Responding to the Call: Factors that Shaped Luther Students’ Involvement with Undocumented Immigrants in the Aftermath of ICE Raid in Postville, Iowa

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At that time it was executed, the workplace raid in Postville, Iowa was the largest of its kind in U.S. history. Following the sudden event, many Luther students responded to help fearful and shocked undocumented immigrant community members. I conducted 34 in-depth interviews with some students who immediately went to Postville to help, students who later became involved in relief efforts, and students who never showed up to help. As expected, biographic availability, ideological compatibility, and social networks were positively correlated with student participation. In addition, language skill capability, previous experiences with immigration issues and anticipated personal gain were discovered as supplemental reasons why students became involved. While past experiences and ideological compatibility were the least influential predictors of participation, strong social ties within social networks were essential and the most important factor to the recruitment and continued participation of student activists. This study looks at six influential factors that mobilized students, and also suggests that student participants developed a deeper political, economic, and social understanding of national issue of immigration after their direct work in Postville.

I saw all of the people and how distraught they were. It was my responsibility to help. So my first response was humanitarian... my feelings are now a little more political. Immigration needs to be reformed.

Ellen, student respondent

On May 12, 2008 an unexpected workplace raid occurred at Agriprocessors meat packing plant in Postville, Iowa. The surprise raid, swiftly executed by United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and other federal agents, resulted in the arrests of 389 undocumented workers. Although many of these people were long-time residents of Postville, the majority were citizens of Guatemala and Mexico (Camayd-Freixas 1). Some of the individuals (mostly women and under age workers) were released on “humanitarian” grounds and others hid around the meat packing plant factory and nearby property to avoid their arrest. In all, 270 undocumented workers were taken to various prisons across the state of Iowa following the morning raid. 260 of these individuals were charged with
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the federal crime of “identity theft” and sentenced to five months in prison before being deported to their countries of origin.

Following the raid in Postville, local churches, Luther College, and concerned community members immediately responded to the unforeseen event. The individuals responded to immediate needs, such as providing food, clothing, medical care, and translating for the Spanish-speaking victims of the raid. The reactions to the raid exemplify characteristics of a form of collective action defined by authors John A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Kriesi Hanspeter in the following way. “Collective action consists of any goal-oriented activity engaged in jointly by two or more individuals. It entails the pursuit of a common objective through joint action” (Snow, Soule, Hanspeter 6). As undocumented families rushed to the church in hopes of finding loved ones and avoiding their own possible arrest, outsiders were called together with the common goal of helping these individuals.

Moreover, because the outreach to undocumented residents occurred through community organization and leadership from local religious leaders, a subcategory of collective action more appropriately defines the responses to the event. Collective behavior specifically defines group action that takes place outside of the normal, institutional channels. “Collective behavior refers to ‘extra institutional, group-problem solving behavior that encompasses an array of collective actions, ranging from protest demonstration, to behavior in disasters, to mass or diffuse phenomena, such as fads and crazes, to social movements and even revolution’” (Snow, Soule, Hanspeter 7). The response that emerged after the raid in Postville represents a kind of collective behavior that occurred outside of any formal social institutions and demonstrated ways in which new-formed social associations were required to solve the recently-poised problems in the community. Moreover, many individuals responded because of the emergency-like characteristics of the sudden event. The strategic swiftness of the ICE raid, the fear it ignited among undocumented workers, and helpless situation families were left in after
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discovering loved ones were missing, made the event seem like a natural disaster, rather than a strategic, government-organized plan to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the United States.

While the initial collective response was not explicitly political, a march was organized two months following the raid to protest both the actions of the government and demand reform of immigration policies. This kind of collective behavior nearly resembles characteristics of a sub category of its kind, a social movement. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper define a social movement as a “collective, organized, sustained, and noninstitutional challenge to authorities, power holders, or cultural beliefs and practices” (Editors Introduction 1). The broad “social movement theory” lays out key concepts and theories that are required to understand the social movement phenomena. Collective behavior, relative deprivation, resource mobilization theory, political process theory, and framing all contribute to the formation and continuity of a social movement. In the instance of responding to the raid in Postville, it is clear that the response was made up of the ordinary public, rather than officials, politicians, or elites. Participation certainly occurred outside of institutional channels and required some degree of organization to solicit volunteers and attend to the needs of affected Postville residents.

