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“Meaning, Action, and Legacy: A Study of Resignation within Universities”
Abstract

I have always been interested in the function of higher education and its rich sociological implications for the development of social actors. This summer, I intend to stay in Ithaca and conduct research with Dr. Kelly Nielsen to examine the meaning and role of resignation in higher education, a field that has not been closely explored before. This research will predominantly consist of reviewing literature on the meaning and development of resignation, and the evolution of its function in higher education. At the end of this summer, I plan to have completed a literature review in preparation for an article I will work on throughout next year that will be submitted to the Annual Review of Sociology, as well as a presentation for the Qualitative Inductive Workshop with the ILR school.

Biographical Sketch

My name is Naomi Li. I am a sophomore studying Economics and plan to declare a double major in Sociology at the end of this year. I was born in Rolla, Missouri, but promptly moved to and grew up in Center Valley, Pennsylvania. I spent the entirety of my middle school career competing in spelling bees, which further developed my fascination with the history of words and the power of how the meaning of words affects social institutions. I am incredibly excited to have this opportunity to work with the Sociology department to explore an incredibly immediate and relevant issue.
Statement of Purpose

When I was 15 years old, I proudly proclaimed to my mother that I would become a professor who would change people’s lives. Why a professor? How does a professor change people’s lives? She asked. Why not be a doctor, a lawyer, or a politician instead? Because a professor has the ability to teach ideas and change the minds of the young people who would make up our future, I responded. From a young age, I have been interested in and fascinated by the social implications of higher education and its role in shaping individuals as well as society.

Higher education has become a central institution in American society, occupying roles that extend far beyond educating the nation’s youth. It serves to stratify populations, develop competent social actors, legitimize official knowledge, and connect multiple institutional domains (Stevens, Arum, and Armstrong 2008). The university system has also become integral to the infrastructure of the state as a political entity by creating interorganizational associations, enabling a national theology of “College for All,” and shaping the political behavior of students and professors (Binder and Wood 2014; Gross 2013; Stevens and Gebre-Medhin 2008). Universities have become complex organizations that are both responsive to and generative of social systems. As the functions and constituencies of the American university system continue to expand, so too do the demands and conflicts that the system must contend with. An outcome of this expansion has been the call for resignation when universities are implicated in social problems.

We know very little about how calls for resignation emerge, how universities respond, and the consequences for calls that are heeded or resisted. Under the guidance of Dr. Kelly Nielsen, I will seek to answer questions such as: what is the historical context of the term “resignation”? How does that historical analysis influence the predominant ways in which we
define “resignation” today? When and how did resignation emerge as a mechanism to advance causes of social justice? In recent years, there has been increasing media coverage of universities as the target of such demands. Anna Lou K. Simons at Michigan State University and Tim Wolfe of Missouri State University both resigned after numerous protests and demands from students and faculty. In other instances, like the resignation of Drexel University professor George Ciccariello-Maher, resignation is the result of public outcry over controversial behavior. Resignation has been used as a method of protest by faculty members who are dissatisfied with the administration. For example, Sara Ahmed, a professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, University London, resigned due to dissatisfaction with the university administration’s failure to address sexual harassment cases. In these instances, it is crucial to ask: were the social justice issues that motivated these resignations resolved, are resignations capable of achieving social justice, and do resignations have any effect on universities’ capacity to fulfill their multiple social roles?

I intend to learn more about the motivations for heeding and resisting resignation through quantitative and qualitative data analysis. I will spend a great deal of my summer researching literature on resignation as a broad term to understand how its meaning has changed over time, and the social and material conditions that have shifted the colloquial definitions of the term “resignation”. Furthermore, I will be researching various media sources to find more information about resignations that occurred in relation to social justice issues, and how these resignations played out. I have already begun searching through the Chronicle of Higher Education for reports on members of higher education who have resigned in response to controversies related to social justice.
Works Cited


