize differently than previous generations. In addition, technology provides students with multiple sources to access information related to environmental issues. Students rely on websites, digital news articles, environmental organizations, TEDtalks,
and YouTube to learn about issues they care about. Knowing more about the role of technology in how activists organize and receive information could promote student involvement while also helping institutions communicate more effectively with student activists.

Finally, focusing a study on environmental activism of students attending associate’s degree institutions could expand the current research. As part of the current study I interviewed four participants from an associate’s degree granting institution and found their experiences were often different than those from other institutional types. Associate degree granting institutions provide access for a diverse group of students and are unique in that they often do not provide on-campus housing, have fewer student engagement opportunities, and students are working towards degrees that are shorter in length than a traditional four-year institution. Since associate’s institutions provide access for a majority of undergraduates, having a better understanding of the experiences of student environmental activists in an associate’s institutional context could help colleges provide more intentional opportunities to support student interest and expose other students that have not engaged with environmental issues the opportunity to do this both inside and outside the classroom.

**Conclusion**

Environmental issues are growing in importance as more is known about our option to address these issues is no longer to reverse them, but rather to mitigate and slow the negative environmental impacts that are inevitable. Colleges and universities are in a unique situation where they have the opportunity to provide an increasingly diverse
RUNNING HEAD: Environmental Activism

student body the opportunities to engage with environmental issues and learn the skills, abilities, and drive to address these issues as informed citizens. Experience in the classroom and outside of the classroom exposes students to environmental issues and fosters their interest in addressing environmental issues. Engaging in conversations with student environmental activists and learning about the issues that are important to their generation can strengthen the current work that institutions are doing. Approaching environmental issues the way student environmental activists suggested takes into consideration the issues of social justice in the environmental movement. In addition, it challenges previous generations to consider the possibility that unprecedented issues may require more drastic approaches than simply recycling and composting to make the impact that needs to happen to mitigate the pending effects of climate change. The ultimate goal is for colleges and universities to fulfill the inherent social charter by preparing students ready to address social issues by providing them with experiences both inside and outside the classroom to foster their growth.
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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letters

1501E60864 - PI King - IRB - Exempt Study Notification

irb@umn.edu <rb@umn.edu>  
To: hans2792@umn.edu

Mon, Feb 23, 2015 at 11:29 AM

TO: ropers@umn.edu, hans2792@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1501E60864

Principal Investigator: Laura King

Title(s):  
College Student Environmental Activism

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota HRPP notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study’s expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at http://eresearch.umn.edu/ to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

google.com/mail/u/0?hl=en&ui=0&fs=1&fsf=1&ty=mr&plhl=en&amr=0&pl=mr-true&search=rb@umn.edu

https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?hl=en&ui=0&fs=1&fsf=1&ty=mr&plhl=en&amr=0&pl=mr-true&search=rb@umn.edu

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April 6, 2015
Laura King
Hans2792@umn.edu

Re: College Student Environmental Activism

Dear Ms. King,

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Century College has reviewed your request to survey and conduct interviews with the college’s students as part of your graduate program. This review indicates that the project is exempt as per 45CFR46 101(b)(2) and hereby gives you permission to recruit students to participate in your research and conduct the research on campus. This approval is valid for one year from the date of this letter. Should your research extend beyond this date and/or change from what you submitted to the Board, you must reapply for approval.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Lisa Schlotterhausen
Dean of Institutional Effectiveness/Chair, IRB
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
College Student Environmental Activism

You are invited to be in a research study exploring how college students participate in environmental activism and how this experience may differ based on the identities of gender, race, and/or socioeconomic class. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an involved student in an environmentally-focused student group or involved in a campus committee/initiative focused environmental issues. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Laura A. H. King PhD student in Higher Education, College of Education and Human Development.