Yet, the collective participation that occurred immediately after the raid in Postville was not a premeditated tactic organized to oppose extant immigration policies or government authorities. While the efforts to provide for affected families were continuous, these actions were largely sustained to care for the affected and distraught undocumented individuals. Also, although people may have responded for political reasons to change the power relations between legal and illegal residents, others more likely responded for humanitarian reasons. As mentioned previously, when people learned of the tactics used by government officials to trap undocumented workers in the plant, the separation of families, and sensed the overall terror that swept over the small town after the raid, individuals initially responded as if a natural disaster had occurred. It is important to note the distinction between the kind of collective
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behavior that occurred after the raid in Postville and the purposeful tactics and recurrent efforts that characterize a social movement. While people may have responded initially with preformed political ideologies and the notion that an oppressed group was suffering from misguided government action, it is necessary to point out that the specific, defining characteristics of a social movement are missing in the Postville scenario.

Although the student response after the raid was not a social movement, using social movement theory is helpful in examining a similar kind of social phenomena that took place in Postville. Moreover, just as this study looks at the response of students, previous social movement studies also investigate factors that are influential in recruiting students for movement participation. Previous studies (McAdam 62) have shown a positive correlation between biographic availability and likelihood to volunteer. Biographic availability, or the freedom from certain responsibilities and routines of daily life, allows people to pursue causes of interest to them (McAdam 62). In his examination of Freedom Summer, the voter registration project in 1964, McAdam explains that students were available during the summer and hence, less likely to dismiss the opportunity to volunteer in Mississippi. “Their freedom from family and employment responsibilities… made it possible for them to act on their attitudes and values” (McAdam 62). A connection can be seen between their freedoms from regular life duties and ability to act on their convictions.

Moreover, research on social movement recruitment processes by Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson demonstrates that biographic and structural availability is an essential determinant in the recruitment process (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson 794). After analyzing ten social movement case studies, the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement in America, and a random sample of 300 University of Texas students, the researches conclude that those who had more unscheduled time and were free from extraneous commitments, were more structurally available to participate. “The fewer and the weaker the
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social ties to alternative networks, the great their structural availability for movement participation. The greater the structural available for participation, the greater the probability of accepting the recruitment ‘invitation’” (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson 794). Not only does this research demonstrate how some individuals get recruited, but also explains why “movement sympathizers” or individuals who agree with the goals of the movement, never end up participating in it.

In addition to biographic and structural availability, the study of student participants in Freedom Summer demonstrates that attitudinal affinity served as influential factor that pulled students into the volunteer registration project (McAdam 58). Although students maintained political and religious ideologies, they all shared a common and grounded sense of idealism to make a difference. “They shared in the generalized optimism, idealism, and sense of potency… these were deeply idealistic individuals, dedicated to achieving equal rights and human dignity for all” (McAdam 59). The students show a shared motivation to apply for the volunteer program based on their idealism and belief in their own abilities to make change.

Analyzing the success of voter registration during Freedom Summer, McAdam looks at the importance of social networks in determining why white, Northern university students from elite socio-economic backgrounds arrived in Mississippi to register voters in 1964 (McAdam 56). “The volunteers enjoyed much stronger social links to the Summer Project than did the no-shows… the individual who applied in consort with friends or as a movement veteran undoubtedly risked considerable social disapproval for withdrawal” (McAdam 62). This study shows that the social networks created among individuals previously involved in civil rights issues and encouragement from friends to keep commitments were the most influential factors that determined which students went to Mississippi to volunteer. Additionally, previous research indicates that social networks play a vital role in the growth of membership and continued recruitment within social movements (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson 787).
Comparing recruitment between strangers and personal acquaintances, Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson conclude the following statement: “A movement’s network attributes and corresponding recruitment patterns do indeed make a significant difference in a movements’ recruitment efforts and growth” (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson 797). Their findings show that the most effective and successful form of recruitment is among friends, acquaintances, and family.

This study was conducted to examine if social movement theory similar explains the collective response of Luther College students to the humanitarian crisis following the raid. It also attempts to discover supplementary factors that may have pushed students to respond to the needs of undocumented workers that may differ from previous social movement research findings. This research shows that student’s did not have singular reasons for going to Postville, but rather several multifaceted reasons influenced their behavior.

**METHODS**

Qualitative data was collected from in-depth interviews conducted with 22 women and 12 men who were Luther students *at the time of the raid*. Selection of participants was developed using a snowball sample method. Having been a student participant myself, I started my interviews with individuals with whom I worked with in Postville. At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they knew the names of other students who had worked with them in Postville. Using the snowball sample technique and the help of Luther College faculty and staff volunteers, I generated a list of 34 total names of student participants. Out of the 34 active students, 29 were interviewed for this study. 22 of these students were *immediately* active in relief efforts in May; for this study, immediate participation is defined as going to Postville within the first 3 weeks following the raid. These 22 students are labeled as “emergency” or “immediate” responders in this research. Seven students out of the 29 participants became involved *later* in the fall, after attending a forum about the raid at Luther College; these students
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who began volunteering four months after the raid are identified as “late-recruits”. The remaining four non-interviewed students never responded to repeated requests for an interview. I included myself in the sample population, but did not include my own interview responses in the data.

