CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by James Madison University

James Madison University
JMU Scholarly Commons

Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current
Honors College

Spring 2018

An analysis of public and feminist rhetoric for menstrual equity

Margaret Linscott
James Madison University

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019

Part of the Rhetoric Commons

Recommended Citation
Linscott, Margaret, "An analysis of public and feminist rhetoric for menstrual equity" (2018). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 617.
https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/617

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors College at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

An Analysis of Public and Feminist Rhetoric for Menstrual Equity

---

An Honors College Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Arts and Letters

James Madison University

---

by Margaret Jo Linscott

May 2018

Accepted by the faculty of the School of Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Project Advisor: Cathryn Molloy, PhD
Assistant Professor, Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication

Reader: Lori Beth DeHertogh, PhD
Assistant Professor, Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication

Reader: Jen Almjeld, PhD
Associate Professor, Writing, Rhetoric, and Technical Communication

HONORS COLLEGE APPROVAL:

Bradley R. Newcomer, Ph.D.,
Dean, Honors College

PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the Honors College Symposium on April 18. 2018.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 3
LIST OF FIGURES 4
ABSTRACT 5
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 6
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW 10
CHAPTER 3: PROJECT NARRATIVE 18
CHAPTER 4: SEXISM IN PUBLIC ACTIVISM 35
CHAPTER 5: CRITICISMS OF THE CAMPAIGN 43
CHAPTER 6: COMMODIFICATION OF A MOVEMENT 51
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION 56
REFERENCES 61
APPENDIX 69

Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the support of a multitude of people. I am eternally grateful for their thoughts, support, and contributions.

Thank you to thank this project's advisor, Dr. Cathryn Molloy, for her guidance and supervision of this project. I am quite fortunate to have had her by my side throughout the campaign's progression as well as during the writing of this Capstone. Her positive energy, thoughtful reflections, and flexibility have been greatly appreciated. I would also like to thank the project's readers, Dr. Jen Almjeld and Dr. Lori Beth DeHertogh, for their contributions to this project and their wealth of knowledge on feminist scholarship.

Thank you to the Honors College faculty for allowing me to flourish as a JMU undergrad student. To Jared Diener, Dr. Phillip Frana, and Dr. Bradley Newcomer thank you for your support and investment in not only the campaign, but also in myself as a scholar. Thank you also to Tammy Steele and Dianne Fulk for their support of the campaign.

I would also like to thank the Student Government Association for their support in helping the Bill of Opinion to pass and their guidance. To the "Free the Tampon" GroupMe, a major thanks for the hours they put in to gather petition signatures and their exuberant support.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends for their love and support.

List of Figures

FIGURE 1: “FREE THE TAMPON” GRAPHIC 30
FIGURE 2: PRESENTATION SLIDE 31

Abstract

In August of 2017, James Madison University installed free tampon and pad dispensers in major restrooms across its campus. This development was the result of the campaign *Free the Tampon* which used the themes of menstrual equity, public writing, and feminist rhetoric to achieve its outcome. Using writing and rhetoric, the campaign successfully engaged with 2000 students in passing a petition and in reaching out to key JMU decision makers. This project designs the origin, implementation, and effects of *Free the Tampon* on JMU's campus and the ways in which concepts of menstrual equity informed the campaign.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It was the morning of a blistery November day in 2016 when I came across an idea that would eventually turn into this project. As I was walking to class, I found myself in need of a tampon, and not having one on hand, I decided to check with my university's Health Center otherwise known as the UHC. The UHC has a vibrant display that allows students to take free condoms as needed, so I figured that they would also provide menstrual hygiene products to accommodate students' needs. The process was more difficult than I expected. After being directed to talk with two different people and told in a hushed voice to hide the products, I finally got a tampon.

The process seemed overly complicated and steeped in needless secrecy, so I sent an email to the UHC asking if they'd consider making menstrual hygiene products as accessible as the condoms they gave out. The response I got back, however, was so steeped in implicit stigmatization of periods that I had to reread it a few times to make sure it was real. The short answer was, "No, the Health Center will not consider making tampons more accessible in their office as it is a student's responsibility and menstrual hygiene is not considered a public health issue."

At the time the email was sent, schools like Duke University and the University of North Carolina were implementing campus-wide policies to make tampons and pads free and accessible to all menstruators on campus. I figured James Madison University (JMU) should follow their footsteps. Policy change would provide a forum for campus-wide conversation regarding menstruation and remove barriers towards ensuring that vulnerable populations also have access to menstrual hygiene products. In the months that followed, I worked closely with the JMU Student Government Association (SGA) to pass a policy for the university to supply the

products in all campus restrooms. Two thousand JMU students signed a petition to show their support, and the upper administration of JMU approved and implemented the policy. To get support for the policy, I used physical and digital spaces to communicate with interested individuals and organizations in the campus community.

This project describes *Free the Tampon*, the social activism project that I worked on as a student at James Madison University, and the role it played to pass a policy supplying free menstrual hygiene products in major restrooms around campus. I begin by offering a review of the literature surrounding menstruation activism in the United States, then follow by analyzing the activism project's conception, design, and through a feminist and public rhetoric lenses. At its heart, the campaign used written and other textual public rhetorics to persuade individuals in positions of power to adopt a change; it also sought to draw general public attention to a form of oppression that is often overlooked. I then offer a narrative on the misogyny I experienced in my role as a social activist, a description of criticisms the campaign faced, and an overview on the rise of "menstrual activism" companies.

The literature review will discuss three distinct waves in menstrual activism: menstrual hygiene, women's liberation, and menstrual equity. Tampons and other menstrual hygiene products were not commercialized until the early twentieth century. Before then, women would use homemade items to manage their periods. In the early twentieth century, the women's health movement brought attention to the need for hygienic supplies, and brands like *Kotex* and *Procter & Gamble* advertised pads and tampons by encouraging secrecy and protection from the shame of showing menstrual blood. In the mid-twentieth century, women's liberation leaders advocated to decrease the stigma associated with periods and end the dominant masculine culture that perpetuated that stigma. Today, the rhetoric associated with menstruation is primarily focused on

menstrual equity—a term coined by activists like Julissa Ferraras-Copeland and Jennifer Weiss-Wolf to illustrate a wide range of topics regarding menstrual hygiene products and their accessibility to various population groups. Since its inception, menstrual equity has been used by activists to bring attention to the lack of adequate hygienic products for low-income students, homeless individuals, and incarcerated individuals. Without access to vital hygienic supplies, menstruators in these populations must improvise with what they have which can lead to a loss of dignity and even illness.

