

# Acting as Allies

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Understanding student allyship and its barriers

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## **1. Executive summary**

Equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) initiatives have gained institutional and societal popularity over the past few years, thereby increasing the demand and desire for allyship among individuals. However, the growing societal prominence for allyship has resulted in its performative manifestation, limiting its impact on social change.

This report explores performative allyship among students within academic institutions, to understand the barriers to their authentic participation. The research draws insights from existing studies along with 12 semi-structured interviews with current students within a leading academic institution. Through this report, I hope to shed a light on how students presently experience allyship and what the key barriers are for them to show up authentically in support of their peers. The goal is to build an understanding of these barriers, so as to provide students with the opportunities to overcome these hurdles and facilitate their growth as allies in an especially transformative period in their lives.

## **2. Introduction**

Revolutionary and recurring social movements over the past decade have demanded active participation and allyship across communities. The summer of 2020 was testament to this fact. Within 24 hours of the death of George Floyd, protestors mobilized across all major U.S. cities. Over the course of the summer these protests reached over 2000 cities across the world. In-person protests were amplified with virtual sharing, with millions of people using the #BlackLivesMatter tags to amplify resources and opportunities to help. Simultaneously, we saw countless companies release official statements to express their solidarity, and over 22 million posts on Instagram for #BlackOutTuesday, meant to amplify black voices [1].

The notion of allyship has evolved to become a social norm, rather than an exception. There is a greater inclination towards allyship among modern individuals, as they become increasingly aware about the roles they play in dismantling archaic social systems and influencing systemic change. Individuals today hope to take on active roles of allyship. However, often, there exists an intent-action gap among most people which limits authentic and participative allyship. Performative allyship is then support and solidarity, without action [2]. This version of allyship is often static and usually comes without any cost to the ally themselves. Often a response to individual guilt, the goal of such allyship is to perpetuate allyship, rather than influence social change [3]. The ease with which this allyship can be performed has made it a popular choice for many, especially as it alleviates guilt at practically no cost. However, most recently both individuals and institutions have received severe backlash for their participative roles in social movements [4] [5]. Even when well intentioned, performative allyship can stifle progress towards real change.

### **Research objectives**

Through my research, I was curious to explore the phenomenon of performative allyship among students within academic institutions. Presently, academic institutions have a growing focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) programs. A 2019 report [6] from Universities Canada identified that Canadian universities place a large emphasis on ED&I in long-term planning, with almost 70% of universities already in the process of building ED&I action plans.

As a student within a similar prestigious university, with robust ED&I processes and initiatives, I was curious to explore the experiences of students as they navigate inclusion and experience

allyship within these formal institutions. Through this research, I hoped to (i) understand students' individual experiences with allyship to identify barriers to authentic participation, (ii) explore the intersectional dynamics of allyship to uncover the relationship between expectations of allyship from others versus their own displays of allyships, and (iii) understand the preconditions necessary for successful participatory allyship.

## **Methodology**

For this research, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews, across students within a singular academic institution. The participants varied across gender identities, sexual orientations, nationalities, race, etc. and they had all completed a year within their academic program.

The recruitment of participants for this research was evenly split across three key categories of students, which are as follows:

- **Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) champions:** Students that led and were actively involved in initiatives and programs within the domain of ED&I within the academic institution, and outside of it.
- **Student leaders:** Students that took on leadership positions with clubs, governing bodies, executive teams and more, and were ingrained within the system and well versed with organizational processes and policies.
- **General student body:** Students that did not take on leadership and/or ED&I roles and have everyday experiences within the institutional landscape.

My intention with these three categories was to understand experiences across a wide array of students with different levels of involvement within the academic institution, to build a comprehensive understanding of varied student experiences with allyship.

Through the open-ended interviews, I asked participants about their personal experiences of allyship – both as an ally themselves and as someone who has expected allyship from others, and their approach to navigating between these roles. With these personal conversations, I hoped to understand their expectations from themselves and others as allies, and simultaneously uncover the challenges and barriers they face in being the platonic ideal of an ally. Additionally, we also covered their overarching expectations from academic institutions and the support students need to authentically participate in ED&I initiatives.

The findings from this study are qualitative in nature and represent individual experiences. Hence, they cannot be generalized, but they provide a useful lens to understand the reasons for performative allyship and uncover opportunities to eliminate barriers to participative allyship.

### **3. Findings**

Across the interviews with members of the student body, three key phenomena rose to the surface, which helped me better outline and understand the underlying factors that influence allyship within the student experience.