It is possible to say with high level of certainty that my sampling frame is exhaustive of the entire group of active students. My sampling frame of 29 students includes those who became involved in varied ways, range in age from first-year to senior, and assumed different levels of commitment once they were involved.

Also, students were asked if they knew anyone who they thought would show up to help, but never did. I interviewed six of the students that other interviewees mentioned to find out about their lack of participation; these students are labeled as “no-shows”. A total of 35 interviews with active and non-active students were conducted for this study.

Furthermore, four Luther staff and two Luther faculty members were emailed to gather general information about how they were notified of the event and how they disseminated that information to students. Information was gathered from these individuals via email.

The interviews took place throughout the month of November, 2008 and resumed again in February, March, and April 2009. All participants who were selected through personal networks and the snowball technique received an email request to be interviewed. If the interviewees accepted, they were interviewed in person on campus. Interviews lasted between 10 and 40 minutes. Students who were unavailable to meet in person completed interview questions via email. Participants were asked general demographic questions, such as age, hometown, major, and involvement in extracurricular activities at Luther. Next, students were asked about their involvement in Postville, how they found out about the event, what motivated them to respond, and what they thought about the issue of illegal immigration. The interviews were informal and conversational in nature.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results from the interviews reveal a broad variety of reasons why students went to Postville to help or later become involved in the fall. This analysis focuses on six themes that emerged to explain student participation or lack thereof: past experiences, personal gain, ideological compatibility, biographic availability, language skill capability, and social networks. The names of all interviewees were altered to protect their anonymity, but no other information was changed.

Past Experiences

It would seem intuitive that students with previous background experiences and familiarity of working on behalf of others would be the most likely candidates for student participation. Yet, due to the immediate nature of the event, past volunteer experiences were less significant determinants for showing up in Postville. When specifically questioned, students recalled the kinds of volunteer work and mission trips in which they were previously involved, but none mentioned that an experience in the past inspired them to help in Postville. Instead, only immigration-specific experiences and social activism involvement proved influential in pushing a small number of students to help.

Social Activism Involvement

Previous involvement in social activism also helps explain why some students showed up, but does not reflect the majority of students’ motivations to respond. One interviewee, Erik, cited his former activist endeavors as reasons why he was one of the first students to arrive in Postville. “[I helped] because of a sense of who I am and with whom I grew up. I grew up with other children who had a worse story than mine. This impacted the way I behave now. I always have been working with social justice issues”. Jacki similarly discussed her enthusiasm for social activism in our interview. “I’m really passionate about social justice issues… since I’ve been here [Luther College] I try to be more
Responding to the Call involved and active”. Despite these two accounts account, this study more concretely demonstrates other factors that influenced student participation.

**Immigration-Specific Experiences**

Immigration-specific work, such as having personal relationships with immigrants, attending educational workshops, or working with immigrants, proved to be the only kind of significant previous experience that students mentioned. Tonya talked about her influential experiences at a conference that helped her better understand the complexity of illegal immigration. “I attended a week-long conference where there were simulation activities. We would learn about immigration all week and it was very eye opening”. Another student cited numerous experiences in which her personal relationships with immigrants made her feel it was essential she go immediately to Postville after the raid. “I spent my junior and senior years teaching English classes to adults in Postville; all of my students worked at Agriprocessors. I did my J-Block [taught a class during January term] for Elementary Ed in Postville, and remained close to my students… I have friends who are illegal immigrants”. These former experiences for particular students made them more likely to understand immigration issues and sympathize with the Guatemalan and Mexican families affected by the raid.

**Personal Gain**

One of the most surprising findings that emerged from the interviews is that some students were persuaded to help because of the anticipated personal gain that could be acquired by the experience. While many Luther students articulated altruistic reasons for volunteering in Postville, five Luther students explained that part of their motivation to get involved was rooted in the belief that their volunteer work would be personally beneficial. Two students, both first-years and previously uninvolved in any kind of social activism, said they felt they had something to gain from going to Postville. Jane, who didn’t “know much about immigration” before the event, said “I thought it would
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be a good opportunity. I’m going to South America over J[January] -term so I thought it would be a
good opportunity to learn more, meet people, and learn about another culture”. Considering this student
had little background information on immigration and was not well-connected to other students who
volunteered, the personal benefit factor helps explain how she ended up in Postville. Abby expressed
that rather than merely talk Spanish in the classroom, her experiences of speaking and interacting with
native Spanish speakers could improve her language skills. “I thought it would be a good experience for
myself. They needed me to translate. I went by myself after receiving the email [from a community
member]. It was kind of my duty and a good experience for me to speak to Natives”. While some
students were motivated by the opportunity to improve their language skills and interact with another
group of people, one student discussed his curiosity to be part of a national news event. Ben, a political
science and Spanish major, explained, “I signed up for a slot [to volunteer] due to the volunteer crisis
that needed to be dealt with. But also, it was an interesting opportunity to see a larger political
phenomena”. About five volunteers show that their participation was partly motivated by personal
interests and opportunities for self-betterment.

