

Emory’s Coalition for a Living Wage
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Introduction

Emory University’s Living Wage Campaign was a student-led effort to raise Emory’s minimum rate of pay and to include sub-contracted workers in that base rate. It was inspired by national efforts to address poverty and income inequality by updating the national minimum wage for hourly workers. The Emory student group included undergraduate and graduate students and sustained its organization over three academic years, fostering discussion and action around the campus minimum wage policy. Through research, organizational efforts, public presentations, and conversations with administrators, the Coalition for a Living Wage was successful in establishing for Emory a higher minimum rate of pay, based on data from the cost of living in Atlanta, and extending the new minimum rate to Emory’s subcontracted and auxiliary employees.

Nationally, evidence emerged in the 1990s that some full-time workers’ incomes fell below the federal poverty level, and that low-wage workers had not benefitted as much as other sectors from the economic boom of previous years. The national minimum wage had not kept pace with inflation, and Congressional action to raise the minimum wage had not been successful (Zinamon 2002). A coalition of community groups, faith-based and labor-based organizations, and progressive think-tanks around the country began to argue for a wage standard based on the true cost of living (Mason 1996; Snarr 2011). A national Living Wage Campaign gained success in over 75 locales: Baltimore, Boston, Washington State, and Atlanta, to name a few (Washington State Department of Labor and Industries 2019). Though some efforts were not successful in the long run—the Georgia legislature voided the City of Atlanta’s living wage ordinance—by 1999, researchers at The Johns Hopkins University were able to report the overall positive impact of the new wage scale for Baltimore city employees (Niedt, et al. 1999), and other cities were also reporting positive impacts without increased unemployment or new inflationary pressures.

The effects of Emory’s Living Wage Campaign have been long-lasting. Regular updates to the minimum rate of pay have been put into effect, and as this is being written, a new minimum wage floor of \$14.25 per hour has gone into effect. In addition, the student leaders from the effort still remember their experiences and recount its significant impact on their lives. This report summarizes and updates the Coalition’s work.

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Methods

This Report was begun in Fall, 2018, as a contribution to the Emory sustainability histories created by students in Spring, 2017, in the course, Writing Emory's Sustainability History (ANT 385W). Another four histories were written in 2008 (see www.sustainability.emory.edu). The author was briefly faculty advisor to the Living Wage Coalition, and as Faculty Liaison to the Office of Sustainability Initiatives was concerned that this social justice component of Emory's history be remembered. This report was based on documents and proposals from the Coalition, interviews with Emory administrators, faculty, and student leaders, and documents about the national Living Wage movement. In the revision process, interviewees were given the chance to review the document and provide feedback. Interviews for this report were carried out with:

James Wagner, former President of Emory University, March 27, 2017 (by Skype)

Michael Mandl, former Executive Vice President for Finance and Operations, March 29, 2017

Luke Bassett, Associate Director of Domestic Energy and Environment Policy, Center for American Progress, Washington, DC, November 15, 2018 (subsequently appointed Professional Staff Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources)

Jenny Cannon, Lead Pastor, Bethesda United Methodist Church, Maryland, November 26, 2018

Emily Cohen, MD, Family Medicine, First Choice Community Healthcare, Albuquerque, NM, November 29, 2018 (by phone)

Cindia Cameron, Atlanta 9 to 5, co-organizer of Atlanta Living Wage Coalition, February 6, 2019

Edward Queen, Senior Lecturer, Center for Ethics, Emory University, February 25, 2019

Nick Vance, healthcare attorney with Ipsen Biopharmaceuticals, July 29, 2019 (by phone)

Debra Smith, Compensation Director, Emory Human Resources, August 2, 2019 (by phone)

Del King, Vice President for Human Resources, Emory University, August 8, 2019 (by phone)

Melissa Snarr, Associate Professor of Ethics and Society, Vanderbilt University, August 8, 2019, (by phone)

Stuart Dilg, medical student, Dartmouth School of Medicine, September 5, 2019, (by phone).

The Living Wage Campaign Unfolds

Emory University's Living Wage Campaign emerged as part of course work under Professor Melissa Snarr (Lecturer, Department of Religion). Professor Snarr was completing her doctoral work in the Graduate Division of Religion and was mentored by Professor Bobbi Patterson in Religion to include Theory-Practice Learning in all her courses. Both her regular classes and the Ethics and Servant Leadership (EASL) Forum in the Center for Ethics in 2001-2002 included independent research assignments. The goal was "to interweave curricular and co-curricular education and give students pathways to connect them—what a Research I university who's committed to social justice should be doing," said Snarr. After a class segment of academic work and talks from Atlanta leaders from the ethical business community, the classes divided into small teams, each choosing a related issue to explore. The issue of a living wage was adopted by two groups, and students gathered information on the minimum rate of pay for Emory employees.