#### **i. Limitations of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I) programming**

Academic institutions have seen a rise in the prominence of ED&I programs, with almost 77% of Canadian universities referencing ED&I in their institution's strategic plans [6]. However, despite the positive trend towards ED&I initiatives, often key structural barriers exist within these institutions [7], that limit the reach of these programs and curb authentic participation from students.

##### **a. Separation of diversity and inclusion**

Although programs around equity, diversity, and inclusion are grouped together, students from this study tend to experience these phenomena separately, with a greater focus on diversity than inclusion. Students believe that academic institutions prioritize diversity metrics, which has led to successful results in terms of rich representation within the student body across nationalities, career backgrounds and aspirations, gender identities, race, etc.

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*“Diversity exists here, but inclusion has some ways to go”*

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However, participants expressed that despite this growing intersectional diversity, students tend to experience a lack of inclusionary behaviour. Participants also shared a sense of regret, as they perceive that they lose out on the benefits that diversity brings, due to the lack of inclusionary behaviour within student bodies.

### **b. Echoes in echo chambers**

Participants shared that ED&I programs, whether they are run by school administration or student-led groups, operate within silos. Here ideas are generated, shared, and explored within groups, who already possess a disposition towards allyship and social justice. This leads to ideas being discussed within echo chambers, where active confirmation bias comes into play as ideas are validated within groups who tend to share the same beliefs. This leads to an unfortunate lack of diversity of thought within diversity programming.

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*“We all have the same opinions. We’re not saying anything different, so it can’t really be a conversation.”*

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Students also expressed that an important and unfortunate outcome of these echo chambers is that often, the people who might potentially benefit the most from ED&I programs are left out of the conversation and never reached, which limits the overall success and effectiveness of these programs [8].

## **ii. Students default to clustering**

Clustering is the idea of people with similar backgrounds gravitating towards one another and creating lasting social groups based on existing common attributes and histories. Participants shared that even when academic institutions do a good job at bringing together people from diverse backgrounds, students often do not experience the benefits of this diversity as they cluster within familiar circles. Clustering can diminish the merits of intersectional diversity, limits students’ exposure and understanding of people they view as other than themselves, and ultimately influences their allyship practices.

### **a. Familiarity as a comfort**

Participants shared that the primary reason they default to clustering is the personal need for comfort through familiarity. In highly uncertain, stressful, and changing circumstances, such as that of starting a new academic journey in their life, students feel displaced and overwhelmed. The familiarity brought by groups of similar cultural

and social backgrounds provides stability to their experiences, providing them with the necessary grounding they seek.

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*“Things were so hard, so I just stuck to the people I understood”*

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However, once the transition eases, students tend to express grief over their own clustering that limited their potential social relationships across different groups. Students stated that while clustering may provide immediate comfort and relief, it has led them to longer term regrets.

#### **b. Empathy gaps**

A key consequence of clustering is that it limits individual understanding of different social groups. It leads to a lack of cognitive empathy, as individuals are sheltered away from others’ lived experiences. Participants shared that it is harder to be an ally when they are unaware of the nuanced contexts in which allyship is needed.

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*“It’s hard to talk about how these realities exist for people when they don’t exist for you”*

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Despite clustering, some students may choose to learn about others’ lives, struggles, and perspectives. However, participants shared that such learning tends to be external and thus limited in its impact on building empathy towards others. Ultimately, this lack of empathy influences the way in which these students show up as allies, where they may take a more performative stance due to their limited cognizance of others’ concerns, struggles, and needs.

#### **c. Absence of personal motivation**

The lack of personal connection brought about by clustering leads to an absence of personal investment among students for groups other than their own, and limits their motivation to be active allies.



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*“I know it’s wrong, but because I haven’t personally experienced it or haven’t understood the history of it, it doesn’t hit that hard.”*

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Participants shared that even in the presence of cognitive empathy, they may resort to behavioural inaction, as a degree of personal investment is required for individuals to bear the cost of social discomfort associated with being an active ally. When students do not share a personal investment with the individual or group being wronged, they are not driven to act. Participants stated that there is an absence of motivation and even if they want to act, they rationalize their inaction by stating that it might not be their responsibility, or even their right, to speak up and take action.

### **iii. Cost of social discomfort**

One of the biggest barriers to authentic and participative allyship is the cost of social discomfort associated with being an active ally. Even when external circumstances promote active allyship and a degree of personal motivation is present, the costs associated with going against the grain, weigh significantly higher than the individual desire to be a good ally, leading to intentional and unintentional gaps in authentic allyship.