I ideological Compatibility

Contrary to previous research findings (McAdam) this study shows pre-formed ideological
beliefs proved to be a somewhat weak factor in determining if students would show up and participate in
relief efforts. Nine out of the 22 “emergency responders” who arrived immediately after the raid
possessed some kind of pre-formed ideas on the issue of immigration. While no respondents explicitly
expressed that the undocumented residents in Postville were oppressed under misguided government
action, a handful of the “emergency respondents” discussed their previous pro-immigration thoughts.
For example, Brad explained that prior to his involvement in Postville he had thought about the issue
and knew what he thought. “I completely understand why people immigrate. They weren’t selfish in
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Mary, one of the most dedicated "emergency respondents", similarly reflected on her pre-formed, yet undeveloped ideas of immigration before the raid.

My mom is from Mexico and was deported when I was five years old. It's not something we talked about freely growing up...so I never really thought about it [immigration policy] before. I understand the other side that immigration is high, but I don't think immigration is bad...you actually do need immigrants. You gotta accept its necessary and it helps both worlds.

Like Brad and Mary, some students with particular political ideologies on immigration participated in relief efforts. Interestingly, many of the students who expressed their pre-formed views on immigration, similarly discussed their ideologies grew from working directly with immigrants in the past. The four students who mentioned immigration-specific experiences similarly demonstrated their political ideologies by framing immigration issues in terms unjust power distributions. These students demonstrate that their immigration-specific experiences encouraged them to develop particular ideologies and thoughts about illegal immigration in the United States. Courtney, who worked with Latino immigrants during the summer, laughed when I asked her opinion on illegal immigration. "My ideas of immigration are pretty liberal. I think it's completely messed up. I've thought that for a while, but my opinion was extremely strengthened by my experience in Postville. I can see how the laws really, really hurt people". These students show that through their previous experiences, they formed ideologies that made them more likely to help when the ICE raid occurred in Postville.

In addition, religious ideology influenced a slightly smaller number of student activists than did political ideology. Nine out of the 29 total student participants in my sample, talked about having some kind of moral obligation to help the undocumented residents who had been hurt by the raid. Gary, who went to Postville this fall for the first time articulated that he felt compelled to go due to an obligation he felt to help others. "These people really needed help. [I went] not really for religious reasoning. It was
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more of a golden rule feeling like if I was in that situation”. Similarly, Amanda, who was one of the first Luther students to arrive in Postville the day of the raid and to recruit others explained that her reasons for taking action were based on religious notions of how to make sense of the world. “I believe that God intends for us to create ‘heaven on Earth’ rather than simply standing by, waiting for eternal life… the only logical response for me is for us to bind together, taking upon ourselves the pain of one another”. Like Amanda, Elizabeth explained that her Christian beliefs provided a clear example for how to act. “I try to live life by looking at Jesus and who he hung out with. Our purpose on earth is to help each other out”. Using her faith as a way to base her actions, Elizabeth has been working with women in Postville once a week last fall semester. While religious beliefs and moral obligation correlate positively with these students’ participation, they only represent a small number of respondents’ beliefs and reasons for helping.

Due to the emergency-like response that was required by immediate student volunteers, it can be expected that few would be motivated by only political or religious convictions. The unexpected nature of the raid and immediate panic of separated families caused students to act as rescue volunteers, rather than political activists or moral entrepreneurs.

Consequential Ideological Developments and Compatibility

Interestingly, the majority of student volunteers expressed that once they arrived in Postville and began working, they began to think more seriously about the issue of immigration. International student, Erik, who was one of the most active student participants, articulated that he had never thought about the issue of immigration prior to the event. “When I saw the women with bracelets and when I heard the stories… of guns being pointed at the heads [of undocumented workers] as if they really were criminals I realized they [federal agents] aren’t following the law or procedure… I just didn’t think about it before or our policy. I just thought there were rules for legal immigrants”. After returning to
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Luther from Postville, Erik actively recruited Spanish speakers on campus to go to Postville and later created a Facebook group to spread the news of the unjust nature of the raid. For nearly all students, their experiences with undocumented Postville residents urged them to think more seriously about the issue of immigration and develop a more political and economic understanding of the issue. Ellen, an emergency respondent and fiancé of an undocumented immigrant from Mexico, articulated a shift she experienced in her convictions on immigration before and after the raid. “[At first], I saw all of the people and how distraught they were. It was my responsibility to help. So my first response was humanitarian… but my feelings are now a little more political. Immigration needs to be reformed… I can see the issue at a deeper level”. Similarly, Jane articulated a similar shift and seemed surprised when she verbally expressed this change of feelings to me. She seemed somewhat surprised by here own personal revelation of the issue that she was articulating for perhaps the first time:

