

## Introduction

Darius Peyton stated that “to impact change one must create a burning platform, have a vision for change, and a belief that change is possible with the right skills, understanding, ability and knowledge that is greater than the cost of change” (Peyton, Leaders charge). Essentially, change is possible when one makes others aware of why change is needed, what outcomes are desired, and how a plan can facilitate change so that the cost of time, money, and labor are justified. Change was on the horizon in 1989 at Michigan State University (MSU) when Darius Peyton and other Black student leaders came to the realization that the cost of not changing outweighed the cost of implementing change. In this paper I will open with an introductory narrative leading into a discussion about the actions students took during the 1989 study-in at MSU. By describing the background for the event, the chronology of the event, the outcomes gained, and the lessons learned this paper will provide a comprehensive basis that one can learn from about change in higher education.

The burning platform that provoked a young Black student at MSU Darius Peyton (communications major) to challenge the status quo was that he was about to become a statistic (Peyton, 2011). The statistics were that only 30% of Black students graduated from college in the 1980's and this fact was an unacceptable reality. Peyton decided to take action by becoming a better scholar through Black Caucus, Residence Life, NAACP, and several other student organizations that allowed him to be active in his education (Peyton, 2011). His passion inspired others who believed in the same cause to show up and take action for themselves in order to change the course of history and improve the future.

Peyton developed his credibility by organizing many projects and programs that connected people for a purposeful cause, such as commissioning and unveiling the MLK Bust in

the student services building and the Black Student Leadership Summit (Peyton, 2011). These successes were only possible because Peyton researched why the retention and graduation rates for Black students were so low. The issue was how Black student leaders could reconcile the external and internal issues affecting the quality of education across campus to better the learning environment (Peyton, 2011). What Peyton and other Black leaders accomplished in their efforts was to become a core group of doers that would later prove to be essential in creating a movement.

This core group was quickly becoming visible as students battled against covert forms of racism and overt concerns with professors who were making claims that minorities did not have the skills to endure academically. At this point the media was pressuring the group for answers, so the Black student leaders decided to nominate Darius Peyton as spokesperson because of his organizational skills and plans (Peyton, 2011). Once the key players were recognized, conversations and concerns were able to be funneled through one voice, providing a better chance to give a clear message of what they were trying to do. Peyton stated that Black student leaders were testing the sincerity of MSU to want to improve diversity relations on campus, and were trying to assist in making a more complete plan that included the student voice (Peyton, 2011). At this point MSU had only broad plans on how to better the student experience for underrepresented students on campus and was still in the final steps of the development stage.

For months MSU was developing the MSU-IDEA (Institutional Diversity: Excellence in Action), a 50 point plan to better the diversity relations on campus and the education of diverse students on campus (The MSU IDEA, 1989, Gibson, 1989). The administration's role in the study-in recognized that the MSU-IDEA and the protesters had the same mission, student activism was merely the bridge to connect the two groups. Peyton's involvement was not

separate from his education but was connected to it, activism breed scholarship and a deeper sense of learning that became his education, as opposed to a student improving himself only through education.

### Background

Student activism in the United States has often revolved around political, social, or educational inequities regarding social justice and structural inequalities. These inequities have led to student protests, marches, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and in certain cases violent action. Student activism is a spectrum that can take on various forms depending on what the problem or issues are and what goals student activists set out to achieve. Taking this spectrum into consideration, it is necessary to give the term "student activism" a definition to define its parameters and develop a concise perspective on what it meant to be a student activist at MSU.

Student activism for MSU students in 1989 meant scholarship and being engaged in one's own education by improving the current situation for minorities in higher education (Peyton, 2011). This trend in student activism was not unique to Michigan but occurred throughout the United States. Places where concerns were raised about the lack of diversity among faculty, staff, students and curriculum included, but were not limited to, Northampton, Mass. (1988), New Haven, Conn. (1988), Cambridge, Mass. (1988), Los Angeles, CA. (1988), Boston, Mass. (1989), and New York, NY. (1989) (Lansing State Journal, 1989). This heightened awareness about racial issues exemplified that higher education was wrought with barriers that prevented underrepresented students from receiving an education and graduating.