Menstrual equity has also been used to describe the ongoing political debate regarding the "tampon tax." Opponents of the tax argue that tampons, pads, and other menstrual hygiene products are taxed as luxuries in many states and should be classified as "medical devices" because of their necessity in daily life. Usually, items classed as medical devices are exempt from state sales tax. For my project, I have considered menstrual equity to mean that menstruation is a biological necessity that requires the use of hygienic products, and thus, access to such products needs to be ensured for all members of a society.

In my campaign for JMU to implement the policy, I argued that menstrual hygiene products must be given the same affordance as other hygiene supplies in public restrooms. These public arguments were mediated over multiple rhetorical spaces, including formal methods of communication such as newspaper editorials, public presentations, and email communications as well as informal modes like Facebook posts, digital designs, social media comments, and passing conversations before and after meetings.

Following a description of the social activism project, I discuss a case of conflict I experienced while working on the project and link it back into broader themes of misogyny and stigmatization. I also discuss criticisms associated with the campaign's lack of inclusive

language and narrow scope. I then offer a brief survey of entrepreneurial activism found in menstrual hygiene brands such as *Conscious Period* and *THINX*. These brands offer insight into the positive and negative ways feminism may be commodified.

Finally, I offer lessons and key takeaways I have learned from conducting the *Free the Tampon* campaign. As of this writing, I am pleased to report that tampons and pads are available in JMU's major campus bathrooms, including gender-neutral restrooms. In 2016 and 2017, many other universities have adopted similar policies, and companies are beginning to address equity and sustainability in menstrual hygiene products. This paper will provide a framework for future feminist activists interested in menstrual equity and related topics.

I did not envision that the moment I found myself in need of a tampon on an average day would lead to the eventual passage of a policy that removed barriers for menstruating JMU students, but the policy wasn't passed by my efforts alone. Like all social campaigns, *Free the Tampon* was the result of the efforts of many key stakeholders and was propelled by the national movement towards greater acceptance and normalization of periods. That said, my project illustrates that everyday experiences can mobilize social activism campaigns of consequence. Still, *Free the Tampon* is just one addition to the ongoing canon regarding menstrual equity, and it is my hope that this paper can provide a framework for feminist activists to create their own menstrual equity and related campaigns.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When I asked for a free tampon at the UHC, the receptionist kept her voice hushed and asked if I had a bag in which to hide them even though the tampons themselves were already in a brown paper bag. It seemed that even the *idea* of tampons were to be kept secret from the public. This story is not unique, nor is it a particularly dramatic example of menstrual stigma; however, it is an interesting insight into how even small exchanges are informed and influenced by menstrual taboo. In US culture, menstruation is carefully concealed and ignored, but this ignorance can prove disastrous for those who lack accessibility to menstrual hygiene products.

The literature on menstruation in the humanities and social sciences falls roughly into three categories as it appears chronologically. These include: menstrual hygiene, women's liberation, and menstrual equity. In matters of hygiene, menstruation literature focuses on the ways in which an increasing number of women in the work-force contributed to the need for more practical menstruation management options like tampons and pads usually fastened by specialized belts and pins (Bobel, 2010; Bobel, 2008; Dickinson, 1945). The menstrual hygienic movement focused on protection and concealment from public life. In the 1970s, the women's liberation movement shifted the focus on menstruation to one that challenged sexist stigma. In line with the mood at the time, prominent feminists used a revolutionary tone to write and speak about menstrual products' impact on the environment, consumer health, and oppression (Steinem, 1978; Friedman, 1981; Houppert, 2000). Today, the focus has shifted to menstrual equity—a concept designed to challenge common assumptions about menstrual product accessibility in vulnerable populations (Goldman, Mahoney, & Bologna, 2016). In this chapter, I will outline these three movements to provide a framework for understanding the activism project I conducted at JMU.

Hygiene

Menstruation is one of the building blocks of human reproduction. The production of ovocytes prepare the uterus for pregnancy, and if an ovocyte is not fertilized, the lining sheds, and the cycle continues until the woman is in her late 40s or early 50s. At the turn of the twentieth century, women did not contribute significantly to America's workforce, instead they stayed at home caring for children, cleaning, and cooking. However, this changed as more women joined the workforce in the 1910s and 1920s. The need for a practical solution to manage their menstrual periods arose, and companies were more than willing to answer the call (Bobel, 2010).

In 1920, *Kotex* tampons were introduced to the commercial market. They were among the first commercial products to contain and protect from one's menstrual flow. Manufacturers issued advertisements emphasizing their products' discretion and secrecy (Freidenfelds, 2009). For example, in a 1928 advertisement for Modess pads in Ladies Home Journal, the ad features a "Silent Purchase Coupon" for women to hand to sales clerks without "embarrassment or discussion." In one medical article, a medical emphasized the protection and secrecy offered by tampons over pads as tampons and recommended they be used because and the smell of menstrual fluid is weaker in tampons compared to pads (Dickinson, 1945).

WWII also influenced consumer behavior with menstrual hygiene products as more women entered to workforce to compensate for the men going overseas. (Delaney, Lupton, and Toth, 1976). In 1946, *Disney* debuted a short film titled *The Story of Menstruation* that urged young girls to keep smiling and keep a calm, neat outward appearance throughout their period. (Vostral, 2008). In the film's narration, actress Gloria Blondell urged young girls not to slouch

and not to "dramatize" themselves "as a smile goes a long way." During these years, disposable menstrual products varied in a few ways. Women fastened pads to their underwear using reusable belts and fasteners, and tampons were fashioned to be as absorbent as possible—a technique that would eventually prove fatal (Bobel, 2008). Gone were the messy sanitary aprons that restricted public life and plagued women before the 1900s. New disposable products gave women a chance to participate in daily life free from burden.