I didn’t know much about immigration before. My mom and step dad are more conservative. They think immigrants are taking jobs away. I wanted [to help] to learn about policy and to develop my own judgment. The processing need to be different… an influence on the legislature is the best way to go about it…reform. It’s easy to be mad at the government, but we don’t need to be mad at the workers.

While the disaster-like qualities of the raid drew in students with diverse ideological beliefs, their participation urged them to re-evaluate their notions and imagine the broader political structure in which the immigration debate takes place. Pat, a self-identified conservative, explained that even though he opposes illegal immigration, his one-day experience in Postville made him question the actions of the federal government.

I was one of the only people there that was strongly opposed to illegal immigration. My view is that we have a quota system on immigration for good reasons… That said, while I think ICE is technically in the right, I am frustrated that they don’t spend their resources in, say, San Diego, where we actually have these problems of overcrowding and competition with low-income Americans. They didn’t need to come to Postville, Iowa. I’m still support of efforts to enforce immigration laws, but this raid made
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me question whether ICE is conducting cost-benefit analyses before picking its targets.

After their brief or extended periods of help, students began to think about political action and reform of immigration statutes, rather than how to encourage more of the same, emergency-like responses they were providing. In my interviews, 23 out of the 29 total respondents articulated the need for political reform or change of the current immigration system in our country.

**Biographic Availability**

After talking to students, a moderate strength relationship emerged between biographic availability and student participation. Similar to previous findings, individuals who were biographically available (residing at Luther College before returning home at the end of the year) and free from the restraints of daily life (finished with classes, work study, final exams, etc.) were more likely to commit and actually show up to help. Matt repeatedly mentioned that having the time to Postville significantly influenced his decision to go. “I had the time since finals were done and I knew that volunteers were needed. So, the most influential factor would probably be that volunteers were specifically called for and that I had the time to go”. Within the sample group of 22 total “emergency respondents”, 8 of those students were finished with classes and final exams (see Appendix D).

Yet, biographic availability fails to fully make clear the rationale behind the other 14 students’ motivations to go to Postville. Even though the raid happened during the first week of spring semester final exams, students preparing for their finals still showed up to offer help. In fact, two immediate responders re-scheduled their final exams in order to stay in Postville to help. Moreover, a different student went home following graduation, but returned to Postville a few days later to continue working in the community. Biographic availability increased the chances of students’ showing up to help, but even strict limitations did not prevent participation. Rather, biographic availability serves as a precondition,
not a cause, for determining students’ likelihood to commit and follow through with their obligations to
go to Postville.

More specifically, this finding explains why some concerned students did not show up initially. Among the “late recruits” who started to help in Postville this fall, six out of the seven mentioned they were not free or were off-campus at the time of the event. Nursing student, Elizabeth, explained her initial reaction saying, “I received an email while in Rochester, but it was finals week. My first instinct was to drive to Decorah, but I couldn’t”. Courtney, another student immersed in her finals and preparation to move out, explained that she learned the most about the ICE raid at the forum held at the beginning of the school year. “I found out initially in a Spanish class… I found out the details later at the forum [held in the fall]… I didn’t even know much about it earlier. I just thought, ‘Hey, I’m going home’. I wasn’t really focused on much else”. My interviews with the “late recruits” demonstrate that although many of them desired to help, they were unavailable to drop previous commitments to go to Postville.

**Language Skill Capability**

In addition to being free from particular constraints (like final exams) or other daily restraints that would decrease the likelihood of involvement (parenthood, work obligations, etc.), students who agreed to help in Postville carried a much-needed skill. 26 out of the 29 student participants spoke some level of Spanish. This skill made certain students feel especially responsible to go to Postville immediately upon request or engage in volunteer opportunities later in the fall. Allison told me that despite her uncertainty in her Spanish-speaking abilities, she felt that the circumstance demanded her presence. “When I got the email, I knew it was huge. There was a sense of urgency with so many people in need. The college has [language] skills the rest of the community doesn’t”. Like Allison, many respondents demonstrate that it was particularly difficult for Spanish-speakers to dismiss the
Responding to the Call request to help out after the raid. Steve explained that the reason he learned Spanish was to be able to put it to use and the situation in Postville was that exact circumstance. Although he was initially unavailable in May, he later signed up to volunteer when he returned in the fall. These findings show that being bi-lingual largely explains why many non-student activists and students who were previously unaware of immigration issues decided to help.

