

Research the Resonates
Villanova CLAS Podcast
Episode 5 Transcription
Youth and Identity: Students Speak Up

HOST: Chelsea Gerrard

Guest 1 (JC): Jerusha Conner, PhD

Guest 2 (HY): HwaPyung (Hwa) Yoo '19 CLAS

Intro: *Sounds of voices chanting in the background.*

JC: Activism is a really powerful way for people to elevate their concerns and articulate their demands and apply pressure to decision makers to create change; And that's kind of what we think of as the visible work of activism.

HOST: That's Jerusha Conner. She's an associate professor in the Education and Counseling department at Villanova University.

JC: But the less visible pieces are also really important, and that's where activists are coming together to build relationships and figure out what their shared demands are, decide on their strategies and tactics, and, while they're doing this work, they're engaging in collective visioning and imagining—some folks call this a radical imagination for what their institutions, their systems, their society could be. And it's the kind of space that they create together where they're practicing living out that vision through their relationships with each other, and that very much connects with their identities and their senses of themselves.

HOST: You're listening to Research that Resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Chelsea Gerrard.

In this miniseries, we're talking to research teams who are exploring topics at the intersection of youth and identity.

Dr. Conner studies activism. She's interested in understanding how activism is not only a vehicle for individuals to elevate their voices, but also how it can spur systemic change. I sat down with her and one of her students from her research team.

HY: Hi, I'm Hwa Yoo.

HOST: Hwa recently graduated from Villanova University, majoring in neuroscience and political science with minors in education policy and psychology. As a student, he became interested in Dr. Conner's research after he heard her speak during a panel discussion on campus. He reached out to her, and she invited him to join her team of student researchers.

HY: And so she told me about this activism project and I was so eager to like get on board and do this project with her. And I think for me, I'm particularly interested in this idea that, how these students come to adopt these value systems, and how they come to

find a sense of purpose and like act on it. And I think for me especially coming from like a neuroscience/psychology background I'm interested in like this developmental aspect of how education can help foster that sort of value system.

HOST: Dr. Connor and Hwa, along with four other undergraduate students and one graduate student conducted a study on self-identifying college student activists in 2016. They created a survey and distributed it nationally, targeting 120 colleges and Universities across all 50 states. From among the survey respondents, they did 40 in-depth interviews.

JC: One of the central questions we asked them was how does your identity shape your involvement in activism? And, we added that question because an activist suggested to us that it was really important and it really mattered to our understanding of activism, and what it means to identify as an activist. And what we found was that the majority of respondents talked about their identities as intersectional. They didn't focus on a single facet of their identity as it related to their activism

HOST: The concept that we, as individuals, have multiple identities and they overlap, is known as intersectionality.

JC: So their gender, or their race, or their ethnicity, or their language status. They spoke about many different aspects of their identity as it informed their activism, whether it led them to it, or shaped how they practiced it. And so, um, so this awareness I think of how they have, um, privileged identities and also oppressed identities, how those sometimes intersect, or how all of their identities might be privileged, definitely played a role in the kind of activism they engaged in.

HOST: Dr. Conner found these students were surprisingly conversant in this idea of intersectionality. They spoke about it not only as it related to their identities but also as it related to the issues that they were organizing around.

JC: And one of the big surprises in our study was that, on average, self-identifying college student activists embrace eight or more causes. So they're not single area, single issue focused activists, necessarily. And I think that's because of that intersectional perspective that they understand how different systems of oppression relate to each other and interconnect. They have that critical lens to bring to bare. And I do think that that was something that was on the margins of earlier areas of student activism that's become more prominent over time.

HOST: The research team had a few other surprising results. Such as the idea that individuals become activists instantly because of some sort of trigger moment—but that's actually not the majority experience, according to their data.

