



STUDENT SUCCESS STORIES:

A LONG LINE OF LEADERSHIP

Draft Version

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Introduction

Earlham College has a long line of powerful, creative, dedicated and effective social activists. Often the results of their labor shows up and extends far beyond when they were at Earlham. Because students do not document their efforts, their work may go unknown. Even during changes initiated by students, many people are unaware of the cause (such as President Bennett’s recent “proposal” that Martin Luther King, Jr. day should be used as a day to discuss race/racism came from students [see below]). This can lead to feelings of powerlessness and ineffectiveness. It is easy enough for activists to feel they are not effective when their long-term goals are not reached. Nevertheless, it ought to be clearly understood that students have made major impacts in the running of the college, its practices and its values.

Students make a range of contributions to Earlham College in departments, administration, faculty decisions and student life. This glimpse into a few events is far from complete or representative. It is not a historical account and some of the stories have had to come through that oral tradition so common at Earlham.¹ I believe it also represents a series of cases, snippets and stories that are not often shared; understanding our successes allows us to see what works and to recognize our deep impact. As one reads each case, it may be useful to recognize that the students involved did not know that they were going to succeed as much as they did and to see some of the choices that they made that were useful. And if you find this document somewhat useful, *document your own stories, too!*

¹ For a more complete overview of Earlham’s history from a different (less student-oriented) perspective and therein some cases of student activism, do see Tom Hamm’s well-researched book *Earlham* (copies are, of course, in Lilly Library and the bookstore; most professors also have a copy).

Sexual Orientation and Non-Discrimination Policy

One place to begin is from a major successful campaign that reached one stage of completion last year (1999-2000). For many years, LGBTQA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning and straight allies) students had been asking for sexual orientation to be included in the Community Code and the public non-discrimination policy. In 1999, a new version of Principles and Practices was approved by all members of the community (faculty, staff, students, administration and Board of Directors), which (also influenced by students) added sexual orientation in its non-discrimination policy. Students recognized that though the Principles and Practices mentioned sexual orientation, there was still a discrepancy between it and the non-discrimination policy used by the college on job offerings.

To work on this gap, Rainbow Tribe created petitions and got signatures from members of the student body. This raised awareness and discussion within the community, including discussions in Committee on Campus Life (CCL). Rainbow Tribe and CCL members still talk about their shock and extreme surprise in then receiving an official statement from Earlham's Board of Directors² last year saying: "The Board reflected on Earlham College's official (legal) non-discrimination statement in light of last June's approval of 'Principles and Practices of the Earlham College Community,' and decided to add sexual orientation to the non-discrimination statement." For those involved, this acknowledgement represented a long, drawn-out victory.

The decision to add sexual orientation to the non-discrimination policy was not an easy one for the Board, made up of some members from very conservative Quaker persuasions. It had some dire and painful consequences, including strongly worded reprisals from supporters, directed at Earlham President Doug Bennett. This included harsh letters from Yearly Meetings stating their "disappointment and dismay in the direction that Earlham College is taking." Students and faculty especially had been urging for several years to add sexual orientation to its policy; this decision was very much the result of years of such activist work.

International Attention: Shell and Nigeria

A loose group, that at various points was an official student organization of Earlham but received no funding for most of its existence, was called the Student Direct Action Coalition (SDAC). One of its focuses during the late 90s was Nigeria, where companies were engaging in serious human rights violations. Companies, especially oil companies, would enter into Nigeria and, creating incestuous relationships between the government, take oil from the country at low-cost and with no environmental or labor precautions. As a result indigenous peoples, especially the Ogoni people, were dislocated from their land, experienced severe negative environmental affects and, when they were willing to speak up for their rights, swift and violent repression. The people had therefore asked for a boycott of companies involved in Nigeria, particularly Shell, one of the biggest companies in Nigeria.

