

Social Activism in the Global Scholars Program: Recognizing individuals who embody social justice and global impact

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Abstract

Since its inception, the mission of the Global Scholars Program has been to increase intercultural competency of its participants, through the lenses of empathy and discourse. More recently, the vision of the program has expanded to promote social justice alongside understanding diverse perspectives. Many Global Scholars exemplify their dedication to service and justice, whether it is in their local communities or spending summers abroad.

Like CNN Heroes, which recognizes “everyday people who change the world,” the GSP Heroes would like to celebrate Global Scholars who embody social justice, are an ally for communities, and inspire others to serve. Through literature review and informal interviews, our team has narrowed four key characteristics of a hero: leadership, empathy, sustainability, and allyhood. Through a peer nomination process, Global Scholars Program participants and alumni were selected to be GSP Heroes.

Literature Review

A GSP hero seeks to end entrenched social inequalities through allyhood and empathy. An ally for social justice recognizes the existence of agent and target groups in society. An agent group, i.e. agents of oppression, is defined as a dominant social group whose members enjoy benefits built into American institutions (AMSA). Members of an agent group may knowingly or unknowingly reap these benefits at the expense of those in target groups. In the United States, white people, able-bodied people, heterosexuals, males, Christians, the middle or owning class, middle-aged people and English-speaking people are considered to be members of the dominant group (AMSA). The denial of oppression by members of an agent group perpetuates inequality. Internalized domination happens when

members of an agent group accept their superior status established within the institution and think that they deserve the privileges (Definitions, 2011). An ally for social justice would recognize this power inequality and view it as unfair. A GSP hero exhibiting allyhood would actively seek to share power from an agent group with a target group.

Members of a target group, on the other hand, are marginalized, exploited and victimized in some way (AMSA). Different target groups can be each other's allies. For example, lesbians can be allies to bisexual people, African American people can be allies to Native Americans, and blind people can be allies to people who use wheelchairs (Griffin). Internalized subordination occurs when members of the target group accept the norms established by the institution and view their oppressed status as inevitable and natural (Definitions, 2011). A GSP hero, no matter which social group he or she is a part of, seeks to engage with individuals of different groups and build allyhood partnerships. A GSP hero practices empathy and pictures his/herself in the positions of those in various social groups. This practice of empathy enables partnerships to form and allows for bridges of trust. A GSP hero would also work to end forms of oppression, an example being combating racism. Racism is a "system of structured dis-equality where the goods, services, rewards, privileges, and benefits of the society are available to individuals according to their presumed membership in [particular racial groups]" (Barbara Love, 1994. Understanding Internalized Oppression). While a person of any race may hold racial prejudices, only members of the dominant racial group can practice racism, as racism requires institutional power to enforce it (AMSA). A GSP hero recognizes racism as an issue that plagues America and applies allyhood concepts of empathy, actively putting forth effort to reach out towards all racial groups. He or she takes action to end injustice, and this action is in the form of leadership.

Although injustice is prevalent in a scope larger than we can measure, we decided to focus our attention on those working to make a positive action against injustice. The best place to start was our community in the Global Scholars Program.

Process

In order to get an accurate idea of the various kinds of heroes within the GSP community, we wanted our recognition to be based on personal observation of things our peers have accomplished. Therefore, we decided that we would let the GSP community as a whole nominate the people they considered as role models for social justice activism. However, we didn't want our symposium project to encourage a sense of hierarchy within the GSP community, which inevitably would have resulted, had we picked only a select few heroes from the entire nominee pool. We recognized at a recent group meeting, that a GSP-wide poll could result in a 'popularity contest' where certain GSP members, who undoubtedly deserve recognition, are pushed aside for the most well-known members. Therefore, we decided that we would honor all of the nominees, but instead award them for specific facets of social justice activism. During our two-person meeting with Jennifer and Bobby, we had decided that we would focus our literature review on allyhood, leadership, sustainability, and empathy, so we decided to match each nominee with the characteristic we felt they displayed best.

Out of consideration for our peers, we decided that it would be most convenient to send the nomination call in a short survey. Our three questions asked for the name of an award-worthy global scholar, a description of why they deserve recognition, and in what way they embodied the 4 qualities we discussed in our literature review. We believe that from living in such a close-knit community, that any GSP hero would display these qualities in a noticeable way to his/her peers, thereby giving us all insight into who truly possesses these characteristics.

