Student Activism, Institutional Amnesia, and Narrative (Re)Construction:
Lessons from Brandeis University's #FordHall2015 Protests

Callie Watkins Liu
Brandeis University

Author Note

Callie Watkins Liu, Heller School of Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. Callie Watkins Liu, Heller School of Social Policy and Management, Brandeis University, 415 South Street (MS 035), Waltham, MA 02454-9110. Email: callie11@brandeis.edu

Abstract

Fall 2015 marked the convergence of Black student activism to address racial issues across college campuses with the author's fifth year as a doctoral student at Brandeis University. In this article, the author reflects upon her personal experiences with student activism at Brandeis in general and specifically with Black student activism on campus that fall. She focuses on the events immediately surrounding the 12-day occupation of the administration office by a group that came to be known as #FordHall2015. From her vantage as a critical race and social movement scholar, a Black woman, and a doctoral student, she identifies structural patterns in resistance and counter resistance around racially centered student activism. She examines how institutional amnesia and narrative framing are employed strategically to protect institutional power and interests, and then presents potential approaches to advancing racial justice changes despite these strategies.

Keywords: Black student activism, higher education, social movement, reflection

Overview

Fall 2015 marked the start of an academic year of student activism nationwide (Pohle, 2015b; Ransby, 2015). Two weeks before Thanksgiving, a group of students at Brandeis University, initially referred to as "Concerned Students 2015," presented the university president with a list of demands which included (but was not limited to) increasing the numbers of Black faculty and students, racial awareness in the curriculum, and academic and social support for Black students and organizations on campus—all to be met by fall 2016 (Concerned Students 2015, 2015). They gave the president and the Brandeis board of trustees 24 hours to respond. When the president did not comply immediately, between 20 and 100 students occupied the president's office for 12 consecutive days (Fontes, 2015; Moran, 2015; Ransom, 2015; Thys, 2015). The group became known as #FordHall2015, in honor of the 1969 Black student occupation of Brandeis' student union building. The occupation became the epicenter of campus-wide racialized student mobilization.

The 2015 events that this article focuses upon were not sparked by one particular incident but rather a confluence of existing racialized experiences on campus, inspiration from the student protests at the University of Missouri and Yale University, and a political context shaped by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which brought critical attention to racial violence and discrimination. As a Black woman, a critical race and social movement scholar, and a fifth-year doctoral candidate at Brandeis' Heller School of Social Policy and Management, I experienced the events of fall 2015 from vantage points that were both academic and personal. Throughout and immediately following the #FordHall2015 occupation, I witnessed first-hand how, in the throes of racial controversy, Brandeis responded with evasion, misstatements, and organizational amnesia. As both a scholar in this field and a student leader in the doctoral program, I was deeply disappointed and felt challenged by this response. In this article, I reflect on strategies that powerful actors such as universities employ to maintain power and explore possible ways to resist these strategies. While this reflection focuses on one particular institution, the lessons here are not exclusive to Brandeis University and likely apply to many other institutional settings. In the following sections, I define key concepts, describe my relationship to the Brandeis University #FordHall2015 case, provide a brief history of specific student protests at Brandeis, reflect on the #FordHall2015 experience, and offer final conclusions.

Institutional Amnesia

Within the literature of organizational theory, there is an established area of research about institutional memory and forgetting. This research examines how organizations intentionally or unintentionally retain or neglect information for organizational functioning. For example, it may be important for an organization to have a record of past challenges so as to not repeat them, but it may be equally important to forget certain organizational habits in order to learn new ones (Aydin & Gormus, 2015; Fernandez & Albert, 2009; Pollitt, 2000). In this article, I view organizational forgetting, or "institutional amnesia," as an intentional strategy to preserve and protect power.

