How To Be An Activist

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss4/5

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Be An Activist

Who says ISU students are apathetic? Three student activists talk about how to get involved on campus. by Kristin Guiter

While walking on campus, you hear chanting voices and see signs scattered around a group of students. As you approach the protesters gathered in front of the Hub, you can clearly identify the cause they represent. Most likely, you either avoid eye contact and continue walking, or else you stop, read the posters, and think about their message. Perhaps you even experience a strong desire to join the demonstration and imagine yourself as a "student activist" but don't know how to take the first step.

The term "student activist" might seem daunting when you envision yourself on a soapbox or leading a march down Lincoln Way, but being active doesn't necessarily mean being in the spotlight. "Students hear the words 'student activism' and think it is a scary term," says Katie Theisen, co-president of the Student Environmental Council, a group that regularly holds protests on everything from Walt Disney to Iowa State's corporate interests. "People feel intimidated, and there is no reason to."

You can be a student activist whether you choose to shout your opinions to the crowds or quietly spread them through word of mouth. An activist can be defined as "anyone who puts forth the time, effort, and energy to work for a cause which they are passionate about," says Jeremy Hayes, a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Ally Alliance. "This can be done through activities put together by an organization or just personal actions that make an impact on other people."

"Everyone is an activist in some sense of the word. Some people are just a little more visible," says Ben Golding, former president of the Government of the Student Body. "When you are promoting something that you believe, anything from political to religious to social in nature, you are an activist."

But if you want to take an extra step, consider joining one of the many ISU organizations dedicated to an array of issues. "There are so many ways at Iowa State to speak out and voice an opinion," says Golding, a senior in construction engineering.

The Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance, the Student Environmental Council, and the Ames chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union are three strong activist organizations on campus, says Hayes, a junior in management information systems.

Each of these organizations can be further researched at www.smuog.iastate.edu.

"If someone is interested in getting involved with an organization, a good place to start is the organization's Web site," he says. There, a person can browse a list of student organizations or narrow their options by doing a search.

Check out the Web pages, pick one that interests you, and go see what it's all about. There's no reason to feel intimidated. Most likely, the group will welcome you enthusiastically and answer any questions you might have. "Take the first step and go to a meeting. We love it when new people come — new thoughts and new ideas are very welcome," says Theisen, a senior in environmental science.

Just showing up at a meeting is the route that Theisen and Hayes both took to get their foot in the door. Theisen joined SEC as a freshman, but she wasn't overly involved. "I decided that if I wanted to see something done, than I had to step up," she says. She was promoted to treasurer and then to co-president her junior year.

Hayes has been involved in the Alliance since fall 1998, but has only recently begun to think of himself as an activist. "My motivation to become an activist is very personal. I have seen and experienced the effects of homophobia and heterosexism, and I want to do everything I can to improve the situation, especially here on campus where I feel I can make an impact."

Both Theisen and Hayes found friends in their activist organizations along the way. "[SEC] is more like an ISU family than a coalition," Theisen says. "I get to meet people with similar viewpoints." Hayes believes that the Alliance has benefited him socially as well. "Within the Alliance, I found friends that affirmed my identity as a gay man. That empowered me to stand up and speak out for what I believe in," he says.

Not only have they developed friendships within their own organizations; they also have met activists from other groups by forming a coalition between organizations. The coalition includes the ISU Greens, FMLA, ACLU at ISU, and the Amnesty International Anthropology Club. "We are bridging the gaps between socially responsible groups to become more active and aware of what is going on with the other groups," Theisen says.

If you are not interested in joining an organization, you can still share your beliefs. "There are so many opportunities for students to make their opinions known: wearing stickers or buttons on your book bag, writing letters to the Daily, bringing up topics important to you in class," Hayes says.

Whether it is through organized activities or on your own, let your voice be heard. "I would like to see student activism increase on this campus. It doesn't mean you have to do it every minute," Theisen says. "It means you are becoming socially responsible and are looking at the environment and realizing you are part of this community."

Kristin Guiter is a junior in journalism from Ottumwa. This is her first article for Ethos.