The introduction of mass-marketed menstrual hygiene products provided a chance for women to enter the public sphere. Restricted to domestic life before, now women had the chance to exercise their voice in a public setting. They had the opportunity to become public actors and contribute to the "mass, popular art" of public rhetoric (Welch, 2008). Such was the power of menstrual hygiene supplies.

Women's Liberation

The cultural script regarding menstruation was upturned during the 1960s and 1970s when the women's liberation movement was at its peak. Feminist groups sought to reclaim menstruation as a health and environmental issue. The women's health movement argued that the medical system, designed by men, had failed to provide women-focused care and ignored women's unique medical needs (Bobel, 2010). Up until the 1980s, the US federal government remained unconcerned with regulating menstrual hygiene products, but that changed with the outbreak of Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)—a potentially fatal infection caused by streptococci and staphylococci (Rome,Wolhandler, and Reame, 1988). In 1980, *P&G* released *Rely*, a high-absorbency tampon that resulted in a TSS outbreak. At its worst, the CDC reported 813 cases of menstrual-related TSS which resulted in 38 deaths in the year of 1980 (Meadows, 2000). Pundits

call 1980 the “worst year in tampon history” (Conger, 2013). In the fallout surrounding the TSS epidemic, the FDA responded to the needs of women by upgrading tampons to a “Class II Medical Device.” As a “Class II Medical Device, tampon and pad manufacturers came under increased agency surveillance and were required to test their products for safety. Despite this, menstrual hygiene was still seen as a convenience rather than a necessity (Bobel, 2010).

The women’s liberation movement also encouraged menstrual activists to consider environmental concerns. Many were concerned with the environmental impact of using disposable tampons and pads and producing large amounts of waste (Bobel, 2010). Today, nearly 20 billion tampons or pads are dumped in landfills each year (Ha, 2011). Environmental concerns are still prominent in current menstruation rhetoric. The average woman today will dispose of 250 to 300 pounds of pads, applicators, and tampons during her lifetime (Stein & Kim, 2009). Sustainable products such as menstrual cups or organic tampons and pads are gaining national attention as women seek ways to make their periods “eco-conscious.” Tampons and pads were historically whitened using chlorine gas, and this process resulted in the formation of dioxins—compounds that are known to be detrimental to the environment (Stein & Kim, 2009). At the time of the women’s liberation movement, women railed against tampon and pad manufacturers who they believed were polluting the environment with the needless amount of plastics and chemicals in their products (Bobel, 2008).

The women’s liberation movement also used the rhetoric of revolution to criticize period stigma. Menstrual stigma can best be described in terms of power. A performance of menstruation is often seen through a leakage, in which blood leaks through a person’s clothes causing menstrual blood to be seen by others. While this is often accidental, the leakage suggests that an individual has lost power over their own body (Macdonald, 2007). This power differential

is exemplified in examining reactions to spit and drool. Spitting is a purposeful act, but drooling is often seen as an individual's failure to control their saliva impulses. Therefore, leakage, a common performance of menstruation, seem to depict some sort of individual failing. It also threatens one's performance of an ideal woman, because she is now marked as different, she is therefore less than (MacDonald, 2007). Even in tampon or pad commercials, in which the primary purpose it to advertise the effectiveness of its products, menstrual leaks are depicted with blue liquid rather than the ubiquitous red. Even symbolic leaks are sanitized for viewer comfort.

In Gloria Steinem's satirical essay "If Men Could Menstruate", Steinem outlines the double-standard women face by describing a world of male menstruators:

> "What would happen, for instance, if suddenly, magically, men could menstruate, and women could not? The answer is clear—menstruation would become an enviable, boast-worthy, masculine event: Men would brag about how long and how much. Boys would mark the onset of menses, that longed-for proof of manhood, with religious ritual and stag parties. Congress would fund a National Institute of Dysmenorrhea to help stamp out monthly discomforts. Sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free. (Of course, some men would still pay for the prestige of commercial brands such as John Wayne Tampons, Muhammad Ali's Rope-a-dope Pads, Joe Namath Jock Shields— "For Those Light Bachelor Days," and Robert "Baretta" Blake Maxi-Pads)" (1978)

Steinem's essay marks an open shift in dialogue about the stigma associated with periods and is a far cry from the days of Disney's The Story of Menstruation. Feminist artist Judy Chicago also tried to resist menstrual shame in her famous photograph Red Flag which depicted a close-up shot of Chicago extracting a used tampon from her vagina. Chicago's photograph

didn't just cause an uproar, but many were also confused as to what the photograph depicted; some even thought that is was a male phallus. This type of thinking is evident in how far removed the female reality was from mainstream discourse (Bobel, 2008).

In other cultures, however, the female reality is neither absent nor denied. Instead, menstruation is void of any taboo; menstruation and the women who go through it are sometimes even celebrated. Among the Rungos of Borneo, menstruation is a matter of everyday life with neither clean or dirty connotations (Appell, 1988). Contrastingly, Yurok women stress the positive power of menstruation. Young girls are taught to welcome menarche as a purifying and spiritual force (Buckley, 1988). Cultures can perform menstruation in a variety of positive ways that neither deny nor mark the absence of the female reality. Each cultural custom exists to reinforce the reality of menstruation. Common United States' customs such as concealing evidence of menstrual blood from others serve to erase the female reality (Kissling, 2009).