Frames, Narratives, and Narrative (Re)Construction

As has been established in the social movement literature, narratives, framing, and storytelling are powerful tools for mobilization and counter mobilization (Benford & Snow, 2000; Polletta, 2006; Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). A frame might be used to define a problem and values, identify a hero or villain, or imply solutions to a defined problem. For example, the Occupy Wall Street movement used the "99%" frame to highlight the fact that 1% of the population holds 99% of the wealth and to present the "99%" as all of those not holding that wealth (We Are the 99 Percent, 2011). This framing centered economic inequality as the problem, established competing groups (i.e., the 99% vs. the 1%), and wove a narrative that depicts the 99% as hard-working and exploited, and the 1% as corrupt and greedy (We Are the 99 Percent, 2011). It is important to note that narratives are not stagnant; they are contested spaces subject to revision (Polletta, 2006). In this article, the concept of narrative (re)construction refers to specific moments in which narratives were being contested—namely moments in which the institutional narrative seemed to contradict events as they were unfolding. The following case examples illustrate how Brandeis University utilized institutional amnesia and narratives for the purposes of institutional protection.

The Author's Vantage Point

I started my doctoral program in 2011, and early in that first year I began to face particular racialized challenges, such as faculty and students confusing me for other Black students or faculty regardless of how well they seemed to know me (without seeming to confuse the names of my other classmates who were mostly White); the avoidance or marginalization of racial issues in the classroom;

frequently being assumed to be less capable or competent; and feeling generally invisible, marginalized, or less valued. As a result, I quickly became involved with student activism in my program and took on the co-leadership of a students of color group on campus—some of whose members would later organize #FordHall2015. As I shifted my focus to my dissertation at the end of my second year, I transitioned out of my leadership role in the group. Thus, when #FordHall2015 happened, I was not central to the operations of this particular mobilization but was connected to the core given my centrality in prior activism with Heller School graduate students. In this sense, I was an informed participant in and observer of the student movement. At the same time, my personal research centered on intersectionality, critical race theory, social change, and social movements. #FordHall2015 resonated with my own racial experiences and substantially advanced the work I had been involved with before. Intellectually, I was fascinated by the movement's strategy, operations, participation, and power building, as well as by the ways in which I witnessed power operating to protect itself.

A Brief History of Student Activism at Brandeis University

Given the phenomenon of institutional amnesia as a strategy to preserve power, and the frequently informal nature of student activism, the histories of resistance to that power are not likely to be documented or highly publicized by institutions themselves. The purpose of this section is not to provide a comprehensive history of all of the racially motivated student activism at Brandeis between 1968 and 2015, but rather to discuss the context around two points of racialized student protests on the same campus. Members of #FordHall2015 explicitly considered themselves to be a continuation of the legacy of Black student protest for racial justice at Brandeis University. Given this connection, comparison between the two time periods illustrates deeper trends with the respect to the themes discussed here. The history in this instance integrates first-hand knowledge, public statements, media coverage, the Robert D. Farber University Archives and Special Collection at Brandeis University (posted on the Department of African and Afro-American Studies webpage), and relevant program websites.

In 1968, the Brandeis Afro-American Society mobilized after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and presented the university with a proposal that "include[d] the active recruitment of more black professors and students and the development of an Afro-American studies department" (Brandeis University, 2016a). Following that mobilization, the institution created 10 Martin

Luther King Scholarships and the Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program (MKTYP) (Brandeis University, 2016a, 2016b). The 1969 occupation, mentioned earlier, catalyzed changes, such as the establishment of an African-American studies department (FordHall2015, 2015d; Robert D. Farber University Archives, n.d.).

In 2012, several colleagues and I wrote a letter to the senior administration and faculty of the PhD program I was enrolled in, documenting the issues we were facing and outlining suggestions for change (Concerned Heller Students, personal communication, April 26, 2012). We wrote:

> As concerned students, we've realized that the climate at Heller embodies a deep issue of "whiteness privilege" resulting in the marginalization of certain people and perspectives. This issue is particularly distressing in a school of social policy and social justice, because it substantially inhibits our ability (as a community) to be agents of social change.

The letter detailed specific incidents that had occurred at the faculty and staff levels, in classrooms, and between students, followed by specific suggestions for how each of the problems could be addressed. We achieved minor changes in response to this letter: support for the creation of a students of color group; a diversity orientation for all incoming students; the incorporation of racially relevant readings in the courses of a few faculty; a Heller-wide symposium about diversity; faculty trainings around diversity and inclusion; and a pledge from the dean of the Heller School to commit to diversity (Brandeis University, 2013; A. Hill, personal communication, June 10, 2014; L. Lynch, personal communication, November 25, 2013).

