

## Talking Points Memo

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# A New Wave of Community Organizers for the Obama Era



By [Peter Dreier](#) - April 11, 2009, 2:52AM

I usually have about 20 students in the Community Organizing course I teach each year at Occidental College in Los Angeles. So far, 42 students have registered for next fall's class.

I haven't all of a sudden become a more popular professor. There's clearly something happening on American campuses and in the broader culture that's tapping the pent up idealism of today's students. An important element of that new mood on campus is Barack Obama.

More and more college students want careers where they can help make society more humane, fair, and environmentally sustainable. They want to put their skills, their idealism, and their energy to work promoting social justice. My colleagues around the country tell me that the same thing is happening on their campuses. A growing number of students are asking faculty and staff about internships, summer jobs, and careers working with non-profit, advocacy, and grassroots organizing groups. Why wait on tables when you could be changing the world?

That's what reporter Sara Rimer learned when she interviewed college students (including several of mine) for her article in this Sunday's *New York Times*, "[Community Organizing Never Looked So Good.](#)"

Given that headline, and the fact it that appears in the Fashion & Style section, you might think that Rimer asked students what they were wearing to the next protest demonstration. But, in fact, hers is a serious piece of reporting about what today's student activists want to do when they graduate. Many of them want to become community organizers, inspired by our new president.

Fortunately, there are many more opportunities today to work for social change than there were when I was in college in the 1960s or even when Obama was in college (at Occidental and Columbia) in the 1980s. The number of nonprofit organizations engaged in the struggle for justice -- community groups, unions, environmental and consumer groups, public health and food justice groups, civil rights organizations, women's and gay

rights groups, fair trade and anti-sweatshop groups, groups advocating for children, for the disabled, for the elderly, and for immigrants -- has mushroomed dramatically. In addition to the thousands of issue-oriented advocacy groups, there are many publications, think tanks, and, of course, websites that promote progressive causes, most of which didn't exist even 20 years ago.

As Rimer discovered, community organizing groups and networks like ACORN, PICO, DART, the Center for Community Change, the Industrial Areas Foundation, National People's Action, U.S. Action, Gamaliel Foundation (whose Chicago affiliate hired Obama after college), the Partnership for Working Families, and others are getting more applicants from college students and recent graduates. Many of them already have some organizing experience through college internships, summer jobs, or volunteering for political campaigns like Obama's presidential crusade.

Perhaps because so many of them get practical experience while still in college, working with off-campus groups, today's student activists are much more pragmatic, savvy, and patient than their counterparts in the 1960s. They are skeptical but not cynical. They are not paralyzed by old ideological battles or identity politics. They respect differences of opinion, including religious beliefs, as well as the right to dissent. They understand that they can disagree with their government and still love their country and its ideals. They want major changes in our institutions and policies, but they know that people need to win stepping-stone reforms before they can envision a different kind of world.

For sure, student interest in political activism and community organizing was going on long before the Obama campaign. In the 1990s, students mobilized against sweatshops and for "fair trade" consumer products, in support of "living wages" for university employees, and around global warming and "greening" America's college campuses. The AFL-CIO began the Organizing Institute, a summer internship program for college students who want to learn about union organizing. After years of watching the conservative movement spend millions of dollars to recruit and train activists on campuses, and plug them into jobs with politicians, think tanks, and right-wing publications, liberal groups like the Center for American Progress, Wellstone Action, Democracy Matters, the Student Environmental Action Coalition and others began to focus more attention on college students -- to invest in the next generation of progressives. In addition, over the past decade, a growing number of colleges and universities embraced the idea of "service learning," linking classrooms and the community.

But there is no doubt that Obama's campaign and victory lit a spark, accelerating student interest in politics in general and grassroots organizing in particular. Millions of young people, including college students and recent graduates, got involved in the Obama campaign. Thousands learned organizing skills at Camp Obama training sessions. The efforts of these young people -- as well as the expanded youth vote -- made a big difference in Obama's triumph last November. Many of the students who volunteered in the campaign got a taste of organizing and now want to pursue it as a career.

In many ways, Obama has given community organizing a new cache. He has described the three years he spent after college as a community organizer in Chicago as "the best education I ever had."

Obama has provided enormous visibility and credibility to organizing as a career and profession. Obama's campaign stump speeches typically included references to America's organizing tradition. "Nothing in this country worthwhile has ever happened except when somebody somewhere was willing to hope," Obama explained. "That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom's cause."