For centuries, rhetoric has been defined by the domination of male, white-centric schools of thought, but feminist rhetoric has sought to redraw these boundaries to be more inclusive (Royster, Kirsch, 2012). This paradigm shift is the result of concerted effort by feminist thinkers to to subvert oppression. Cheryl Glenn's feminist historiography *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance* focuses on remapping history not only to insert women into their rightful place in rhetorical cannon, but also to revitalize and contextualize the foundations of rhetorical theory (1997). For instance, Aspasia's vast rhetorical contributions are overshadowed by the masculine, phallocentric culture of oppression that sought to paint her as a sex symbol and devalue her rhetorical agency and academic achievements (Glenn, 1997). Feminist historiographies exist to connect women to rhetoric in a mutually-beneficial relationship. In the rhetoric of vision, feminist rhetoric successfully subverts

oppression using the power of linguistic relativism as it engages in the production of reality by recoding dominant symbols (Hawkesworth, 1988). For instance, dominant symbols of menstruation such as tampons or pads are seen as a nuisance and something to be hidden, but current menstrual equity campaigns have sought to recode them into a necessity to be celebrated.

Menstrual Equity

Today, menstrual activism is focused on equity and access among all populations of people, such as transgender men, incarcerated individuals, homeless people, low-income individuals, or students. In essence, menstrual equity refers to the gap in accessibility and options in care for all who menstruate. It is important to note here that barriers in accessibility to menstrual hygiene products can be exacerbated by an individual's race, class, gender identity, ability, sexual orientation, and other factors. Feminist writer bell hooks calls on us to recognize the ways in which racism, sexism, class elitism, and homophobia are related (2015). As a result, we must view menstrual equity through a lens that recognizes the various systems of dominance that creates barriers for safe-access. In effect, menstrual equity refers to the growing movement of political actors and feminist rhetors who wish to provide free menstrual products for those who need them and to end the "tampon tax." This movement is growing. In 2015, Canada dropped sales taxes on tampons and other hygiene products, and in 2016, the Chicago City Council voted to end the municipal sales tax on menstrual hygiene products because of their status as medical devices (Goldman, Mahoney, & Bologna, 2016).

Menstrual activism marks a new chapter in related activism. While environmental sustainability is still a big issue for menstrual activists, the idea of period equity is gaining attention in the public sphere. The initiative in New York City is perhaps the best-known effort

to bring awareness to menstrual equity. New York City Councilwoman Julissa Ferraras-Copeland declared that tampons were as "necessary as toilet paper" as she argued for free products in all NYC public schools, homeless shelters, and jails (Mettler, 2016). The mantra that tampons are just as necessary as toilet paper was repeated in Brown University's press release regarding the Student Government Association's decision to provide free menstrual products in all restrooms on their campus, and other universities like Emory, Duke, and James Madison University—the subject of this paper—have followed suit.

The menstrual equity movement builds on both the hygienic and women's liberation movement as it works to provide accessible hygienic products and challenge systems of oppression that create barriers for menstruators. The following chapters in this capstone project will provide a case-study of a menstrual equity project and will make recommendations for other feminist activism projects using concepts described in this literature review.

Chapter 3: Project Narrative

Having a period is expensive. Some estimate that women spend an average of 80 dollars a year on menstrual hygiene products (Goldberg, 2016), but this estimate does not cover the multitude of related, yet indirect costs of menstruation such as painkillers, new underwear, heating pads, and auxiliary hygiene devices like party-liners. In a study for the *Huffington Post,* contributors found periods to cost an average American of about $19,000 in a lifetime (Kane, 2015). In other countries, the cost of these products can be more than a financial nuisance; they can also lead to missing school or work days. The United Nations estimates that more than 10% of African girls miss school during their periods (UNESCO, 2014). There should not be massive financial and social costs for a process so fundamental and necessary.

As a first-year student in college who lacked both transportation and spending money, having a period was immensely stressful. First year students at JMU do not have access to cars, so necessities like medicine refills, toothpaste, soap, or tampons must be bought on campus where they are expensive or off campus in stores accessible only by foot or public transportation. Generally, it is much easier and less time-consuming for students to buy products on campus rather than off-campus. During my freshman year, I knew of only two places on campus that had menstrual hygiene products for sale, and both places were rather expensive. For instance, at a convenience store centrally located on JMU's campus, a box of eighteen *Tampax Pearl* tampons cost $7.99. At a supermarket located about a mile outside of the campus boundaries, an identical box of these tampons cost $3.85. Even if one were to buy double the number of tampons from the supermarket, they would still be paying nearly a dollar less than they would for the box of tampons located on campus. Instead of paying these steep prices, I opted to spend a few afternoons walking to the store to pick up what I needed. After I moved off campus my junior

year of college, I had more freedom to drive myself where I needed to go. That said, often, I would spend 8-10 hours on campus during weekdays: in class, studying, or in meetings. I couldn't exactly run back to my apartment to pick up an emergency tampon or pad if I ever found myself in a bind.

That's when I began to realize the immense burden of having a period. Menstruators must dedicate considerable brain power to keep track of their cycle, note accessible locations to buy hygiene supplies, and dedicate time to buying them. Of course, this does not take into account the multitude of intersectionality that can increase this burden. Incarcerated individuals, homeless people, and the very poor don't have appropriate access to these products. When I was doing initial research for this project, a woman who works locally with refugees described how some mothers must choose between menstrual hygiene products and supplies for her children because of their limited funds. Often, she said, those mothers would choose the latter. Research about women incarcerated in prisons and jails found that they often receive insufficient, inadequate rations of tampons and pads (Knittel, Shear, & Comfort, 2017). As a result, these women must face the humiliation of bleeding through their clothes. This type of degradation and humiliation is intolerable.

Of course, I don't presume to think that college students—presumably with more resources—are facing the same systemic barriers as refugees or incarcerated women, but the burden and inconvenience I felt at the lack of accessible products on campus was enough to distract me from classes and cause stress. Similar products like toilet paper, hand soap, and paper towels are provided free of charge in all JMU campus restrooms. Moreover, the UHC offers an entire wall from which students are encouraged to come and procure free, colorful contraceptives. Since I was familiar with this wall, the "Safer Sex Wall", I ventured a guess that

menstrual products might be available in the UHC when I found myself in need of some on when my period started unexpectedly. As I approached the help desk at *The Well*— a division of the Health Center that houses the "Safer Sex Wall"—I felt a weird sense of nervousness and envied the people using the "Safer Sex Wall" with relative ease.