Concerns about the quality of education that students of color were receiving and their graduation rates were shared throughout the state of Michigan in 1989. Protests were occurring at Michigan State University (MSU), Ferris State University (FSU), Wayne State University

(WSU), and a year prior at the University of Michigan (U of M), championing the right for better conditions for students of color in higher education (Ann Arbor News, 1989, Jackson Citizen Patriot, Rasmussen, 1989, Towne Courier, 1989, & Traverse City Record-Eagle, 1989). These events of civil unrest among students were a clear sign that the disparity between Whites and students of color in higher education had reached its limit for being tolerated. These events became a platform for universities to begin dialogues on potential solutions for racial inequities on their campuses. MSU, in particular, is significant because it was the leader for having the most racially diverse campus in the Big Ten conference (DiBaggio, 1989).

Michigan State University has a long history of championing diversity, from the late 1950's to Clifton Wharton being the first Black President of a major white university (1970-78), to present day. MSU president John Hannah was made chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission by the President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, in 1957 (Ellenstein, 1989). This position gave him the opportunity to address the Senate Committee on Constitutional rights and to express the need/importance of Blacks having equal rights (Ellenstein, 1989). Despite efforts from powerful and influential officials, progress towards advancing the rights of students of color were encumbered by their opponents. In 1965 students staged a sit-in on Abbot Road to protest an East Lansing city ordinance barring minorities from buying housing; in 1968 - the same year that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated - students marched and held a sit-in at Linton Hall; in 1969, students held a sit-in at Wilson Hall cafeteria protesting discriminatory acts towards Black employees from White students (West, 1989). MSU has been a testing ground for many civil rights protests but among the most remembered would have to be the 1989 study-in at the John Hannah Administration building.

Many students, faculty, staff, and community members thought that the civil rights of all students were being met and that poor student performance was due to lack of effort or academic rigor. Many events occurred leading up to the 1989 study-in, starting as far back as February and all the way up to the study-in, including: Feb. 23 - 400 students, parents and administrators came together to address racism on campus, Feb. 27 - 50 minority parents met with President John DiBaggio with written demands for the administration, and March 31 - The State News published Economics Professor Emeritus C. Patric Larrowe's column on racism that put the community up in arms about saying that his class was too tough for minorities (Countdown, 1989). These series of events caused a chain reaction of emotions to flare up, to the point that further conversation would not quench the issue unless followed by true action.

#### The Event

On Tuesday, May 10, 1989, day one of the study-in, one hundred students occupied the John Hannah Administration Building demanding that action be taken, beyond just holding discussions about racial issues on campus (Clemens, 1989, Leaders Organize, 1989, & Nichols, 1989). Darius Peyton, spokesperson, and Jeffery Robinson, co-spokesperson emerged as the two prominent Black leaders who would be organizing and negotiating on behalf of the group (Lansing state journal, Campus activism spreads). Students stayed overnight, bringing in sleeping bags, tooth brushes, and other supplies in order to be part of the study-in. Meanwhile, thirty students from WSU came to the protest to provide support; however, only three of them were allowed in the building to reduce the risk of having non-MSU students intimately involved. while the others were told to support the group from outside (Krebs, WSU students support cause,).

Wednesday, day two, the numbers grew to 350 students, and conversations between Peyton and DiBaggio's negotiation teams started at 5:00 pm and ended around 6:30 pm (Zasadny, sit-in talks begin, Davis, 1989). After the meeting concluded student concerns clarified needs around an increase in tenured Black faculty, and a response to the fourteen demands they submitted over four months ago (Zasadny, sit-in talks begin). Co-spokesperson Robinson made it clear that the administration would now be on their timetable due to the administration's inaction (Zasadny, sit-in talks begin). The atmosphere that was developing in the building was of songs like "Lift Every Voice", "Lean on Me", along with, chants stating "by any means necessary", posters with statements like "Black by nature, proud by choice" posted up on the windows, and even a color picture of Malcom X (once a Lansing resident) taped above the bust of John Hannah (Zasadny, sit-in talks begin). Among the students supporting the cause were the Asian Pacific American Student Organization (APASO), the Coalition of Hispanic Students for Progressive Action (CHSPA), and the Lesbian/Gay Council (Murray, students garner support on day 2). Much support was even garnered from family, faculty/staff, alumni, fraternities, churches, etc., all of whom provided food supplies or whatever they could (Zasadny, sit-in talks begin).