JC: And you can think of the Parkland students and that massacre at their school as this kind of event that, you know, the next day they woke up and they, um, said, "I'm an activist and I'm gonna fight for gun reform." Not everyone at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had that kind of, um, call, but certainly a number did. But in our study, we found that that trigger experience was very rare. Only about a third of the students

reported having a key turning point moment. And most of them felt that they came to activism and that identity of activists very gradually and it involved some experimentation, kind of dipping toes into the water and they were really hard pressed to figure out the exact moment that they became activists. So that was one surprise.

HY: One of the other ones was that like there's no one specific type of activism, that a lot of times we just see like the protests, the sit ins and the very like up front sort of activism as the display of what activism looks like. But, there's a lot of people who are doing the more administrative roles, the more backstage stuff, uh, who still consider themselves activists.

JC: Mmmhmm.

HY: Yeah.

JC: Even though it's a less conventional...

HY: Yeah.

JC: ...picture.

HY: Yeah, yeah.

HOST: In addition to these statistical findings, Dr. Connor and her team uncovered a number of insights from their in-depth interviews with the student activists. One of the most notable being, activism had a positive impact on students' ability to empathize with others. Here's Dr. Connor.

JC: I remember when one student talked about how in her conversations with her peers from different backgrounds, it was like a sheet was removed from over her eyes that she was now seeing the world in a different way because of those conversations.

HOST: Hwa was particularly interested in this finding and launched that passion into his own research project, which received funding from the Villanova Undergraduate Research Fellowship program. He did a research project focusing on international mindedness—which goes by a few different names like cosmopolitanism and world-mindedness—but essentially it relates back to this idea that exposure to difference helps students empathize with the struggles and oppressions of others.

HY: I mean, without going into all of like the subtleties of it, I think a definition that really struck out to me, uh, stood out to me, was this idea of um reaching into oneself and reaching out to others. And so, it's not necessarily a matter of like having a specific set of knowledge or a level of understanding about what's going on in the world, or being able to like state facts about everything that's going on in global politics, but um just a matter of being willing to kind of engage, and wanting to engage with those sorts of topics.

HOST: Hwa's research looked at the International Baccalaureate Diploma program, which is a very popular international education program for high school students. He was looking at the program's effectiveness in fostering international-mindedness, which is

something the program really prides itself on. He surveyed and interviewed students participating in the program from Switzerland, South Korea, and the United States.

HY: I was really struck by the idea that, for the students, for most of them, when I asked them what they felt was the most valuable experience, um, in gaining international mindedness, was their experience with other international students. And so, they spoke a lot about how it was their conversations outside of the classroom, not necessarily facilitated by teachers or coursework that was so valuable to them in fostering this international mindedness. So, I think for me, that kind of goes back to this idea of how students come to adopt certain value systems. And I think the relations that are happening in school and in education is so important and is not focused on enough. And so, a lot of the students in South Korea talked about the fact that there was a lack of dialogue in the classroom, and especially if it is in an international school, having the sort of in classroom conversation where there are students from all these different backgrounds would be so valuable in helping them expand their mindsets and like engage with one another.

HOST: Hwa plans go on to graduate school and expand his research in international education policy, specifically in the context of under-resourced countries. He says his experience working with Dr. Conner has been instrumental in his development as a researcher.

HY: Um, and so I think it's been such an incredible experience working with Jerusha just because it works, I mean, it examines the sort of topic that I'm interested in, but it also kind of embodies it in the way that she structures her research team and the research project. She's always like asking us to like pitch in our ideas and our perspectives, no matter like what stage of the research it is. And she's always like trying to get us as involved as possible even if it's like a technical area that we don't have as much expertise about. And so I think that's been a really great experience, in terms of like helping me find my voice in research, being able to be a part of the team that I felt really valued in, kind of helped me find a direction in research myself.

JC: Well, I just would add how privileged I feel to have had the opportunity to work with Hwa, as a colleague. It's been invaluable having Hwa and the other students on our team share their experiences and perspective and different lenses on the data. It really has enriched the kind of knowledge I think we're producing.

HOST: Thanks for listening to Research that Resonates. If you haven't listened to our first mini-series on Sustainability, be sure to check that out on Apple Podcasts, Google Play and Spotify.