Before looking at the wall that dispensed free condoms to students, I approached the receptionist desk and asked quietly if they had any tampons or pads. The woman at the desk seemed confused and stated that they "might have some" in another office. After giving me directions to the other office, I made my way upstairs to ask the Health Center if they had any tampons. The woman at the reception desk seemed uncertain but said she "would double-check in the back." I waited as she looked. I was planning on using them right away, so I didn't have my backpack out to store them. As the woman came back, she asked in a hushed whisper, "Do you have a bag to hide them?" This comment seemed like a really strange thing to say—especially since the tampons she was holding were already in a brown paper bag. No one would know what they were regardless of the backpack or not. These interactions indicated two things to me: one, most students don't ask for emergency menstrual supplies at the UHC, and, two, periods and tampons were so stigmatized that they required not one, but two layers of protection from the public gaze. Later that day, the brief exchanges at the UHC were still on my mind; it bothered me in ways that I could not quite verbalize. As I told a friend what happened, she mentioned that she wished JMU followed more in Brown University's footsteps.

In the fall of 2016, the SGA at Brown University voted to provide free tampons and pads in all campus restrooms—including male rooms. Viet Nguyen, the 2016 Brown Student Body President, spoke to *The Washington Pos*t about his feelings regarding the new policy and stated that, "…making Brown one of the first institutions in higher education to implement such a

program at this scale, will motivate other universities and student governments to take similar actions to address this issue of equity" (Mettler, 2016). However, Brown University wasn't the only institution at the time to address these issues. In New York City, councilwoman Julissa Ferraras-Copeland spearheaded a campaign to provide free menstrual products in homeless shelters, public schools, and jails in New York City. In her advocacy efforts, Ferraras-Copeland compared tampons and pads to toilet paper, hand soap, and paper towels. In rhetorical criticism, scholars analyze rhetors relationship to truth through the lens of Aristotle's three rhetorical canons: ethos, pathos, and logos. In using ethos and pathos, rhetorical actors attempt to build a relationship with their audience. (Wrobel, 2005). In other words, the link between the audience and a central message is defined by the audience's perception of a given actor's passion and credibility. Logos, the third rhetorical canon, refers to the logical argument of a given message. In this instance, Ferraras-Copeland's message of period equity was defined by its logos in creating a logical equivalence between menstrual products and common toiletries such as toilet paper by drawing comparisons or outlining disparities between the two. A rhetor can be in danger of making a false equivalence when making such an argument. In such cases, paradoxes can detract from an argument. As a result, rhetors must understand the properties that make something appropriate to be compared to another (Bacon, 2013). Ferraras-Copeland knew that when she was drawing this equivalency. Both tampons and toilet paper are used for a necessary, involuntary biological process. Additionally, Ferraras-Copeland's ethos as a New York City councilwoman and her pathos in rhetoric effectively connected the message with the audience.

Inspired by both Nguyen's and Ferraras-Copeland's work and emboldened by the events at the UHC, I decided to write a few emails as a modest start to looking into the clear issues at JMU related to menstrual stigma. I wrote the first email to representatives at the UHC. In the

first letter to the health center, my friend and I drafted an email that addressed our reasoning for wanting more accessible tampons at the health center. It went as follows:

> Hello _______,
>
> We were interested in the Health Center's policies on providing tampons to students in need. Recently, we found we were in dire need of menstrual hygiene products and went to the Health Center for emergency supplies. Your staff were pleasant and professional in making sure we had what we needed.
>
> As we were walking away, we were so pleasantly surprised to find that the Health Center provided such necessary products that we wondered why more students did not know about this exceptional service.
>
> The condom wall at The Well is something that many students go to practice safe sex. Has anyone at the Health Center considered making a "Tampon/Pad Wall" for students in need of emergency supplies in order to go through their class days, especially as the lack of menstrual hygiene products for a day of class can be detrimental to the student experience. Making them more accessible can alleviate this issue.
>
> We apologize if we are emailing the wrong person. If so, we would love to be pointed in the right direction. We would love to hear your thoughts on this, and if possible meet with you to discuss it further.
>
> Respectfully,
> Magi Linscott & Sarah Boelsche

In this email, our main rhetorical effort was spent in trying not to offend the UHC representative in an effort to build a dialogue rather than a debate. We used condoms as an example to compare and contrast the ways hygienic supplies are treated to the ways condoms are dispensed at the UHC to mimic Ferraras-Copeland's rhetoric.

We received a response the next day and were surprised by the tone and dismissiveness of the email. For reasons of confidentiality, I am not including the original email but am, instead, including paraphrases and summaries to get across the message. The UHC official at first believed we had complained about the "Safer Sex Wall," and used a considerable portion of the email explaining elementary safe sex facts. The representative then went on to discuss that

tampons and sanitary napkins were neither necessary nor under the Health Center's purview as they don't constitute a health risk. While periods certainly aren't a disease, they do pose hygienic risks if the waste is not properly disposed, and I was struck by the implication that tampons and pads were luxuries. I have had friends skip entire classes because they did not have the supplies they needed to feel comfortable. The respondent also went on to explain that "girls" need to plan better if they find themselves without a tampon or simply "be creative" in finding other solutions. I was disappointed by the implication that neither my friend nor I were "responsible" enough (and apparently, we were "girls" and not "women"). The response made me feel sorry to have sent the email in the first place. This dismissive tone of the email and the explanation of basic facts is reminiscent of the ways in which Neoliberal logic privatizes certain issue and locks them inside the barred domains of experts or licensed specialists. In her book *Living Room: Teaching Public Writing in a Privatized World,* Nancy Welch furthers this argument by discussing the inherent barriers placed in grassroots movements that can create a schism between experts and activists (2008). Sue Wells, in an interview for *Composition Forum*, also touched on this schism by discussing two distinct publics: the "public of expertise" and the "public of engagement" (Minnix, 2017). The UHC's email reflects this schism as the respondent's purpose of replying was not to engage but rather to lecture and dismiss. Neoliberal logic also extends to the schism between activists and "official" sponsors. For instance, during a *University of Vermont* protest over immigration rights, Welch observed activists being restricted on where and how they conducted their protests. The reply I got from the email was so restrictive, that it offered my friend and I no recourse for continuing to converse or operate within the UHC's framework. In effect, we felt silenced and belittled by the response.