Thursday, day three, demands from other minority groups like CHSPA and APASO were submitted to Peyton to be submitted with the rest of the demands being made (Gibson, Murray, Zasadny, 1989). Students blocked the front door and effectively shut down the lobby of the Administration Building, including access to the cashier's and registrar's office, to show that they were serious about being heard (Gibson, Murray, Zasadny, 1989). Conditions inside the building were bad due to poor ventilation and cramped space causing students to fall ill, like Jeffery Robinson who had to be transported to the hospital (Gibson, Murray, Zasadny, 1989). Outside a

counter group was created by Kent Hohensee, called "No Equality Thru Inequality" (NETI), to protest against the occupation of the administration building (Reitz, MSU sit-in: Day 3). MSU Black alumni pressured DiBaggio to address student demands by lobbying the MSU Board of Trustees (Gibson, Activist alumnus supports protesters, and Riddle, 1989).

Friday, day four, students continue to lock down the Administration Building until their demands were met (Murray & Zasadny, sit-in talks to resume today). White students began to become impatient from not having access to the building where they received their checks, class schedules, and other needed services (Hamilton, 1989). Saturday, day five, talks came to a halt since DiBaggio was in Florida to celebrate his daughter's law school graduation ceremony from the University of Miami (Murray & Zasadny, sit-in talks to resume today). DiBaggio did send his team of negotiators and had Sam Baker, Assistant Vice President for Personnel and Employee Relations, act as his proxy to try to continue the discussions (Murray & Zasadny, sit-in talks to resume today). However, Peyton and his negotiation team said this violated the agreement to get DiBaggio's full attention, which was demanded from the onset of the negotiations (Murray & Zasadny, sit-in talks to resume today).

Sunday, day six, protesters and their families came together at the Administration Building to celebrate Mother's Day (Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 6). Students decorated signs, mopped floors, cleaned up, and displayed roses wishing a happy Mother's Day (Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 6). The ASMSU, the Clerical-Technical Union (C-T), the Council of Graduate Students (COGS), and the Residence Hall Association (RHA) agreed that the study-in's demands were worth the administration's consideration (Gibson, student groups, C-Ts support protesters aims). COGS showed their support by creating an ad-hoc committee to further minority issues; RHA passed a bill pressuring administration to consider the demands, and C-T passed a

resolution affirming the right to protest despite the inconvenience it may pose to others (Gibson, student groups, C-Ts support protesters aims).

Monday, day seven, negotiations resumed with DiBaggio at 3:30 pm and continued through the night, as student leaders negotiated their demands (Murray & Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 7). Peyton's team asked for the removal of Sam Baker from the negotiation team since she was not part of DiBaggio's original team (Murray & Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 7). During these meetings protestors chanted "Equality by all means necessary" and "Our race, our pride, we shall not be denied", and had signs that stated "John A. Hannah Administration building for sale by owners - 12,000 square feet - newly renovated - 14 demands or best offer, 1-800-Demands", all showing the commitment and unity of the group (Murray & Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 7). Many staff/faculty agreed with the civil disobedience that students had taken, since they did not have a union or a contract to back up their demands (Murray & Zasadny, msu sit-in: Day 7). NETI circulated a petition during the day and gathered 150 names that requested protestors vacate the Administration Building, an end to racial inequalities, an end of unfounded uses of the word racism, free tutorial services for all students, majority student representation in minority policy making issues, and no form of amnesty for protestors (Krebs, organization forms to fight sit-in demands).

Tuesday, day eight, negotiations ended at 6:40 am, and 36 demands were finalized at 10:00 pm, through the "Response to Student demands" document released by the administration (DiBaggio, May 16, 1989, Grand Rapids press, 1989). Four demands were taken out, but students hoped that the demands would have a lasting long-term effect (Zasadny, protestors hope demands have long-term effects). Several students left the administration building taking all their belongings, removing posters, and cleaning up all other items (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1989).