The Student Direct Action Coalition joined with hundreds of other groups and people to boycott Shell. One direction it tried to take, but was unsuccessful with, was trying to influence the Investment Responsibilities Committee (IRC)³ to remove stock in Shell and other companies involved in Nigeria. It also ran a couple of leafleting campaigns outside of local Shell stations to raise the issue.

² For more information on the nature of the Board, its membership and the Earlham by-laws, see the By-Laws on the Earlham Student Government (ESG) website (<http://www.earlham.edu/~esg>) and an article called "Understanding the By-Laws" which can also be found on the ESG website or at <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda>.

³ According to Esly Caldwell, the reason for the IRC is, according to his memory, because of student activism around the South Africa divestment issue. Because of the IRC, the issue around labor rights and the Worker's Rights Consortium were able to emerge.

Another connection that SDAC members realized between Earlham College and Shell was having Shell gas cards in Earlham vehicles (in the blue pouches). Though not a planned action, after returning from a trip with the vans, a student cut up the Shell gas card in one of the vans. The student, and another outspoken SDAC member who stood with the individual's actions, were required to help Housekeeping (who takes care of the vans), who was very offended by the action, as a form of punishment. Nevertheless, after the action it was decided that Shell gas cards would be removed from all Earlham cars (although left in Earlham vans, as back up). As far as I am aware, both this and Shell's practice continue.

A FLAW in Labor Rights⁴

In 1999, the anti-sweatshop movement was growing. Nationally companies such as Nike, notorious for its sweatshop practices (forced overtime, below living wages, etc.) were trying to figure out responses. One response they made, along with US President Clinton's Apparel Industry Partnership (AIP) and a few nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), was the creation of the Fair Labor Association (FLA). The FLA would monitor companies' practices and assure that they were not violating the set standards. The FLA, called the FLAW by members of groups fighting for workers rights such as the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), was so incomplete and had so many loopholes that it was considered meaningless except to be a shield from criticism. At the same time, there was a push by USAS and other groups for organizations to create Codes of Conduct, agreements that contractors with colleges (especially) made assuring basic rights.

On campus that year was a very outspoken member of USAS and a member of the Campaign for Labor Rights (CLR). Both organizations were strongly opposed to the FLA. One or two articles were written on sweatshop issues raising student-body awareness.

Meanwhile, Kumar Sathy, the member of USAS, tried to convince the administration to create a Code of Conduct to screen major sweatshop violators by presenting a draft of a Code of Conduct. Kumar reviewed the drafts of other colleges and universities and created a draft specific to Earlham College and presented it to the Earlham Socialist Alliance (ESA)⁵. Realizing that the code should not just be written by an individual or an individual organization, he sent out invitations to meet with the on campus Amnesty International, ESA, Indigenous People's Movement (IPM), Student Direct Action Coalition (SDAC) and Earlham Environmental Action Coalition (EEAC). About twenty students from these various organizations met in the Community Action Center (CAC/The Center) and ran through the draft and line by line suggested changes.

When he proposed the Code of Conduct to President Doug (this was Kumar's first meeting with Doug), he was told the document was too rigid and that the language was not Quaker enough. For a while he tried to fix its language to be more in-line with perceived Quaker testimony. Kumar had asked Doug how he should proceed with this issue and how to best contact Doug in regards with this matter. Doug then briefly showed Kumar how to write a memo.

In an attempt to make sure the President did not choose the FLA in the meantime, Kumar requested a position statement. President Doug promptly responded to this memo with a packet in Kumar's mailbox. Attached to a thick compilation of documents about the Fair Labor Association was a note stating that though he was not able to provide Kumar with a position statement regarding the Code of Conduct draft, he would share some information about an organization that he was inclined to join (the FLA).

⁴ Written in conjunction with Kumar Ramanathan Sathy (2001).

⁵ The Earlham Socialist Alliance is currently called Earlham Progressive Union (EPU).

Several letters were sent to the President requesting that the President not join the FLA, particularly without more dialogue around the issue.