**Social Networks**

The most significant factor in this research shows that social networks were highly influential in the involvement of student participants. Students mentioned they found out about the raid in Postville through friends, family, professors, an email sent by the Luther Public Information office, or area community members. To appreciate the importance of social ties, nearly all of the “emergency responders” in my sample mentioned that they knew the person who told them about the raid or worked with people they knew upon arriving in Postville to help. Social networks not only provided ways to spread information, but personal ties cemented students’ commitment to help. This study shows that friendship and family networks were most effective in disseminating information and requests for help, influential in mobilizing other student activists to get immediately involved, and aided in continual recruitment for volunteers in the fall.

**Strong Social Ties**

Personal networks were key to the spread of information about the raid. 14 out of the 22 immediate student volunteers were informed about the raid by a family member or friend (see Appendix A). Amanda, who found out about the raid a few hours after it occurred, was one of the first students to go to Postville. She was successful in recruiting three students to go with her. One student in this group, Erik, was successful in recruiting three others to go with him to help. Personal connections to Amanda demonstrate that these students felt a high level of responsibility to keep their commitments to help.
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Not only did personal ties among friends keep students accountable, but family relationships also played an essential role in the spreading the news. Andrew, a Postville native, explained that his mother informed him about the raid a few hours after it occurred. “My mom called when the raid happened. She’s a kindergarten teacher in Postville… she told me about the situation and told me where they [undocumented workers] were… I didn’t know they were all illegal”. Soon after Andrew found out, he recruited his friend Brad, who told me in our interview, “I talked to Andrew… he was going to help at the food pantry. I had no idea what had happened, but Andrew said they needed translators. I thought I’d go with him”. The spread of information through social networks show that while both men were previously oblivious to the event, their personal ties and established bonds made them trust not only the information they received, but also feel more confident in responding to the request for help.

Furthermore, social networks made students accountable for following through with their commitment. First-year student, Katelyn, got involved based almost entirely on her connection with a friend who was helping. During our interview, Katelyn explained that her first reaction was to not go. “I found out through Jane… I don’t speak Spanish and I honestly didn’t want to go at first”. Despite not speaking Spanish or knowing anyone else involved, Katelyn’s friendship solidified her commitment to help for a day.

Weak Social Ties

It is easier to see the powerful strength of personal networks when compared to impersonal, organizational social networks. The day of the raid, a community organizer in Decorah, Iowa sent an email to local groups notifying them about the raid and needed assistance. Two days later, an email was sent to the entire Luther community from the Luther College Public Information Office explaining the need for humanitarian assistance in Postville and the need for Spanish translators (see Appendix C). Although over 2,500 students received the Luther College email, only six students became involved
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after reading about the event. In comparison, when Amanda asked three people face to face to go with her to help, they all did. First-year student Jane initially received the community email about the event, but ignored it. Contrary to a personal commitment, the impersonal email diffused the responsibility one individual, like Jane, had to the larger group. After running into a campus pastor and student participant at lunch, Jane was invited to sit with them. “I listed to their whole lunch discussion. Pastor D put it in a way that was more comprehensible to me. They [undocumented workers] weren’t aware of the ‘crime’ they were committing”. After this encounter Jane went to Postville and remained involved with the community for the duration of the summer. Jane’s strong tie to her friend and Pastor pushed her to volunteer.

Surprisingly, Spanish professors did not serve as strong social networks in recruiting students immediately after the raid. None of the “emergency respondents” said they found out about the raid through a professor. Although many Spanish faculty were involved in volunteer efforts and coordination, none were instrumental in getting large numbers of students to show up. This finding demonstrates that impersonal, institutional social networks were less effective in mobilizing students.

No Social Networks

While these findings show that strong social networks are positively correlated with student participation, zero social networks are negatively correlated with student activism. Three of the six interviewed students who never got involved emphasized that they were poorly informed about the situation in Postville and as a result, never helped. One student, although a Spanish speaker and a member of a student activist group on campus, had a difficult time recalling what students were asked to do after the raid occurred. “I was at Luther and I don’t really remember… nothing was mentioned to me that help was needed. I didn’t have any friends involved. I’m in SEEDS [Students Encouraging Economic Development through Solidarity] and nothing was mentioned in the group”. Perhaps because
Responding to the Call of finals week and the conclusion of the semester, students weren’t attending regularly scheduled events or even interacting with their peers as they would normally do throughout the semester. The coincidental time of the event during final exams may have hindered the dissemination of information to more students.