The students soon found out that certain jobs at Emory were subcontracted to outside firms—such as food service, shuttle drivers, post office staff, and some building maintenance—and information about pay scales from those organizations was not readily available. Dr. Snarr also was involved with an Ethics and Servant Leadership program for staff members at Emory, and helped to put the students in touch with leaders in areas such as building maintenance and grounds. Students got to know individuals from these and other occupations and soon learned that starting wages for some were substantially lower than for regular Emory employees. Two students recounted hearing from some of the lowest paid employees that they had to work two and three jobs to be able to support themselves and their children. The Emory Coalition was inspired by activities around worker pay at Harvard and Yale Universities, as well as national attention to sweatshop labor in producing clothing and other items.

By Spring 2002, the group had grown to 15-20 students, including both graduate and undergraduate members (Fact Sheet n.d.). In articulating support for a living wage, the students embraced “the fundamental principle that a person who works forty hours per week should not live in poverty or near-poverty conditions” (Bassett et al. 2003:3). They cited both Emory’s mission and the Methodist church’s values, including that “every person has the right to a job at a living wage” (Bassett et al. 2003:3). They disseminated their findings around “the state of wages” in class presentations, both to Dr. Snarr’s classes and to others with similar interests. The students’ goals were to figure out what a living wage would be “and to achieve that for all employees working on Emory’s campus,” according to one of the leaders.

The students’ proposal to increase wages was discussed in various venues around the campus and around Atlanta. Outreach included *Wheel* articles, tabling events, presentations to student clubs and residence halls, a petition, and continued conversations with Emory hourly employees. The group also met with Atlanta living wage organizers, interested students and faculty at Agnes Scott College and Columbia Theological Seminary, officials from Aramark food service, Emory Human Resources, and President William Chace (Fact Sheet n.d.). Coalition meetings were led by undergraduates, though some graduate students—mainly from the Candler School of Theology—were also present.

In Spring of 2003, the Coalition held a Living Wage Forum that attracted over 100 people, and included as speakers Pierre Ferrari (President of SweatX and formerly with CocaCola), Tina Pippin (Agnes Scott faculty), and Cindia Cameron (co-organizer, Atlanta Living Wage Coalition), with Professor James Fowler (director, Emory Center for Ethics) as moderator. “Our focus as a student-led initiative was to try to elevate the voice of the workers. We interviewed a number of employees and got some to write letters. In ...[the] forum, one of the employees read her letter, and another letter was read by a member of the Campaign.”

Repeated demonstrations in Cambridge, a sit-in at Harvard University, and similar efforts at Yale and other schools, raised the public visibility of the living wage movement on university campuses around the country. Students in the Coalition discussed their strategy, whether to be “collaborative” or “confrontational,” and it was their expectation that the administration would prefer not to generate negative publicity. The Coalition was also aware that a new president was coming into office at Emory, and they wanted their proposal to be on his desk when he arrived. Administrators from Emory’s Campus Life division, Human Resources, and the central

administration met with the Emory Living Wage Coalition at several points to discuss the issues. Students were asked to draft a report with recommendations in the Fall of 2003, and it was presented to Emory administrators in October, 2003 (Bassett et al. 2003).

The report not only presented an ethical rationale for supporting a higher rate of base pay, but it also presented statistics about the cost of living in the metro Atlanta area. Included were average costs for housing, child care, food, transportation, healthcare, and taxes. The statistics showed conclusively that the current rate of pay was not a self-supporting wage for a single person, and certainly would not support an adult with one or more children, without additional resources (Bassett et al. 2003). Data were provided for Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, Cobb, and Gwinnett counties.

One student remembers the meeting with administrators after the report was prepared as “more educational—not argumentative or negotiating,” but another remembers the meetings as “pretty contentious.” It became clear that the key issue was wages paid by subcontractors. Administrators raised concerns that rising personnel costs could be financially harmful to the mission of the university and that jobs might be cut. The students presented evidence from other cities that jobs were not lost and finances could be adjusted to the higher payrolls. “They seemed to be appreciative of our collaborative approach,” said one student, “and that was always our intent.”