As a group, based on the survey responses we received, we first sent an email to the nominees (John G. et al.) to see if they would accept our request to recognize them at the symposium, as well as a questionnaire composed of 5 questions so we could familiarize ourselves with their work. We asked the following questions of our nominees: What got you involved with your area of social justice activism and why have you chosen to make a commitment to this topic? Please describe the work that you do. What tasks are involved? What do you find most rewarding, and most frustrating regarding the work you do? Pick one of the following qualities and elaborate on how you embody that quality in your work: Allyhood, Empathy, Leadership, and Sustainability. How can GSP members contribute to your cause? We have received 4 responses so far, and set a deadline of Sunday April 22nd for receiving the other responses. For the ones we do have, we assigned each of our 4 members present at our most recent group meeting to summarize the questionnaire responses into a short paragraph that we could present at the symposium. More summaries are to come, as we are waiting upon a few nominees, but the summaries we have created are shown below:

Katherine Man is a Global Scholars Program Hero for her commitment to VISIONS Inc, a nonprofit organization dedicated to multicultural training and dialogue among different communities. She joined this project due to its emphasis in diversity dialogue, which she believes is integral in making an international society. At VISIONS, Katherine lead dialogues between suburban and inner-city youth, ranging from topics of race, socio-economic status, gender and sexuality. Katherine's leadership in dialogue and ability to connect with participants, demonstrate the GSP Hero quality of Empathy. She says "participants really need to keep an open mind and be willing to accept that there are multiple sides and opinions to every issue." Her impartiality enabled her to dialogue effectively and understand various identities. For Global Scholars who want to engage in dialogue and diversity, Kate recommends participation in the Program on InterGroup Relations (IGR). She says, "With

our world becoming increasingly connected, understanding diversity is becoming more and more the key to success.”

- Sophomore, Biopsych, Cognition, & Neuroscience
- Global Scholars Program first year
- Leadership in VISIONS, nonprofit promoting multicultural training
- Hero Quality- Empathy

Sharif Moosa's area of social justice relates to providing a communication outlet for the people in his home country of Bahrain, particularly during the time of last year's Arab Spring. Sharif has a personal connection to the Bahraini protests, as his father had been arrested for his activist efforts. Wanting to inform others of the ongoing situation, Sharif got involved with conducting research for organizations back home, as well as press outreach--conducting interviews about his father's arrest and major gatherings in the country.

From our perspective as a CGP team, we feel that Sharif is an outstanding advocate of empathy. It seems that he has faced tremendous challenges in his work, stating that “not all Bahrainis see eye-to-eye on this [the cause],” and yet, Sharif continues to serve as an informant to all those who want to get involved, or still don't know about the issue. He has said that although the group discrimination and marginalization, which is common in Bahrain, doesn't apply to his Sunni Muslim family; he will not stand for unequal political rights among peoples. We believe that he has gotten past the 'easy' task of sympathizing into the more challenging task of empathizing--trying to place himself in the situation of the people back home, even though he is not directly in the midst of the situation, or personally attacked by the discrimination against Bahraini citizens. We, as well as his fellow GSP peers, feel that this merits recognition, particularly because empathizing with a nation's daily struggles can be so mentally and emotionally taxing. These daily struggles are not shown on news media outlets, so Sharif would encourage all of us to look past the main headlines, and

share any news we can about the situation in Bahrain. The more knowledge and insight we have on the issue, the more we can empathize with the plight of the people, like Sharif has.

Seungmin Lee was selected as a GSP hero because of his dedication to allyhood. He “believe[s] that some privileges [he] ha[s] (ex. economic stability, citizenship, ...) are merely luck,” and he “could not accept the fact that many people who do not have such privileges suffer or could not enjoy the benefits which other people regard as natural.” He grew involved in social justice because he wants “all people have equal opportunities as much as possible.” His allyhood is displayed through his volunteer work as an information and communication technology teacher at a primary school in Accra, Ghana. In addition to teaching his students basic computer skills and technological concepts, he led them in extracurricular pursuits and field trips. The practice of corporal punishment Seungmin witnessed as a volunteer teacher caused him to grow uneasy. He recognized the cultural difference between him and the other teachers, but nonetheless tried his best to suggest alternative forms of punishment. Seungmin believes that GSP’s diversity is a great asset when it comes to allyhood. The diversity of GSP’s students allows for an exchange of ideas, sparking creative approaches to social justice issues. In addition, Seungmin feels that Global Scholars can share the “injustice they experienced to make other GSP students [more] aware through group discussions or monthly activities/lectures.” Seungmin is continually inspired by other GSP students to keep promoting allyhood.