At the end of the year in the last Word article, before the Quaker-friendly version of the Code of Conduct was finished, the President explained he had been talking to Kumar Sathy and announced that the College *would be joining* the FLA. After reading the article, Kumar ran into the President's office only to find that he was on a business trip. He attempted to make an appointment however the President's schedule was full. He went home and received a phone call from Dipti Banrawal who voiced her apologies for the way that the President responded to this matter. She had learned about the response from e-mails that Kumar had been sending out to various on-campus organizations (including the Peace and Global Studies [PAGS] alumni/ae list as well as on-line responses to the President's Word article). Dipti, after hearing that Kumar could not schedule an appointment with the President, said that Kumar could use an appointment time that she had already made.

At the end of the school year, students mobilized. Bright posters were put up across campus saying, "No FLAW zone" and other such phrases. Sit-ins were seriously discussed at several points (some members regret not doing it). Kumar and Leah Robshaw wore capes that they had painted with the words "I don't support the Fair Labor Association."

About eight students met with Doug. At the beginning of the meeting, they started by voicing their disappointment in this process and in the decision that Doug had made. Doug responded by saying something to the effect of, "If you want me to withdraw from the FLA, then that's what I will do." Though the Word article had said "we will" affiliate, this statement regarding withdrawal led the students to believe that Doug had already joined the FLA. Doug said that he would hand the issue of sweatshops and college apparel to the IRC committee (which, as we may remember, was originally created out of student concerns around divestment from South Africa in the 90s).

Over the summer, Kumar requested that Doug send him a copy of the withdrawal letter. Doug sent him the withdrawal letter that indicated that the President had officially affiliated and sent in funds to join the FLA. The next year an organization called the Worker's Rights Consortium (WRC), more in line with student's concerns, was created internationally. Kumar Sathy, along with other students, persuaded the IRC to consider joining the WRC and ignore the FLA. After many months of discussion Earlham College agreed to join the WRC, which had serious protection for worker's rights and a serious set of monitoring procedures. The President later admitted to Daniel Hunter, who had only been remotely involved, that he had made a mistake in the handling of the issues of Codes of Conduct. He never did the same to more involved members.

Living Wage Campaign

[More to be added later.]

Sexual Assault Policy

[More to be added later.]

Race Matters at Earlham⁶

Another success where student impact was invaluable showed up in a recent convocation by Doug Bennett entitled, “Race Matters at Earlham” (9/5/2001). The fact that President Bennett was talking about race at that time, for example, was very much related to student’s raising issues during the previous years in Word articles, a People of Color Day of Silence, Minority Student Speak-out, pressure on the Diversity Aspirations Working Group (DAWG) and several individual meetings with Doug Bennett.

The “proposal” that Doug Bennett made to use Martin Luther King, Jr. day as a day to discuss race was and is not a new idea. For numerous years, members of Black Leadership Action Coalition (BLAC) have been urging for MLK day to be recognized as a holiday and for students to take it off. Nate Williams, one member of BLAC, had specifically suggested to BLAC and to the President’s office that the day be recognized as a holiday last year⁷. In place of classes, he and a line of other students had proposed teach-ins and workshops on racism and other forms of oppression should be done in the spirit of Dr. King’s life work. Bringing Fred Shuttlesworth to speak on MLK day 2000 was one attempt at making that a reality.

The addition that Doug Bennett put together of creating a space for students, faculty, staff and administration⁸ also came out of student concerns. Last year students had asked such meetings to take place at several points as a way to increase communication. In fact, students had organized a Communications Circle in which students, faculty, and administration were invited. During the Communications Circle, students raised a variety of concerns, which the administration was asked to address. Among the concerns was that a meeting with the wider Earlham community (faculty, staff, administration, students) was not a regular part of the Earlham experience.