#### **a. Social alienation**

Participants stated that the fear of being alienated by their peers for policing their actions, is a growing concern that holds them back despite their inherent desire to be a good ally. Especially in the formative periods, as students are beginning their new academic journeys, the fear of being left behind in a new social environment, coupled with the discomfort of confrontation, drives further silence.

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*“I was still making friends. I wanted to be in a space of likability and so I didn’t say anything”*

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*“I didn’t want to interrupt them. It was awkward. I was just an attendee”*

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This is only aggravated in situations where there is a power imbalance (formal or informal) among the parties involved. Participants acknowledge that in these situations, even though inaction is an act of protection, the bigger picture trade-off associated with self-preservation can lead to a build-up of internal shame and regret.

#### **b. Debilitation by confusion**

Students may also choose to stay silent or limit their allyship to performative aspects when they are confused about the role they can play in a given situation. A common sentiment across the participants, despite their varying levels of familiarity and involvement with social movements and allyship, is a lack of clarity on the right actions to take.

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*“I was outraged and wanted to do something about it, I just didn’t know what”*

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Individuals are afraid of being imperfect allies, they fear speaking out of turn, speaking incorrectly, and misrepresenting information. Participants shared that addressing their ignorance, brought about by a lack of knowledge and experience, is uncomfortable to face and easier to avoid, thereby pushing them towards inaction.

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*“I knew it was wrong, but I didn’t know why so I didn’t know what to say.”*

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#### **c. Fear of being targeted**

A growing area of concern among the participants, that prevents them from pursuing active allyship, is the fear of putting a target on their backs. Participants shared that by being active allies, they worry they might take a place in the spotlight and their past and future actions will be under greater scrutiny.

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*“People are waiting for you to slip up, so I feel scared to speak up”*

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Their fear of making a public mistake, or having an old mistake resurface pushes them to choose inaction over their perceived humiliation and/or persecution. And thus, they take on quieter, more performative roles, in a bid to protect themselves.

## **4. A way forward**

The in-depth conversations with the research participants also helped me to identify some suggestions on a way forward, that could encourage active and participative allyship among students.

### **i. Widen the scope of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I)**

Given the limitations of existing ED&I programs discussed above, participants believed that it is important that institutions focus on widening the scope of ED&I programs. Traditional diversity focussed goals have yielded positive results, but students now feel a greater need for inclusion efforts.

It is also important to make ED&I accessible not only to those who come into these academic institutions with a greater affinity for the work of social equity and justice, but also to the wider student audience. It is important to shift the narrative of this work, by unburdening ED&I champions and making this work every student's collective responsibility, and simultaneously empowering them with the institutional support and autonomy to drive change from the ground up.

### **ii. Facilitate social inclusion**

Participants from this study emphasized an overwhelming need for institutions to facilitate and encourage social inclusion through formal initiatives, in order to overcome the adverse effects of clustering. Students believe that schools do a great job at facilitating teams of diverse professional backgrounds, and that same degree of collaboration should be encouraged among students of different social backgrounds as well.

There is also a need to create opportunities for sharing so students can learn from their peers' lived experiences. Participants expressed that such sharing could enable personal

connections and help bridge the empathy gap, while simultaneously providing students with the necessary context on the need for allyship for different groups.

### **iii. Guide the way for students**

Participants shared that there is a need to make the process toward participatory allyship less intimidating by creating opportunities for learning, to increase levels of awareness and knowledge. Apart from formal events and awareness campaigns that highlight the need for social reform, participants mentioned that they need guidance on actions to be undertaken when transgressions occur. One way to do this is to build centralized resources that students can leverage to educate themselves on how to be a good ally in different circumstances by outlining procedural details and actions.

Finally, allyship needs to be reframed as an opportunity for continuous learning and growth, rather than a perfect spectacle. This will help to overcome the need for perfection in allyship that can act as a strong barrier to action among students, and simultaneously allow them to learn on their journeys to becoming better allies.

## **5. Conclusion**

Through these interviews I observed that across the board, despite participant's individual backgrounds, actions, and levels of involvement – students expressed guilt about the times they could have done more and been better allies to their peers. They regretfully shared their shortcomings as an ally and expressed an urge to do more, to help their peers authentically to drive impact, and to be more active in their allyship. This indicates that we are at a turning point in time, where individuals personally care about being active allies and driving change, beyond performative actions.

It is then important to enable these individuals to fulfil their goals of becoming better allies, especially during a time in their lives where they are looking for growth and transformation. These are future leaders, hoping to learn more, to be better, and to make our world a more inclusive place. In this transformative period of their lives, institutional structures and supports which makes their learning smoother will help close the intent-action gap present in modern allyship.

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