The 27-hour negotiation session with the administration left student protesters and students relieved that the study-in was finally over (MSU news bulletin, Protestors 'u' reach settlement, and Zasadny, protesters hope demands have long-term effects). However, racism was still lurking, as a partially-burned wooden cross was discovered at 12:30 am near the study-in by MSU police (Kalamazoo Gazette, 1989). Darius Peyton, Jeffery Robinson, and many other students expressed their hopes for a lasting effect to come from the study-in that would better the context of learning for students of color (Zasadny, protesters hope demands have long-term effects). President DiBaggio commented that the study-in participants were not violent, and did not cause vandalism, and behaved appropriately (Zasadny, protesters hope demands have long-term effects). The 14 original demands that were presented in February grew to 36 demands throughout the course of the study-in, mirroring many of the proposals in the MSU-IDEA (Institutional Diversity: Excellence in Action) (Zasadny, protesters hope demands have long-term effects). The demands (listed in Appendix A) would lead to many changes on MSU's campus in the coming months and years.

### Outcomes

The change that MSU underwent was seen as a process that was already in motion before the study-in even occurred because of the MSU-IDEA. However, what Administration came to understand was that the student voice was not present in the formation of the MSU-IDEA. The movement of students taking over the John Hannah Administration building was a very intentional and well-planned protest. Students aligned their demands with the MSU-IDEA to highlight what they thought was good and added other demands they felt were missing. The results four months after the study-in were manifested in a new position for a minority adviser to the Provost, the MSU Police Department officers undergoing cultural training and meeting with

students about minority concerns, and in an increase in money for MSU scholarships based on need (O'Hanlon, 1989). Although change was occurring, the administration was becoming complacent in its actions, believing that by accomplishing a few tasks they would satiate student protestors.

Unfortunately the same complacency that plagued the administration in acting on the low retention rates of minorities in the past was reoccurring with their present actions. Peyton and other students felt that the changes were inadequate and spurred a unity march on September 28th fall semester involving 400 Black students, ending with a discussion with administration in the McDonel Kiva about their frustrations (Walters, Blacks say 'U' sits on sit-in demands). Students proved to be a worthy adversary for keeping the administration to a timetable that prioritized the students' of color educational needs. Students became invested in their education and felt a level of control over their present conditions that decreased apathy and increased student scholarship. This was apparent after the unity march when MSU committed to setting aside \$750,000 for the MSU-IDEA and that it was seeking \$500,000 in funding to back minority projects during the next five years (Walters, Blacks say 'U' sits on sit-in demands). The level of transparency demanded by student activists opened up channels of communication with students for resolving racial and scholastic issues that were not as available in the past.

Although the administration stated that they were making progress students were worried that the delayed implementation of demands agreed to by administrators was a tactic to pacify students (Walters, Blacks say 'U' sits on sit-in demands). These concerns are valid since many of the tactics the administration used before and during the study-in were not conducive in actually addressing student concerns effectively enough to foster trust. Three weeks later DiBaggio released a four page University-wide memo warning that another sit-in would not be tolerated

(Martinez, No sit-ins). These actions only go to show that the administration still had much to learn about diplomatically solving problems in partnership with students.

One year later Darius Peyton and Dr. Lee June, senior adviser to the provost for minority affairs, made a film documentary about the study-in as a way to inform future student activists for years to come (Gibson, 'U' funds sit-in film as educational study). This film holds promise for students to be able to hold the administration accountable for the quality of their education, and it fights the notion of apathy among students. Apathy among students is a result of the many disappointments they have had with an administration that has not involved students in the equation as key players in shaping their educational environment. Furthermore, MSU made little progress by increasing the number of Black faculty by eight people, increasing Black student enrollment to 2,865 and becoming the largest in the Big Ten, changing the name of the coordinated Minority Student Programs Office to the Office of Minority Student Affairs with a larger budget and increased status of the Director, providing a series of forums on racism and diversity, improving communication between Black students and the MSU Department of Public Safety (DPS), and naming Dr. June as senior adviser to the provost for racial, ethnic, and minority concerns (Andrews, Eight days last May). Even though one year had passed by since the event, the administration was unable to effectively and efficiently prioritize educational improvements for students of color. The point of the study-in was to show that students want to be part of the decision making process about their education, not passive bystanders who only receive whatever the university gives them.