As days progressed, the email continued to bother me, so I did something simple, yet highly significant: I talked to people. At first, it started with close friends and family. The conversations then spread to include classmates, teachers, housekeepers, and strangers. At first, the conversations I started were relatively informal. They started with a summary of the email I got and outlined my reasons for wanting accessible products in campus restrooms. After I received the email from the UHC, I realized that a "Tampon Wall" similar to the "Safer Sex Wall" would do little to address the systems of period stigma and menstrual product inaccessibility that seemed to run rampant on campus. Instead, I believed that advocating for menstrual products in all bathrooms would promote a wider campus conversation and make a larger impact. As I talked to more people, my central argument grew into a formalized elevator pitch that was similar to this:

> "If JMU provides free condoms for a voluntary activity, I think they should provide tampons and pads for a biological necessity. The stigma associated with tampons and pads is so bad that lacking access to these types of products is not only a nuisance but is also detrimental to a student's experience."

As I talked with more people, I realized that I needed to write about it. In an editorial for the JMU student newspaper *The Breeze*, I wrote "Let's talk about tampons"—a piece that made the argument for accessible menstrual products in all JMU restrooms. I chose to write in *The Breeze* because it had a specialized JMU audience and because I believed the original email I received from the health center contained opinions and arguments that should be opened up for public debate. Opinions and worldviews are fallible, and as a result, challenging those opinions and worldviews is necessary to establish truth (Mills, 1859). In fact, the foundation of democratic deliberation is founded on that principle. *The Breeze* also occupied a very public forum to express ideas. In writing it, my position as student was overshadowed by my role as writer. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Jurgen Habermas argues that the

public sphere allows for individuals who occupy unequal positions to have relatively equal rhetorical weight (1962). *The Breeze* piece was intended to bring about a reaction of indignation and empowerment at the current conditions. My descriptions of my own menstrual process and the emotions of outrage I injected into it were attempts to make the personal political. The rhetoric of women's liberation also attempts to make personal experiences a political statement by focusing on "consciousness-raising" (Campbell, 1973). Personal, everyday experiences related to menstruation such as inserting or removing menstrual hygiene products, leaking blood through clothes, or feeling the pain associated with cramps can also be used as affectual arguments. Candice Rai describes affects as "primal, bodily, and sensual experiences" that can make strong arguments to influence an audience who may share those affects (2016).

By discussing these everyday experiences in *The Breeze* piece, I highlighted on the fact that menstruation was a shared experience by a majority of people at JMU. However, the rhetoric I used in this piece was not intended to invite mediation or exhibit any other characteristics of maternalistic rhetoric which was to come later in the campaign. Instead, it was intended to challenge and confront social norms that allowed for menstruation to be a burden on campus. Postmodern feminist ideals, such as disrupting narratives and making noise (Davis, 2000), permeated the editorial. In fact, the final sentence of the editorial, "Free the tampon; end the stigma." contained a call to action to disrupt the stigma at JMU. Postmodern feminist rhetoric calls for a "legion of noisemakers" that express and attack all forms of systemic oppressions (Welch, 2008). Dianne Davis calls postmodern feminist rhetoric "an attack on the politics of horror that has led us around by the nose since way before the Third Reich and has not let us go since" (2000).

During the editing process, many of the Breeze's editors made small changes to the document, but some had bigger implications. One change was categorizing tampons and pads as feminine hygiene products rather than menstrual hygiene products. Though seemingly small, this change excluded those who don't consider themselves feminine and transgendered men. It changed the rhetorical audience of the piece. Now, the audience was restricted to menstruators who identify as women and not to the numerous and diverse sets of people who do not fit in that category. After its publication, I got a few emails from students asking why I did not use more inclusive language. Their passion for inclusivity was impressive, and it spoke to what Angela Haas describes in her case study on decolonial technical communication theory: all rhetoric must involve a negotiation of cultural values (2012). In this setting, inherent values of gender conformity influenced the editorial's message and excluded an entire audience. From that point on, I vowed to stand up for inclusivity in all further communications about the project.

In conversations with various students and faculty and the emails I got after the editorial's release, I was surprised by the male (or those who identify as male) response to the issue. Virtually every male I talked to was shocked to learn about how vital tampons and pads were to menstruators' day-to-day life. Some were so interested in the issue that they wanted to help in whatever way they could. In an emailed response to the article, one person suggested tampon and sanitary napkin vending machines in all major buildings. Some of the older buildings on campus contained these types of machines in female bathrooms, but one housekeeper I talked to about it didn't believe they had worked for "30 years or so." Regardless, this commenter's passion about the project challenged my views about the prevalence of stigma on JMU's campus. Males didn't shudder at the thought of tampons or periods; in fact, many seemed interested in learning more. Part of this interest may be attributed to an unrepresentative

sample. The people with whom I surround myself and the interested readers of JMU's student newspaper may be more inclined to hold feminist values.

These types of conversations were one of the most important elements of the campaign. Every day, I would engage in conversations with strangers, housekeepers, and individuals representing a specific institution within JMU. These conversations were intended to reflect to a "bottoms-up" approach to engaging with the JMU community. In service-learning and pedagogy scholarship, philosophers and scholars emphasize two approaches to classes engaging with the community: "top down" and "bottoms-up" (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1973). In the "top-down approach," both students and instructors decide what a community needs and attempt to accommodate those perceived needs. "Bottoms-up" approaches are focused more on relationships rather than outcomes and determining set needs through coordination and communication (Mathieu, 2005). My conversations with JMU students, employees, and staff were intended to be an exchange of ideas. They typically started with a question about their views on the subject of menstruation, rather than a monologue on why I believed we should have free menstrual hygiene products. Invitational rhetoric is a form of rhetoric that seeks to validate others' perspective without being committed to change (Koss & Griffin, 1995). While "Let's talk about tampons" featured more traditional rhetoric—a single rhetor attempting to changing an audience's mind, these types of conversations were more concerned with listening to others' perspectives and engaging in a mutual understanding between myself and the people with whom I conversed.