Delayed Recruitment

Lastly, social networks provided a way for students who weren’t initially involved in May to later get involved. Four months after the raid, institutional networks were key to recruiting new students to help. The six out of the seven “late-recruits” mentioned that they began volunteering after an informational forum was held in the fall (see Appendix B). This forum was organized by Luther College campus ministries. The institutionally-supported branch of the college provided a way for students to learn about the event and easily discover ways to get involved. Elizabeth, who was off-campus when the raid happened, explained “After the Postville forum, I signed up for interpreting. We [friends who signed up with her] didn’t know what we’d be doing, but were so angered after hearing the women’s stories [at the forum], we signed up”. The late response of students shows that impersonal and official social networks were a vital part to maintaining interest in the topic and soliciting the help of new volunteers many months after the raid happened.

The No-Shows

One of the most intriguing group of individuals in this study were the no-shows; students who, despite having qualities that made them perfect volunteer candidates, never showed up to help last May or this fall. All six individuals I interviewed spoke either fluent Spanish, were Spanish majors, or minors. In addition, all students were at Luther at the time of the raid and all except one returned to campus in the fall.
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During our interviews, each student cited schedule conflicts and/or lack of transportation as reasons why they were all unable to help at the time of the raid. Two students with whom I spoke explained they were explicitly recruited by College Ministries and solicited by friends to join them in Postville because of their fluency in Spanish. One of those students, despite living in Decorah for the summer and being the son of an undocumented immigrant parent, was never sufficiently enticed to help. “I really wanted to help, but the hours were difficult”. As the interview continued, Manuel grew continually uncomfortable and asked me to verify the confidentiality of my research. “My family has never let me forget [how] my mom’s side got here… all the opportunity I’ve been given from them. It’s important to help others… but sometimes people ask me a lot of questions and I give short answers to try not to offend anyone”. Although Manuel never openly discussed his unwillingness to help, his body language and lack of explanation demonstrate that his perceived association with the undocumented immigrants or chance of offending peers may have kept him from going. Victor, like Manuel, was also heavily recruited to go to Postville. During our interview, Victor talked about being called by college ministries, asked to go by a friend, and talked to by numerous professors in the Spanish department:

I couldn’t go because of time and finals… I haven’t helped since and I’m not that kind of person. I have no excuse except time… It [the raid] doesn’t affect me directly, but being Latino it affects a portion of who I am but, it’s hard to change

As the interview continued, Victor explained more about his stance on activism. He phrased the raid in Postville as “spilled milk”. He told me that at least the families knew their loved ones are alive after the raid. It is important to note that Victor’s experiences of growing up in a country disrupted by guerrilla warfare differs significantly from the experiences of other Luther students; his perception of the event was of much lower severity than other people who learned of the raid. Yet, the “no-show” students shed light on reasons why other students didn’t get involved. Discomfort with the controversial topic of illegal immigration, lacking a sense of empowerment to make change, or indifference to an issue that
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doesn’t directly impact them are reasons that may have further deterred students from participating in Postville.

CONCLUSION

Studies of student participation in social movements predict that biographic availability, attitudinal affinity, and social networks are positively and strongly correlated with movement participation (McAdam, Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson). While these same factors were important in encouraging students to go to Postville, this study shows that past experiences, the personal gain factor, and ideological compatibility were the least important factors for predicting student involvement. While biographic availability did not entirely explain the involvement of active student participants, this factor did point out that those who were bound to other commitments were least likely to show-up, even if they were sympathetic to the event. Rather, language skill capability, and social networks were the most important factors in recruiting student participants in this study. Previous research findings on movement recruitment conclude that the probability for being recruited can be explained by either an interpersonal tie to someone in the movement or absences of conflicting extra-movement networks (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olson). Similarly, this study also indicates that availability and strong social ties were strongly associated with participation in the Postville community following the raid.

Although previous research demonstrates that students act altruistically on behalf of others due to a shared sense of idealism (McAdam 59), this study shows that students are sometimes willing to work on behalf of others if they perceive an advantageous, future gain. While the personal gain finding may seem selfish, the personal benefit component is an excellent way to pull in more students and motivate them to work for others. For students, activism may carry with it a certain stigma or characterization similar to the radical activists of the 1960’s. Rather than turning students away from
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the idea of getting involved, reinforcing a potential, advantageous gain associated with social activism may be a way to get uncharacteristic “activist” students involved.