In a 2017 interview, former president James Wagner recalled that the minimum wage issue emerged soon after he began his role as Emory’s president. He had dealt with the same issue of lower pay scales for subcontracted workers at Case Western Reserve University, his previous position, and had developed and implemented there a policy he described as “same pay for the same work, regardless of who your employer is, so long as you’re in my backyard.” Wagner continued, “This [living wage issue] was one of the very early things that was adopted [at Emory, under his administration] ...but it was just about *fairness*.” “...[N]ow when we contract with a new service provider—and they’re bringing workers to our campus and this is really their work site—it’s written into the contract that their wage scales have to follow ours” (Wagner 2017).

Vice President Mike Mandl also remembers the interactions with students in 2003. “My approach was altered by [President Wagner’s] values, which were to listen. I tried very hard not to practice what many administrators do, where ‘The answer is no—what was the question?’” Said vice president Mandl:

I didn’t like the term “living wage” for a variety of reasons, and that was OK with them [the students] at the end of the day. ...I also wanted to not have Emory being held to the same standard as Boston or New York [which were more expensive cities to live in]. ...So, the way I started to think about it was, “Well, the federal government is not doing its job on minimum rate or minimum wage.” You can’t argue with that. ...So we established a minimum rate of pay that was much higher than the [federal] minimum wage, obviously. And it had an immediate impact on all the lowest paid employees. And we would raise it with inflation.

“So that’s how we got it established. It started with rational discussions with people who had it on their radar screen.”

Negotiating Specifics

The Coalition for a Living Wage acknowledged that significant progress had already been made in recent years by Emory’s Human Resources with a commitment to higher wage levels for Emory’s lowest-paid workers. From 1999, when the minimum rate of pay was \$6.20 an hour, it had risen in 2002 to \$8.50 (Debra Smith, personal communication, 8/2/19). The number of regular employees thus affected was relatively small—estimates were given by both the students and other Emory personnel to be approximately 200 individuals (Bassett 2003; Terrazas 2003). The students’ proposal included a recommendation to form a committee to plan and implement a living wage policy, establishment of a deadline, wage parity required for subcontractors, and greater transparency around wages. The City of Atlanta’s proposed ordinance (later passed) that determined \$10.50 as the hourly appropriate wage (with benefits) was cited in the students’ report (Bassett 2003:6).

In discussions about an appropriate level for Emory’s minimum wage, it was noted that the university provides a number of benefits, including healthcare and free MARTA passes to staff, that needed to be factored into the calculations, along with Atlanta’s generally lower cost of living when compared to other cities. A key focus of the conversation was the fact that Emory Dining was moving toward renewal of its food service contract, and the students were particularly concerned to bring those workers’ pay scales into alignment with the rest of the university employees.

Once the students’ proposal had been discussed and largely adopted by President Wagner and Executive Vice President Mike Mandl, it was discussed in many other campus venues. As recounted in the *Emory Report*, acting Provost Woody Hunter explained to the Faculty Council of the Senate that the university had committed in 2000 to using the federal government’s poverty guideline in determining its minimum pay rate and had raised the minimum rate 32% since that time. (Miller 2002; Terrazas 2003). “However, a local organization called the Atlanta Living Wage Coalition has determined that the current living wage in this city is \$10.50, calculated as 130 percent of the federal poverty level for a family of three.” In response, the budget prepared for the subsequent year included provision for higher wages. Given the relatively low number of university employees paid at the lowest rate, the cost implications were not immediately great. “The problem comes with the ‘compression’ effect such a move would have on salaries farther up the scale, as questions of seniority and authority come into play,” said Hunter. “Once higher-grade salaries start getting adjusted for the increases made to lower rates, the costs begin to mount” (Terrazas 2003). Faculty comments were mixed about the initiative, though in the end it passed with an endorsement from the Faculty Council.

Impacts on Emory University Pay

As a result of the students' campaign and decisions by Emory administrators, the minimum rate of pay was raised to \$9.00 an hour in 2004 and to \$9.25 in 2005. In subsequent years, it continued to rise, reaching \$10.50 in 2008 and \$12.08 in 2015. Del King, Vice President for Human Resources, remembers this era of change, and said, "It was our intention that we continue to move up." There have been raises in the minimum rate of pay every year but two, since 2002.

Wage parity for auxiliary services and subcontracted employees was also part of the discussions, and these employers were given a grace period in which to implement the higher wages. Emory Dining chose to shift from Aramark to Sodexo (spelled at that time Sodexho) for the university's dining contract. Built into the 2005 contract was the requirement that all dining workers receive Emory's minimum rate of pay. The other main group affected were the shuttle drivers, and they were included in the new rates about the same time.