Despite all of these efforts, core racial issues remained in the program. After I transitioned out of the leadership of the students of color group, new students continued to reach out to me every year as they faced racial and ethnic challenges at the Heller School. I shared our letter and the history we had learned regarding student activism—including the history associated with previous students who had advocated for changes and initiated the creation of a diversity steering committee (Brandeis University, 2012). Each wave of activism had resulted in some changes, yet students of color faced racial and ethnic problems again the following year.

#FordHall2015 students presented yet another letter about racial issues on campus, but this letter and initiative was campus-wide rather than Heller-specific. For 12 days, #FordHall2015 students slept on the floors, ate in the hallways, and coordinated strategy and actions in the president's office. It became a safe haven

for many Black students and allies on campus. It also became a site of learning and engagement. The students invited faculty to hold classes nearby, produced materials such as a #FordHall2015 syllabus and a frequently asked questions document, and provided guidance about how to engage with race and the protest in classrooms. They documented everything and diligently disseminated press releases and other communications through Facebook, Twitter, Medium and YouTube (Carriker, 2015; FordHall2015, 2015b). An agreement was finally reached between #FordHall2015 and the administration after 12 days that addressed each of the demands and detailed specific implementation steps and timelines that were to be achieved to fully address the concerns.

There was supposed to be a public statement and signing on December 1, 2015, at 12:30 p.m. At least 200 students gathered at noon to witness the signing (FordHall2015, 2015c; Pohle, 2015a). We[1] marched down campus and gathered around a tree in a field and waited for the president and vice president for students and enrollment to show up. Activists led chants and shared their experiences as we waited. By 1 p.m., the administration had not shown up. We went down to their building and stood outside. Students knocked on the windows and doors, but no one came out. Eventually, a couple of faculty members went inside to find someone to come out and speak with us, but no one came. A dean became a messenger shuttling between the administration and us, but they still would not come out. Brandeis University administrators sent out a message on Facebook saying that there was confusion because "email systems were not connecting" and that they were "proud to join our students at the Unity rally to hold a formal signing ceremony," but they still did not come out. We waited in the cold rain for another hour. Finally, just before 3 p.m., they came out to sign the document (FordHall2015, 2015c).

The Author's Reflections:

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[1] "We" refers to myself along with the other students, faculty, and staff who came to witness the agreement signing—many of whom had been involved with or supported the occupation in a variety of ways over the 12 days.

Strategies to Protect the Powerful

The Power of Forgetting

In April 2016, I participated in a diversity and inclusion panel with senior leadership and graduate students regarding what had happened on campus since #FordHall2015 and also attended a social-justice forum on the same topic. The president, who had been the dean of the Heller School when my colleagues and I submitted our letter in 2012, also participated in these discussions. During the first discussion, the president commented that #FordHall2015 raised her awareness about racial issues on campus and that they (i.e., the administration) are all learning. My heart sped up and jumped into my throat. How could this be new to her when I had personally spoken with her about these issues in 2012? How could this be new when I personally knew of at least one cohort of students before and one cohort after mine that had raised these issues with her, never mind the 1969 protests? I asked her, "Why is this only important to you now? Why didn't you pay attention the first, second, third, or fourth time we told you about this? How did you forget?" The president then acknowledged the work of my colleagues and me, and apologized for dropping the ball.

It was in that moment, in that meeting, that I realized institutional amnesia is a strategy and not an accident. Each push of student activism resulted in some changes but not enough to prevent future students from experiencing racialized challenges again. Furthermore, instances of student resistance were always treated in isolation, disconnected from previous legacies of student resistance, meaning that students had to work to connect the pieces of history again. This strategy allows the institution to claim ignorance and innocence, avoid responsibility for previous failures and continuing problems, and avoid deeper interventions while getting credit for superficial ones (e.g., implementing diversity days and trainings or creating a committee but never holding problematic power people accountable or changing organizational structures).