Lionel Sitruk is an activist for peace and justice in Palestine and Israel. He has been working for Palestinian solidarity. He became interested in the conflict because of his national and religious identities. As a Jewish student, he has family who now live in Israel and has suffered anti-Semitism in the past. This personal connection has taught him about "the conflict between occupier (Israeli military) and occupied (Palestinians)." He has been involved in translating French to English, teaching English to Palestinian and Jewish youth

(all Israeli citizens), fundraising, networking, and report-writing in the bi-national village of Wahat al-Salam - Neve Shalom, Israel. He has also been involved in similar work and served as a witness and human shield during demonstrations and tree planting activities in Beit Ommar. According to Lionel, "Israeli Occupation Forces use less violence when internationals are present." He believes the most rewarding aspect of his work is knowing that when he participates in demonstrations, soldiers are less likely to use forms of violence like tear gas, metal bullets coated with rubber, or sound bombs. He thinks the most frustrating aspect is that his work is misunderstood as not being neutral enough. He believes that Palestinians deserve freedom and wants people to realize that Israelis also come to demonstrations against the occupation and illegal settlements. He says "criticism about Israel or questioning Zionism (the political ideology that a Jewish state with Jewish majority must exist for Jews to be safe) is labeled as anti-Semitism which is a huge problem and is dangerous in a world where real anti-Semitism still exists." Lionel is a great demonstration of allyhood. He has "used his privilege as an international to stand in solidarity with Palestinians whose land is being confiscated from them." As an ally for Palestinians, he tries to focus on "reminding soldiers that they are blocking Palestinians from cultivating their land and informing friends and families about the situation." To contribute to his cause, Lionel thinks GSP members should support the Palestinian civil society nonviolent call for Boycott Divestment and Sanction from Israel and Israeli products until Israel conforms to international law regarding:

1. Ending the colonization of all Arab Lands and dismantling the wall,
2. Allowing the right of return of Palestinian refugees as required by UN resolution 194
3. Having Palestinian citizens of Israel being given equal rights

He also believes it is important for everyone to educate themselves about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and support local groups in Palestine (<http://palestinesolidarityproject.org/>, <http://www.awalls.org/>) and Ann Arbor (<http://www.umich.edu/~umsafe/>).

From just these four short summaries that we have received, however, we recognized yet another problem at our most recent group meeting. Some of our nominee responses (through no fault of their own) were more thorough than others, to the extent that we felt it would be unfair to recognize our nominees at the symposium purely based on their summaries. (Based on the summary a nominee like Lionel, for instance, would get more recognition time than an equally deserving candidate like Sharif.) We also felt that a summary didn't give us a sense of WHO our nominees really were. What kind of personality do they have? What can they share with us that they can't in a text format?

We decided that it would be appropriate and time-effective to conduct phone interviews with each of our nominees. We have not conducted these interviews yet, and aim to complete all of them by the 13th of April, giving us that weekend to construct the final award presentation. We have a time constraint of 5 days with the phone interviews, as we can't formulate specific interview questions for the nominees until we get all the responses on Sunday. Though we might not have time to get together as a group to formulate interview questions for each nominee specifically, we will assign a team member to each nominee to review their questionnaire, determine its level of thoroughness, and develop interview questions accordingly.

Although we were rather ambitious with our previous symposium plan (i.e. doing in-person interviews that would be recorded at on-campus locations, and then presenting video clips at the symposium), we have become more realistic with our achievement goals. We recognize that we have only a few weeks in order to assemble our project, that we will be attempting to finish during a 'finals crunch' time, and that our nominees probably wouldn't

have the time to agree to an extensive ‘documentary-like’ video shoot. We will, however, still present our nominees with a small token of our admiration, in the form of a ribbon during Symposium, have a slideshow that recognizes each nominee with their picture, summary paragraph, and specific quotes from the telephone interviews that we feel best displays their ‘activist quality’ (leadership, empathy, ally-hood and sustainability).

Conclusion

As mythologist Joseph Campbell once said, “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.” Our GSP heroes have all displayed this dedication, which is making an impact on the world. Perhaps by knowing that there are fellow students working towards a cause that’s important to them, we can be inspired to choose our own cause to work towards. Since our heroes were nominated by GSP members, their work has made a large enough impact to be evident to the rest of the GSP community. For these causes to permeate throughout our heroes’ lives, it shows their true dedication for the work they do. It is remarkable for people to have demonstrated commitment at such a young age. This shows that we are all capable of striving towards leadership, empathy, sustainability, and allyhood.

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