As this report was written, the minimum rate of pay rose on September 1, 2019 to \$14.25. Given Emory's continued transportation subsidies, health insurance, and other benefits, this rate echoes efforts around the country to move the minimum wage to \$15.00. Del King clarified that in the future, "our intention is to move to \$15.00 an hour."

Impacts on Students

All five of the students interviewed reported that their efforts on the Living Wage Campaign have had long-term personal impacts. Close friendships have endured over the decade and a half since, and careers were shaped by the experience. Said one student, "It's something I'm really proud of... It taught me a lot about organizing and social justice that has continued in my career. [I learned that] social justice is multidimensional and intertwined." Another recalled, "It was a great experience for me, and a formative period in my life. It's something I still feel strongly about." Referring specifically to the Forum, one student said, "It was our crowning glory. I was very proud of being part of it."

How did students come to be aware of the issues and then become active? One explained that the Coalition benefitted from a core of socially concerned students who were friends. This group also worked on issues such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Other interested students came to the attention of the Ethics Center and were brought into connection with the Coalition.

One student who came to the effort in his first year explained,

I came from a beach town in California, and I wasn't ignorant to the reality of second class citizenship [in the agricultural fields there], but I was shell-shocked by the racial disparities I found at Emory, with the students on one side and the workers who supported us [on the other]. It was my first time in the South. It was a bit of culture shock and I didn't like it and I wanted to make friends with the staff. I felt there was too much of a racial wedge between the students and staff....

Building ties with some food service and janitorial workers “meant a lot to me. And then when I stumbled on the [living wage] group, I felt like I had to be a part of it.”

One student not a part of the core group remembers that in her junior or senior year, she learned of a meeting about living wage through a Learnlink conference, Emory’s email platform for communication among student groups.

I had that liberal arts education openness...attention to what [Professor of Religion] Bobbi Patterson taught me were “interlocking patterns of oppression”...and it really opened my eyes. I didn’t really think much about what people were paid before then—it never occurred to me.

Because of her family’s long history with Emory and the university’s general reputation as a good place to work, she said she had never considered whether pay levels were fair. “It was a new concept to me.” She came to realize “it would take some *advocacy* to make things right—that the issue would take work—and organization and persistence. It was a really big undertaking.”

Other undergraduates expressed satisfaction at being part of a larger, national effort. “This was the biggest effort, the one where I felt the most palpable sense of movement and change.... There was a certain magic in the group in one year. We worked very hard gathering information and spreading the word.”

“EASL was a fantastic program at Emory—I got a lot of value out of that,” said another. “The Campaign was a great leadership experience. It definitely shed some light on what the lives of employees at Emory looked like. It let me understand the ability of students to have some impact on that.”

The living wage effort helped another college student become “aware of injustice and ways to make the world a good and far more righteous place. But it was easy to just be a student and stay in the bubble.” The Coalition’s efforts helped transcend the bubble and helped students “to realize there were people on the other side of the food counter.” One theology student said, “You have to believe your faith matters—this was a tangible way to live out your faith.”

A life lesson provided by the Coalition experience was that patience and perseverance are really important in social change work. “It was really impactful for me to see students really take the lead on such things. I thought, ‘Oh, this is what it means to be transitioning into adulthood.’ Seeing students advocate for change—we are connected to a larger life.”

Conclusion

The impact of the Living Wage Coalition is visible on campus today in several ways. First, the issue of pay for subcontracted workers was brought to the fore and firmly settled, with a new Emory commitment. Even though Emory may not be the direct employer of a worker, it was recognized that the university has an obligation—as one interviewee said, “We are implicated.”

Second, the discussions fed into the whole decision on which dining service provider would be chosen in the next contract, and built into that contract was the requirement that all dining workers received Emory's minimum rate of pay. The same stipulation was included in the 2015 contract with Bon Appetit.

Finally, the student effort around living wage contributed to a general sense that worker relations are an important issue for a university—and an appropriate concern for individual staff and faculty members. One faculty member involved at the time also came to greater awareness that “these are the stakeholders who need to be heard for themselves.”

The Emory Living Wage Coalition and its conversations with Emory administrators resulted, according to one observer,

In an increased speed at which the culture is shifting. That's a consequence of Emory's shifting self-understanding from a dominant regional institution to a national institution—and [that meant that Emory] had to think about these national issues in a way it didn't have to before.

The students' work allowed the university to begin to “measure success in a deeper and more complicated way.”

And in reviewing this history as part of their interviews, many spoke words similar to these from one student: “It makes me happy that it [the living wage effort] became part of the social mission of the university...it's a heart-warming thing.”

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