Narrative Reconstruction

I also saw how Brandeis University coupled institutional amnesia with narrative reconstruction to maintain its powerful position and keep itself in a favorable light. In fact, narrative reconstruction occurred from the beginning of the #FordHall2015 occupation to the end. Two days into the occupation, on the evening

of November 22, 2015, the president of Brandeis sent out a campus-wide statement summarizing what had happened on campus up to that point:

> As someone who has worked on these issues over my career and came to Brandeis because of its historical commitment to advancing social justice and free speech and expression, I am committed to working with the Board of Trustees and the broader community to further advance our diversity, which is one of our founding principles. Yet this must be done in ways that are consistent with Presidential and Board governance and within the context and culture of collaborative engagement at Brandeis. The issues raised by our students have been the subject of a weekend meeting of the Board of Trustees which fully supports this letter.
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> … Brandeis has a long history of taking action to support diversity and inclusion and it continues in earnest to this day. But we recognize that we must go further to fulfill our founding ideals. However, reacting to immediate timetables and ultimata is not something that is productive or does justice to the work that needs to be done. And it does not allow for engagement of all members of our community. This deep engagement is critical to ensure that the course we follow takes account of the many important interests that are involved or implicated in any initiative and has broad support. It also makes it more likely that these initiatives will be long lasting and effective. (Lynch, 2015)

The letter went on to detail what the president and board saw as appropriate next steps and outlined the ways they felt they were already working toward accomplishing diversity-related goals on campus—placing the position of power firmly in the hands of the institution.

On November 23, the #FordHall2015 group sent out a communication stating the following:

> On the evening of November 20th, 2015 the Ford Hall 2015 negotiations team[2] met with [the senior administration] to begin the negotiation process to meet our demands…. Within this meeting, we agreed that on the morning of November 21st, 2015, a draft of potential resolutions would be sent to the negotiations team by [the president]. This was to be sent for review by

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[2] The negotiations team consisted of four women from the #FordHall2015 group.

the negotiators prior to being released to the Board of Trustees for consideration.

Instead, 56 hours into our sit-in of the President's Office, Interim President Lynch issued a public statement regarding our demands to the Brandeis community, without first sending them to us, as agreed upon. Despite breaking the terms of the agreement, negotiations with senior leadership are not over…. [W]e believe our community requires unedited, unfiltered, transparent communication that acknowledges and resolves the true nature of the issues at hand. For these reasons, we will be releasing a more detailed and direct response to the public statement released by Interim President [redacted] shortly. (FordHall2015, 2015a)

Without #FordHall2015's countervailing response, the administration's letter gave the appearance that the university quickly managed the student resistance and facilitated a collegial, collaborative process, lending the impression that the university was proactive, visionary, and in control. The #FordHall2015 communication, however, painted a conflicting picture of the university violating agreements with the students and presenting a false narrative. Negotiations continued after these communications were released; yet, there was never a public acknowledgment by Brandeis that it had committed any error. If #FordHall2015 had not vigilantly and publicly documented and disseminated communications about the process—producing press releases and videos every day, leveraging social media—the institutional narrative would have become the dominant perspective and dictated the outcomes.

On the evening of December 1, after the final agreement had been signed by the senior administration and the students, the chief information officer sent a communication stating:

I am writing to apologize for the delay Brandeis users experienced with incoming emails today. I am especially sorry that this outage interfered with important communications on campus today, in particular the discussions between the administration and the students involved in the sit-in at Bernstein Marcus. (J. Unsworth, personal communication, December 1, 2015)

The explanation of the email glitch comprised a narrative in which everyone was on the same page, the institution had not committed any errors, and the tensions

were merely the result of a technological "outage." This new narrative ignored the reality of students standing just a few feet outside the administration building while the senior administrators waited inside, and did not explain how a technological challenge would prevent the administrators from physically walking out the door to speak with the students.