Students can affect the institution by their ability to suggest ideas and organize alternative institutions until they become institutionalized. Student unrest included a protest called the People of Color Day of Silence, in which students who identified as persons of color were silent all day and passed out flyers⁹. This kind of pressure, along with Word articles asking for a larger Multicultural Affairs budget and students talking to Doug Bennett¹⁰, helped set the agenda which resulted in a near doubling of the Multicultural Affairs office’s direct budget and money sources being found elsewhere, too. Even the original creation of the office has strong links to student concerns and activism. Likewise, the Multicultural General Education requirement (MRI) was a suggestion by students from the Multicultural Alliance in a 1997 list of demands and encouraged by students within committees.¹¹

⁶ The overall “race” dialogue at Earlham College continues to be very African-American/Caucasian oriented, excluding major issues – such as recruiting – of Hispanics/Latin@s, Africans, Asians and Asian-Americans. This section, unfortunately, represents that racism instead of better addressing it. Because this should be an on-going document, suggested experiences would very much be welcome.

⁷ I imagine this request has been made elsewhere but I do not know the specifics of them.

⁸ According to the Earlham, by-laws faculty includes teaching faculty and administrative faculty. I use “faculty” to refer to teaching faculty as a technically false separate identity. Many administrative faculty teach. Nevertheless, I find it a useful distinction to make because they have functionally different roles within the structure of governance.

⁹ The flyers, which were critiqued by a People of Color meeting, were written by Dipti Baranwal and Daniel Hunter (they can be found at: <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda/flyer.pdf>).

¹⁰ Check out two excellent documents: <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda/cdoug.pdf> and a documented called Talking with Men in Ties (<http://www.earlham.edu/~esg> or <http://ww.earlham.edu/~hunteda>).

¹¹ That document is also on-line thanks to Earlham Student Government at: <http://www.earlham.edu/~esg>.

Environmental Policies

Earlham student activism has resulted in a variety of environmental policies and changes at Earlham. For example, an “environmental program currently in place by Sodexho-Mariott is the “To Go” containers – containers made for taking out food from Saga. For many years, Sodexho-Mariott purchased styrofoam “To Go” containers [approximately 58,500 per year!], allowing students “on-the-go” to eat a meal out of Saga. Due to strong influence by the Earlham Environmental Action Committee (EEAC), these styrofoam containers have been replaced with reusable plastic containers as of the 1998-99 school year. The system is set-up such that each student receives a free sturdy, plastic container (originally purchased by Earlham College). Students then come with a used container and exchange it for another, clean container. The dirty containers are washed, as per health regulations, and used again.”¹²

This project was one of the earlier such projects in the country, and one of the first in the Sodexho-Marriott chains of college dining services. Students began conversations with Kathie Guyler, manager of the Sodexho-Marriott dining services at Earlham. After working with her and, most likely, the food review committee, students convinced Kathie Guyler to try the experiment on a short-term basis (how they convinced Earlham to make the initial investment in plastic containers is a good question). After the students graduated, the short-term experiment was deemed a success and it became a regular institution at Earlham.

Students are also fully responsible for the recycling program at Earlham College. Student-initiated, student-run, student researched and student-powered, the recycling program has been trying to figure out how to institutionalize itself better for several years¹³. The recyclable market fluctuates such as in 1995 when Rumpke Recycling refused to accept paper or cardboard due to a lack of demand in the Midwest, making the job harder for students. Since then students helped get copy machines and computing centers across campus to make use of both sides of white paper as a way of reducing waste.

Students, backed by the Earlham Environmental Action Committee, have run the recycling program every year since its inception many years ago. Students have recycled literally tons of various materials: paper, glass, plastics, cardboard and more.¹⁴ As students, even small groups, raise issues it can change outcomes (such as when one student helped the new social science building to be Green Star compliant by researching what it took and then suggesting it to one of the building’s committee members). While not being content with where the recycling program is, one can recognize that a part of becoming part of the Earlham institution (and thus run by administration and staff) is proving that it can function effectively, which students have done.

And so much more...