Progress on the demands set by students may be seen as a product of poor economic conditions, less government funding, and an unrealistic timetable. These conditions would have been understandable if it was not for the fact that the Faculty Senate earmarked \$650,000 to

develop the MSU-IDEA a year after the study-in (Gibson, 1990). Furthermore, twenty-two years later MSU students persist in fights for better retention and graduation rates for students of color and in having their voices heard by administration (Peyton, 2011). This may seem overwhelming but in the grand scheme of things many other universities have not fared much better than MSU for increasing students of color's retention and graduation rates. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the lessons that have been learned by students and administrators in regards to the concerns and recommendations made to improve student conditions and scholarship.

### Lessons Learned

MSU has in fact learned much from the various groups of students who have walked on campus trying to make MSU not only their home but a culture for success. On May 30th, 1989, seventy students talked about education as the key to reducing racial tension on campus and how their demands benefited all students on campus to be on the same level (Zasadny, students learn from sit-in). Students were primed for using the study-in as a movement to raise awareness about their needs once they gained access to higher education. This awareness proved that it was not enough simply to provide access to students of color and not address the poor graduation rates and performance. There had to be a change in the culture that would make higher education more approachable and achievable, with systems built intentionally to understand students of color's ideal contexts for learning.

The study-in showed how majority students continued to be misinformed about minority concerns, the specific demands made by protesters, and misconceptions about unfair grade boosts and free tutors for minorities, none of which were true (Clemens et. al, Wrap up). This is why protestors were so adamant about having open forums addressing racism and discrimination

on campus, during welcome week and orientations for students. The goal was to get everyone on the same page in understanding the covert barriers that prevented students of color from achieving a college degree. These conversations after the study-in clarified that the only students given free tutorial services were students in the College Academic Achievement Program (CAAP), which included all types of students who were first generation and had low income status (Clemens et. al, Wrap up).

The study-in improved the communication of the needs of students of color, for example to improve their performance in higher education by having more faculty of color. MSU Campus Police Chief initiated an increased dialog with Black Student leaders to address creating a healthy campus atmosphere for students of color (Peyton, 2011). Regarding the paramount issue of minority retention rates declining had been a concern since 1978 (see Table 1 in Appendix B) and begs the question of what is being done to improve the statistics (Martinez, Retention rates plummet sharply over past decade). MSU came to the realization that a need for action on these disturbing issues was in its utmost interest, as society is becoming increasingly more diverse. The demands from the study-in highlighted that the administration cannot be arrogant by thinking they understand what students need without having conversations with them.

These conversations have been the pinnacle in informing the decisions of administrators on how to better the learning environment for all students by acknowledging the student voice. This acknowledgement is visible even twenty-two years later, as Darius Peyton and Dr. Jeffery Robinson share their experiences and stories with students, who currently are struggling to improve the performance gap for students of color. Students listened as Dr. Jeffery Robinson stated "change is only possible by challenging the structure and producing an element that will

continually challenge that structure" (Conscious Circles, 2011). The spirit of what was learned in the 1989 study-in is still very much alive, showing that students want to be heard and consulted about the decisions being made about their education. Darius Peyton (2011) stated that student activism is about caring for the community, uplifting one another, and purposeful learning that allows one to want to learn more (Conscious Circles, 2011).

### Conclusion

History has much to teach us about where we have been, where we are, and where we need to go to enhance how we live and learn as a society. The 1989 study-in is only a snippet in history but has much to offer aspiring scholars who seek to improve present structures, support aspirations, and inspire scholarship in the classroom. The most important lesson that the study-in imparted was the fact that students need to be involved in how systems are put in place that allow them to learn. Students are a university's greatest asset, and they need to be given outlets to voice their opinion in ways that inform decisions about improving student environments to support learning.