In addition to the influential factors that motivated students to help in Postville, students in my sample exemplified a more nuanced understanding of what kind of event took place in the small Iowa town and the deeper national implications of immigration in our nation. Having the characteristics of a natural disaster, many students responded simply to the call for emergency help. Despite offering immediate help to something that “was huge” rather than acting out of political beliefs, the collective outcome resulted in students’ uniform compassion for immigrant families affected by the raid and deeper understanding of the broad issue of illegal immigration in the United States. Even though students held varied political and religious ideologies prior to volunteering, this study shows that nearly all of the students articulated desire for some kind of reform of the immigration system after working in Postville. This deeper understanding of illegal immigration and ability to imagine future change by accessing the political structure was a surprising and compelling finding. When asked what she would do in relation to Postville, one student responded saying, “Talk to people in political office”. Students’ work in a seemingly far-removed and vaguely understood topic became the catalyst for their understanding of what do next at the macro, institutional, and political level.

The reality is that students’ help in Postville didn’t drastically change the situation or outcome of the event for undocumented workers, their families, and their futures. Undocumented workers were sent to prison, families were separated, some still remain in Postville unable to leave, individuals were deported, and now hundreds of former Postville residents reside in their home countries with little economic promise. Rather than see their efforts as fruitless, the student respondents reveal in the way they talk about the issue of immigration that they are engaged in a broader discussion of illegal
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immigration. Student participant, Mary, eloquently summarized her experiences in Postville by stating the following:

Nothing we did to help them was in vain. It was all for good. The connections we made, [pause] it is sad because we’ve lost them. They had to go back and there’s no way to keep the connection. I miss the kids. You want to protect them from evil and don’t want them to suffer so much. For the adults, you have to help them make it hurt less. We all need to have tolerance and consciousness of what’s going on.

While grounded in the realities of the event and aware of the hardships they encountered in their brief or extended periods of help, student participants are not hopeless in making change. By articulating reform and desire for things to be “handled more responsibly” in the future, students exhibit an obligation to the larger collectivity. Lori, a senior at the time of the raid, summarized her experiences saying, “I was changed by what happened in Postville. It was one of the most emotionally draining experiences of my life…I continue to tell most people I meet about the raid”. What began as a very local, immediate response to a workplace raid has become for many students the first step of becoming aware of the complexities of immigration in the United States.

In the future, a more in-depth analysis of factors that dissuaded students from participating could prove beneficial. While this study briefly touched on the factors that influenced the “no-show” students, closer examination is needed to make any claims about this group of students. In addition, research on how a humanitarian response might differ to a non-stigmatized group may prove fruitful to the discussion of collective behavior and social movement theory.

The implications of this research study suggest that by encouraging social networks, recruitment for other forms of collective actions can be better facilitated. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that rather than embody pre-formed ideological beliefs on certain issues, collective behavior may consequently result in the formation of firmer beliefs on an issue after having direct experience.
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Considering the controversial nature of illegal immigration in our country and increasing number of workplace raids, it is important for future researchers to explore the relationships between students and participation in immigration-related issues.

Bibliography:


Appendix A -
Social Network Chart: How Students *Initially* Found out about the Raid

- Normal Font Name: “Emergency” Student Responder
- Name with strikethrough: No-Shows; Students who found out, were lightly candidate to go, but never went to Postville
- Name with double strikethrough: Appears twice in chart; Student heard the news again from another source and decided to go
Appendix B-
Social Network Chart: How Students got Involved Later, Fall 2008

Comment: Insert revised chart
Appendix C-
Campus-wide email message sent by Luther College Public Information Office

Sent May 14, 2008, 1:15 p.m.
To: Luther Students, Faculty and Staff
From: College Ministries
Re: Humanitarian aid for Postville families

Families of about 400 workers arrested May 13 at Postville's Agriprocessors meat packing plant are in need of humanitarian assistance.
Members of the Luther community are now in Postville, serving as translators and helping at St. Bridget's Church. They report that the community is in dire need of more translators to work with lawyers and medical personnel who are coming to Postville today (May 14) about 4 p.m. and all day tomorrow.
If you can serve, please contact Amy Webber, International Student Coordinator, Diversity Center, Luther College, e-mail: webberam@luther.edu, telephone: 563-387-1014.
The families are in need of supplies. Donations can be made at St. Bridget's Catholic Church in Postville, telephone (563) 864-3142.
The most needed items include: soap, shampoo, conditioner, undergarments of various sizes for the children, bath and hand towels. Food, beverages and entertainment items for children housed at the church are also needed. Please call the church before traveling to Postville with your donations or volunteer support.
Thank you.

Jerry Johnson
Director of Public Information
johnsjer@luther.edu
Telephone 563-387-1565
### Student Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First 1-3 Weeks after Raid</th>
<th>4 Months after Raid</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 “Emergency/Immediate” Responders IN-SCHOOL students</td>
<td>7 “Late Responders”</td>
<td>6 “No-Shows”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 “Emergency/Immediate” Responders OUT-OF-SCHOOL students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>