Other successes that have their roots in students and student pressure include:

- the end of the ban on music in the 1880s;
- the beginning of team sports in the 1890s;
- the dissolution of the Press Club (the closest thing Earlham ever had to a fraternity on campus) in 1925;

¹² From the Environmental and Social Audit written by Leah Robshaw and Daniel Hunter (page 4), which can be found at: <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda> or <http://www.earlham.edu/~esg>.

¹³ As an example, see a recent letter to the Earlham administration written by students at <http://www.earlham.edu/~hunteda/recycle.pdf>.

¹⁴ It is important, I think, to also recognize that maintenance has chosen on its own to recycle building materials (especially mixed metals) and batteries.

- the ending of the ban on dancing in 1929 and 1933;
- allowing smoking in 1941;
- formation of the Peace and Global Studies department (as well as others);
- additional security lighting put up around the heart and elsewhere because of pressure by Action Against Rape;
- keeping Jonathan Diskin, who was not going to receive tenure (which is equivalent to being fired) very likely because of his political beliefs, by a silent protest outside of the Meetinghouse;
- in 2001, though Earlham never divested from Sodexho-Marriott for its support of private prisons, the three year campaign exposed conditions under which Earlham refused to use consensus and instead trusted in unilateral authority and fed into Sodexho-Marriott's decision to eventually divest from private prisons¹⁵;
- suggested and created the WebCalendar (<http://www.earlham.edu/~calendar>) and creation of the Earlham Student Government website (<http://www.earlham.edu/~esg>), which, by its massive amount of information put on-line (such as hand-typing most of the Gazette magazine), encouraged the President's office to put more of *its* information on-line (such as putting up the Gazette now at <http://www.earlham.edu/~pres>);
- and getting vegan ice cream in the dining hall by a short-lived organization called Students for Animal Liberation Aide and Defense¹⁶ (SALAD) as of 1997.

Closing Thoughts

As I wrote a lot of these reports, I thought about how frustrated some of the students were even with their successes. In some cases, such as the plastic containers in Saga, students did not realize it would be a success and graduated wondering. Student activism on the non-discrimination policy had been happening for a long time; yet, many students did not realize the impact their collective effort would make – they felt helpless and powerless to affect change at Earlham. Or, in cases like the Sodexho-Marriott case, there was only the smallest victory celebration when an international decision had been made in part due to the activism of institutions like Earlham College. Let us celebrate our successes!

When we look around at our campus, so much of it has been influenced by students. To keep it going and to make it happen takes the work of more than *just* students, and for us to think we did it on our own is deceptive and wrong. But students, who can agitate for change with few harmful consequences, come in every four years with very new ideas and new energy. Our energy, our excitement and our passion helps direct the next steps for Earlham College. Without a long-term vision, we may miss how much we can affect. Yet, it is student insight that often has determined the next steps for Earlham, even though others may get credit for those steps. As we learn to tell our own success stories, we may find we had more power than we thought.

¹⁵ Earlham was named in national presses for its campaign around Sodexho-Marriott. It even got the manager of Earlham's dining hall to write a letter (maybe several?) and urge Sodexho-Marriott's CEO to divest, pointing out it would lose colleges such as Earlham if it did not eventually divest. The issue around consensus was that a decision reached by a committee via consensus proposed breaking ties with Sodexho-Marriott and finding an alternative company. This was seen to be a major success after members in the committee kept refusing to address the issue or agree to that solution. The decision was then overturned during the last week of the school year by President Bennett who has the power to disregard such decisions. You can read that history more closely at: <http://word.cs.earlham.edu>. (Search for "Sodexho-Marriott".)

¹⁶ In addition to being one of the most creative named organizations, SALAD was a short-lived organization started mainly by Josh Holden. This action to include vegan ice cream was not an organization-sponsored event but was by one of its membership. Specifically, one member of SALAD hassled several members of the football team until a number of people on the team agreed to sign asking for vegan ice cream. When presented to Kathie Guyler, then manager of Sodexho-Marriott at Earlham College, she readily agreed to get Rice Dream ice cream.