Change comes about, Obama said, by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before." His campaign slogan -- "Yes, We Can" -- was borrowed from Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers movement

Credit must go, too, to Sarah Palin, who attacked Obama's community organizing experience during her Republican National Convention speech in St. Paul last September, and then, along with John McCain, went on the warpath against ACORN, one of the nation's largest and most effective community organizing groups. The GOP assault triggered a huge [backlash](#) not only among community organizers all over the country (who were happy for the free publicity) but also among newspaper columnists, editorial writers, readers who wrote letters to the editor, and bloggers. In the aftermath of that attack, more newspapers and magazines published stories about community organizing -- describing and praising the activists who improve communities by bringing people together and giving people the confidence and leadership skills to promote change -- than had been written in the entire previous decade.

Despite our serious economic crisis, the country's mood has changed for the better. Americans are worried about their jobs and their families, but they still give the new president high marks for moving quickly to address our problems. This is important, because significant improvements only occur when people believe that things should be changed and that they can be changed. Obama has restored a sense of possibility and hope to American politics.

Even so, if Obama has any chance to be a transformational President, like FDR, it will require a powerful progressive movement that aligns itself with, but isn't controlled by, the young president and progressive forces in Congress. There is plenty of evidence from polls that Americans want a more activist government to address the problems of economic insecurity, health care, the environment, and U.S. military intervention in Iraq and elsewhere. To win universal health care, labor law reform, or legislation to reduce global warming -- and to stimulate the troubled economy to promote shared prosperity and green jobs, and rescue people from foreclosures -- Obama will confront fierce resistance from powerful forces in the business community and their friends in Congress.

The Millennial generation - Americans now under 30 - voted overwhelmingly for Obama. They are also ready to follow Obama's lead and join the growing ranks of progressive activists.

They also know, however, that grassroots organizing is only one way to bring about change. Increasingly, for example, students who go to law school want to use their legal talents to right wrongs rather than represent banks, corporations, and developers. Fortunately, there are a growing number of public interest law firms around the country that link lawyers to social movements concerned about the environment, housing, consumer protection, immigrant rights, and other issues.

Likewise, students interested in medicine and health care can take many paths to help change our failing health care system. A growing number of students are pursuing careers in public health, where they can combine their concerns about the environment, medicine, social justice, and creating livable communities. Or they can go to medical, nursing, or nutrition school and use their skills by working in community clinics that serve low-income people and agitate for change with such groups as Physicians for a National Health Program, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and the California Nurses Association.

Whatever profession they pursue -- architect, city planner, teacher, biologist, engineer, nutritionist, accountant, aide to an elected official, child care provider, lawyer, or physician, among them -- they can use their talents to help move society in a more progressive direction or to protect and defend the status quo. They understand that it isn't simply a matter of having skills. It's a question of what values those skills will be used to promote -- and what kinds of organizations they work for.

Obama has already helped change the nation's mood -- and helped to inspire a new generation of organizers and activists. More and more young people want to pursue a career with a conscience.

But will the nonprofit groups that help advocate and organize for change have the resources to employ them? Many environmental, community, and other groups that do this work are facing difficult times, since they depend on members' dues, foundation grants, bake sales and other fundraisers to keep their organizations afloat. And will today's young people be able to pursue their ideals if they can't afford to stay in college, or if they are saddled with college loans that they can't afford to pay back on an activist's salary?

Here's another way that Obama, and Congress, can help. They have already expanded the federal budget for AmeriCorps, the nation's major community service program. But what's needed is a major commitment similar to the GI Bill that gave returning World War 2 veterans funds to attend college. America should guarantee all students in two- and four-year colleges financial assistance -- allowing them to graduate debt-free -- if they pursue careers in public and community service. This means encouraging doctors and nurses to work in clinics serving the poor, architects and planners to work for nonprofit

groups building mixed-income housing, teachers to work at public schools in low-income areas, engineers and technicians to work with organizations that design and install "green" technologies in our homes and workplaces, and community organizers to work with groups that help people help themselves, through their faith-based institutions, neighborhoods, and schools, in the great American tradition of voluntarism.

A character in George Bernard Shaw's play, *Back to Methusaleh*, says, "You see things and you say, 'why?' But I dream things that never were, and I say, 'why not?'"

That's the essence of an activist -- someone who doesn't just criticize awful conditions, but tries to change them, not on his or her own, but with others. We endured eight years of White House contempt for the practical idealism that makes change possible. Obama has restored Americans' faith in themselves.

You can find that new mood on almost every college campus today. When a skeptic asks me if the students in my community organizing class have what it takes to change the world, I'm proud to say: Yes, They Can.

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