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## Appendix A

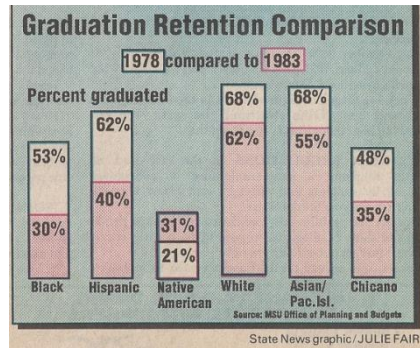
1. Establishment of regular forums on racism during each term, summer orientation and Welcome week.
2. Implementations of regular contact between MSU President John DiBaggio and the administrators' council and Academic Council.
3. Negotiation of tenure for ethnic-sensitive positions, such as the vice president for student affairs and services and the human relations director.
4. Assurance that DiBaggio will seek input from faculty and students concerning the improvement of communication on diversity issues.
5. Increases in the number of black faculty, staff and administrators by specific dates.
6. Assurance that the reorganization of the provost's office has not diminished the influence of prominence of any black administrators.
7. The parent group community relations effort issue was removed from the demands by the students.
8. Implementation of black faculty and administrators proposals.
9. No explanation of the Mary Lee Brady issue because it is a personnel matter the University cannot discuss.
10. Recognition of the impact of the Black Faculty and Administrators Association and establishment of regular consultations with the group.
11. Creation of funds for security at student organization social events.
12. Review of the antidiscrimination procedures.

13. Establishment of six in a half days of specialized training for MSU department of public safety officers including a segment on "multicultural policing".
14. The state news race-baiting issue was removed from the demands by the students.
15. Increases in representation of undergraduate minority students as outlined in the MSU IDEA (Institutional Diversity: Excellence in Action" plan.
16. Creation of a scholarship pool for the recruitment and retention of graduate students.
17. Encouragement of faculty to consider a thematic course for black studies.
18. Coordination of ethnic sensitivity training for appropriate groups by the Department of Human Relations.
19. Implementations of programs and seminars on diversity and awareness for use during orientation.
20. Review of current black history courses and their applicability toward the major..
21. Establishment of an all-University conference on diversity and pluralism in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday and excusing students from classes at their request to attend MLK observances.
22. (The Resident Assistant assignments issue was removed from the demands by the students.)
23. Initiation of a search within 30 days to fill the position of senior adviser to the provost for minority affairs with a tenured administrators.
24. Creation of a multi-cultural advisory committee on minority issues by fall 1989.
25. Explanation that the responsibility for effective diversity and pluralism rests with the deans, chairpersons and college advisory groups.

26. Exploration of provisions for special assistance for the Office of Black Affairs and ASMSU projects.
27. Creation of the Office of Minority Student Affairs, which is more active than and replaces the Coordinated Minority Student Programs Office.
28. Discussion of minority faculty recruitment and retention initiatives in IDEA.
29. (Unit affirmative action plans were removed from the demands by the students.)
30. Presentations of target dates for implementation of Black Faculty and Administrators Association recommendation in IDEA.
31. Approval of the Minority Advisory Council's request for reorganization.
32. Description of funding for security at social events as in demand No. 11.
33. Assistance in efforts to create a new minority student newspaper.
34. Establishment of meetings with minority, women, and handicapper groups within the next two weeks.
35. Investigations of pending complaints against any college of the University.
36. Assurance that student protesters will not be prosecuted and University employees will not be paid or penalized for missed days.

## Appendix B

Table 1: Graduation Retention Comparison: 1978 compared to 1983



(Martinez, F. (1989) Retention rates plummet sharply over past decade)

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. What was your major in undergrad at MSU? Why were you chosen as spokesperson?  
How involved were you as a student?
2. What role did you play before, during, and after the study-in? How was the study-in strategically organized?
3. What was the climate on campus for students of color on MSU's campus in 1989 leading up to the study-in?
4. What sparked the events that occurred in the 1989 study-in?
5. Why was the group so selective of who could be a part of the study-in?
6. How did the group decide on demands and why were certain demands taken off the table?
7. What was it like having conversations with MSU's President John DiBaggio in 1989?  
What was it like to be on the negotiations team?
8. What do you think of the MSU IDEA (Institutional Diversity: Excellence in Action) ?
9. Were you satisfied with the Outcomes from the 1989 study-in? and if so what aspects of the event were you satisfied with and why?
10. What lessons did you learn from the 1989 study-in that has informed your actions today?  
(regarding student activism, equity, and equality on college campuses)
11. What progress do you feel MSU has made since 1989 for students of color on MSU's campus? And what further work needs to be done to improve the college experience for students of color on MSU's campus?
12. What do you think about the student activism of Black Student Alliance currently?

13. How has your student activism at MSU influenced your life work?

14. Is there anything else you think I should know about the study-in or events around it?