Background Information
The purpose of this study is to explore how student environmental engagement and/or activism and how the identities of gender, race, and/or class influence your approach to activism.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
  • Participate in two 60-90 minute interviews with me. With your permission, these interviews will be digitally recorded.
    ○ The first interview will use a set of questions that will focus on your involvement in environmental activities and how your identities influence this involvement.
    ○ The second interview will be used to verify and confirm what we discussed in the first interview. I, as the researcher, will bring back an initial analysis of the first interview to discuss further and ensure that I am describing your experiences and influences accurately as you see them.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study
Risks of this study include that the conversation may prompt uncomfortable reflections about your involvement in environmental issues. While your participation may enrich what we know about environmental activism and college student engagement, there are no direct benefits to you resulting from your participation.

Compensation:
You will receive two $10 gift cards for your participation. A gift card will be given to you immediately following each interview to thank you for your participation.
Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, it will not include any information that will make it possible to identify any participant. Research records will be stored securely on a locked computer and only the researcher will have access to the records. As a participant, you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to further provide confidentiality.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your College/University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is: Laura King.

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at 715-559-5979 or hans2792@umn.edu.

Advisor’s Name/Phone: Rebecca Ropers-Huilman, 612-624-1006

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Research Subjects’ Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Thank you for participating in this interview. You were invited to participate because of your involvement with environmental groups and campus initiative. The primary purpose of this study is to better understand the environmental experiences of college students, what types of activities you participate in, and how identities influence your approach to environmental activism/involvement in addressing environmental issues.

1. What activities do you participate in currently that are related to addressing environmental issues?

2. How did you come to be involved with environmental issues? What influenced you to participate in addressing environmental issues? How have experiences or activities at your college or university influenced your environmental participation?

3. Why do you participate in the specific environmental activities or topics that you do?

4. How would you describe the purpose and responsibility you feel towards addressing environmental issues to a friend or family member? How do you see yourself connected to the planet and other living things? Why do you believe addressing environmental issues is important?

5. How do you define environmental activism?

6. Do you see yourself as an environmental activist?
   If no, How do you define your environmental engagement?
   If yes, How did becoming an activist change the way you see yourself? What has supported your growth as an environmental activist?
I’m really interested in how people’s identities, specifically that of gender, race, and class, influence their experiences with addressing environmental issues. So to begin, I would like to know a little more about how you see yourself and your identities.

7. How do you identify in relation to your gender, race, and class?

8. Which of these identities, if any, do you think are most salient/important when you are working with environmental issues?

9. Are there other things that influence how you approach environmental activism/engagement? What are these influencers?

10. How do your identities, either alone or in combination with each other, influence how you approach addressing environmental issues?

11. What challenges have you encountered related to your identities while addressing environmental issues?

12. Is there anything else I should have asked or you would like to tell me?
Appendix D: Solicitation Flyer, Email, and Letter

College Student Environmental Activism

Are you involved in environmental groups or activities?

Participants are needed for a dissertation study focused on exploring the experiences of college student environmental activists.

The purpose of this study is to explore the environmental experiences of college students and what influences this involvement. In particular, the current research is focused on how the identities of race, class, and gender influence students’ approaches to environmental engagement and activism.

Students will be asked to participate in a series of two interviews lasting between 60-90 minutes in length and will receive a $10 gift card for each interview.

Space is limited. If you are interested in participating please contact: Laura King at hans2792@umn.edu or 715-554-5970
Solicitation Letter

Hello,

I am a doctoral candidate in the Educational Policy and Administration program at the University of Minnesota. I am in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation and am collecting data for that purpose. For my research I am very interested in exploring college student environmental activism and how the identities of race, class, and gender influence how students approach their engagement with environmental issues.

You may be eligible for this study if you are a current student and are involved in some way with environmental groups or activities.

It is important to know that this letter is not to tell you to join this study. It is your decision. Your participation is voluntary. Whether or not you participate in this study will have no effect on your relationships with your current College.

Participants will be asked to participate in a series of two interviews that will last between 60-90 minutes each. After each interview, you will receive a $10 gift card as a thank you for your participation.

Although there are no direct benefits to you personally to participate in the current study, your participation will help the researcher better understand how college students approach environmental activism and what influences students’ approaches to activism.

Included with this letter is a flyer describing the study that includes my contact information that you may choose to share with members of your student group.

If you would like to learn more about this study or are interested in participating, please contact Laura King at lans2782@umn.edu or 715-559-3979.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Laura King