Historical Narrative (Re)Construction

After witnessing Brandeis' narrative (re)construction throughout #FordHall2015, I recognized that this strategy was not new, that it had deep historical roots. The Brandeis administration had created 10 Martin Luther King Scholarships and the Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program in response to the 1968-1969 racialized student mobilizations previously mentioned. While these scholarship are likely significant for their recipients, 10 scholarships[3] a year in a student population that currently reaches several thousand (Forbes, 2016) arguably has minimal impact on the student body and campus culture. The MKTYP is marketed as being aligned with the social justice mission of the institution—"an integral part of the institution's enduring commitment to social justice" (Brandeis University, 2016e). The program website features a short introductory film that opens with a founding faculty member, Bob Lange, saying:

> When Martin Luther King was killed, there was an outburst of feeling from the faculty that we should be doing more for civil rights, we should be doing more for African-Americans. That somehow we weren't really living up to what we might be. (Brandeis University, 2016e)

The history MKTYP presents in the film depicts progressive, visionary, innovative, and forward-thinking faculty who were spontaneously motivated to "do good," to do more for civil rights and African Americans. This framing, however, ignores the prominent role student activism played in the creation of the program and the resistance they had to overcome; places the power and agency in the hands of the faculty and the institution; and presents the institutional actors as the heroes of the story.

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[3] The scholarship was created in response to the demand to increase Black student enrollment, but it is no longer specifically for Black students. Therefore, the impact of this scholarship with respect to the Black student population is even more limited than described here.

Recognizing and Resisting Institutional Amnesia

In 1968 and 2015, Brandeis University used student activism opportunities to reinforce its brand as a social justice institution and to position the university as a hero fighting injustice. #FordHall2015, combined with my own earlier student activism, revealed a cycle of student mobilization, the administration acting as if the issues being raised were completely new, superficial changes, institutional amnesia, and narrative (re)construction. I watched the institution change to the extent that it was made too uncomfortable not to, while still avoiding the root causes, and witnessed a cycle that absolved the institution of responsibility and a proffered narrative that positioned the institution favorably. Institutional change happened, but the degree of change depended on vigilance, strategic persistence, documentation and dissemination of the story before it could be revised, and a clear record of and connection to the legacies of resistance. The historical persistence of this cycle under different administrations—and even under the same person holding different administrative positions—suggests that the cycle is structural and intentional rather than coincidental.

Brandeis University was founded in 1948 as a social justice-oriented institution by prominent Jewish figures in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust (Brandeis University, 2016c, 2016d). Given this history, one could ask, why would a social justice organization established by a marginalized population resist racial justice initiatives? I conclude with lessons from critical race theory and intersectionality to address this question. First, multiple social structures and powers are always operating simultaneously, and social structures like racism permeate all aspects of society (Bell, Jr., 1995b; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Yes, Jewish individuals founded Brandeis after the Holocaust, yet they were also predominantly White and male, meaning that while the institution may have been centered on particular religious and ethnic vulnerability and persecution, it was built just as much around Whiteness. The second lesson centers on the notion of Whiteness as property—that is, Whiteness and White privilege are structural and systematically invested in and protected (Harris, 1995). The final idea is that of interest convergence, which maintains that social change only happens to the extent that the interests of the dominant group align with the change efforts (Bell, Jr., 1995a). In the case of Brandeis, interest convergence might mean that change will only happen to the extent that the social justice values align with the competing structural tendency to preserve and protect Whiteness.

Ultimately, being founded on a dedication to one aspect of vulnerability does not negate other forms of privilege that are built into an institution. The pressure from student activists such as those involved in the occupations in 1969 and 2015 is a vital part of catalyzing structural change. Those fighting for such change at an institution like Brandeis must remain vigilant with respect to institutional narratives, critically interrogate structures of privilege built into the institution, proactively confront those internal forms of privilege and oppression, and maintain profound structural accountability.

Social change is deeply contested terrain, and social justice entails a continuous struggle for power. Generations of students have mobilized in response to racial experiences on Brandeis' campus, and while the ultimate impact of #FordHall2015 is yet to be determined, the legacy of racial struggle will likely continue. #FordHall2015 was not the first racially motivated student protest on Brandeis' campus, and will not be the last. Identifying strategies used to protect power and privilege, such as institutional amnesia and narrative (re)construction, may help to alter the cycles of institutional resistance and open the door for greater institutional change.

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Author Biography

Callie Watkins Liu is a doctoral candidate at the Heller School of Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University. Her work focuses on vulnerable populations, social justice, social change, social movements, social policy, critical race theory, and intersectionality.