Shortly after the publication of "Let's talk about tampons", a representative from the SGA contacted me wanting to learn more. For the purposes of this capstone project, I will refer to him as Mark. Upon meeting with him and telling him my ideas, he believed that we could

work together to pass an SGA Senate Bill calling on the JMU administration to make menstrual products available in campus restrooms. Mark operated within the framework of JMU, and the insight he had into the process of policy change at JMU made him an invaluable ally. Using Sue Wells' terms of different publics, his interest and action in this issue area signified a joining of "the public of engagement" and "the public of expertise" (Minnix, 2017). His help catapulted the project into the consciousness of an even larger audience. Before, audiences understood the campaign's message through the work of one person: me. After The Breeze's publication, individuals interested in the cause joined a GroupMe, or group text message, in which we discussed ideas and shared experiences. Now, its message was being co-opted and communicated by not only Mark, but various other students interested in the cause. Nancy Welch describes public rhetoric as a "mass, popular art" as Nancy Welch describes (2008). Public rhetoric should not be radical, but a normal part of the everyday experience. While this process was positive, there were also challenges that came with SGA's involvement. In the next chapter, I will outline some of the events that transpired during this process in detail.

The process was relatively simple. First, an SGA committee member would propose the bill in front of the SGA group as a whole. If no one had major objections, the bill would then be released to the student body for review. If 20% of the student body acknowledged their support for the bill, the bill would be voted on by the SGA. If it passed the SGA, representatives would take the bill to a senior official of the JMU administration for final review and approval. As an outsider, I knew very little of this information and was glad that Mark was able to help me navigate the process. At each stage of the process, I was able to address large groups of people both verbally and through writing to pitch the policy. During the petition process, I employed multiple strategies to garner support including emails, digital graphics, and social media posts.

Given the organizational structure of JMU, I knew that email was among the quickest ways to reach a large number of people and many students are involved in organizations on campus like clubs, sororities, and fraternities. I sent an email to the presidents of all the major clubs on campus, including Student Ambassadors—a club that offered tours to prospective students, the Feminist Collective—a club that advocates for women's rights, and Madison Equality—an organization the promotes LGBTQ+ rights. In addition to extra-curricular organizations, I also sent emails to Greek fraternities and sororities. The emails I wrote to sororities were quite very different from the types of emails I sent to traditional fraternities.

Traditional Social Sororities:

Subject Line: Free Tampons/Pads in JMU Bathrooms
Dear Alpha Phi,

I'm writing with an opportunity for the members of Alpha Phi to endorse a new JMU policy that would provide free tampons and pads in bathrooms on campus. Last semester, I found myself in need of some emergency supplies and was shocked at the lack of menstrual product accessibility on campus. In contrast, I had no problem getting my hands on free condoms. If one is free and accessible, I thought, why not the other?

If this policy passes, free menstrual hygiene products will be placed in bathrooms around campus. If your organization's members take only 30 seconds to sign this petition, then this policy will be closer to becoming a reality not only for current JMU students, but also for future JMU students.

Thanks very much for considering! I would really appreciate your support!

The petition is here:
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc0qAg0KlG5LZxyo3eHVTCyP18H7HcGNUuKmBcfhRLtBIALCQ/viewform?c=0&w=1

In case it is helpful, I've attached this brief PowerPoint slide and graphic for your use. I hope that Alpha Phi can support this policy and sign the petition!

If you or anyone in your organization has questions, I would be very glad to answer them. Please, also, forward this email to any other organization leader you think would be interested.

Most Sincerely,

Magi Jo Linscott

Traditional Social Fraternities:

Hello Gentleman,

I am writing to ask your support for a policy that would allow access to menstrual hygiene products for JMU student. A policy like this could make life easier for girlfriends, sisters, and friends. When someone does not have necessary hygienic products, this reality could ruin someone's whole day (and also let's be honest—it's gross). I hope that your organization can show support to the female population at JMU by sharing this petition with your members, talking about it at Chapter, and signing the petition.

Below is the link and attached is a PowerPoint slide with more info: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc0qAg0KlG5LZxyo3eHVTCyP18H7HcGNUuKmBcfhRLtBIALCQ/viewform?c=0&w=1

Please, feel free to email me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. I would be happy to talk further with you!

Sincerely,
Magi Jo Linscott

In addition to the emails, I sent digital graphics and *PowerPoint* slides in an attachment to the emails. They are as follows:

Figure 1:

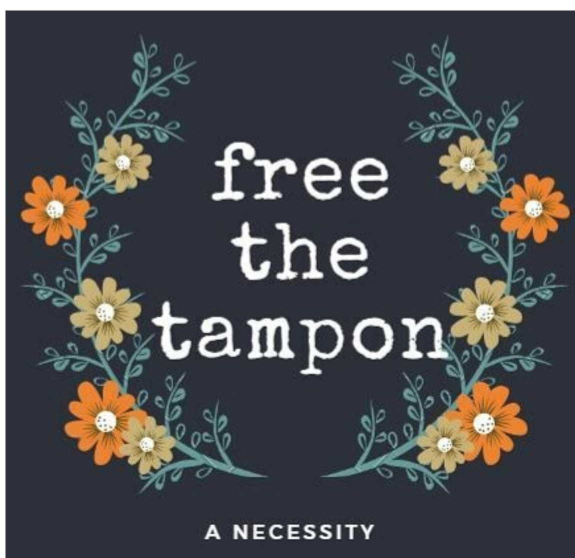
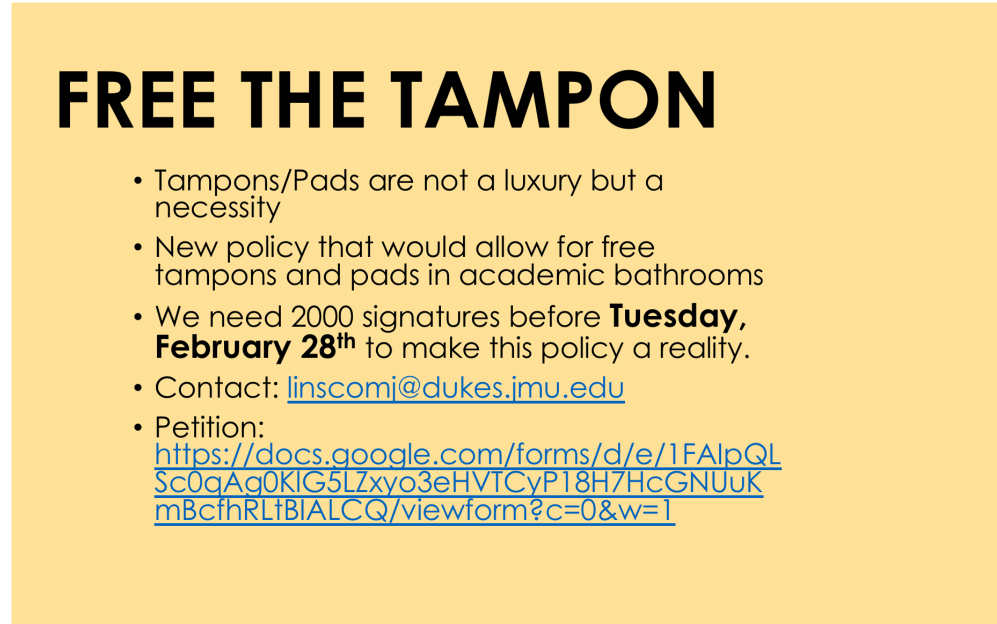


Figure 2:



Both of the above images, were also used in various social media posts on both my personal page and organizational pages who shared the image via Facebook. These images were also the backdrop by which I made my case in front of various classes in which I would emphasize the necessity of menstrual hygiene and discuss my personal experience. Both the emails and digital media were intended to be reappropriated by a third-party. For instance, in emailing a traditional social sorority, I expected the contents of my email and the PowerPoint slide to be changed and altered slightly by the leadership of the organization to convey the message to the organization's general members. Ridolfo and Devoss call this type of considerations "rhetorical velocity," a set of strategies used by rhetors when their original text is intended to be appropriated by third parties (2009). Rhetorical velocity asks rhetors to consider who is interested by their work and how third-parties may recompose their work. Rhetors must assess if their work was positively or negatively appropriated if both parties met their respective

goals (Ridolfo & Devoss, 2009). As there was no basis to see how (or if) organization leadership used my emails or media, I do not know if the effect was positive or negative.

By the end of the push to get signatures, over 20% of the student body expressed their support for the new policy. Because it got the required number of signatures, the policy, then, went to the SGA Senate meeting. In general, students in SGA seemed to support the Bill of Opinion or at the very least not adamantly oppose it. As such, it easily passed the SGA senate. Finally, it went before the Senior Vice President of JMU, Charlie King. In preparation for the meeting, I organized a group of people in support of the policy to document all of the restrooms in each of the major buildings on campus. In these outings, a group of people would count and classify all of the bathrooms in a given building by male, female, and gender-neutral classifications. At the end of this process, we had compiled data for bathrooms in all major buildings, including dining halls. My goal for the meeting was to lay a framework for which bathrooms should receive installations for free menstrual hygiene products.

Upon meeting with Charlie King, I was surprised at how interested he was in the philosophy behind the campaign. Although we spent a considerable amount of time discussing logistics, he was also interested in talking about the idea of menstrual equity. Six months after finding myself in need of a tampon, I am happy to report that JMU officially accepted a policy to allow free, accessible menstrual products in major campus bathrooms around the university's campus.

I started the campaign to create a campus wide conversation about periods and the destructive force of its stigmatization. In doing so, I realized that the best way to start this dialogue would be to push for something I originally thought was just slightly out of reach: free, accessible tampons in campus restrooms. I believed that addressing preconceived notions about

periods and thinking about ways to make menstrual products more accessible to those who need them would create a lasting impact. The successful passage of the policy was a seminal moment in which an institution addressed the menstrual needs of its community. Its passage is rooted in themes from both rhetorical and public policy scholarship. Social activists have long used rhetorical theories to advance their philosophy agendas, and I was no different. I realized the inherent importance of a "collision of opinions," John Stuart Mills described, to establish truth (1998). The campaign was also an example of the long, rich tradition of *paiedea. Paidea*, translated to "education for citizenship", implores educators to produce active citizens who are knowledgeable about community issues (Sundvall & Fredlund, 2017). Done well, community writing breaks down barriers between a university and a given community. While the campaign did not extend beyond the university's campus, it did engage with issues and solutions outside of a strict classroom setting. Devoid of a basic outline for the campaign, I created one myself.

My first rhetorical act wasn't in creating a message, but in identifying and characterizing a public. Jurgen Habermas' seminal book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* defines a public as a collection of private individuals drawn together by power and governing forces. Mass media also plays a role in expanding and further dividing publics. Rather than being part of the public sphere itself, French sociologist Bernard Meige calls mass media a "public sphere activation location" (2010). For the purposes of the menstrual equity campaign, these locations existed in Facebook groups, emails, and mobile messaging platforms like GroupMe. The locations activated public engagement across diverse publics. For instance, the emails I sent to gather signatures for the petition were most beneficial in reaching organizations, while Facebook messages mobilized already passionate, engaged individuals and seemed to enrage those who disagreed. These messages sent in across various places and modes, reached different

publics. The internet and its subsidiaries have made it possible to reach not only a breadth of audience, but also garner depth of engagement in that audience. Cardon (2010) posits that "on the internet, and thanks to the internet, the controlled public self-emancipates. It expresses itself without being asked to do so. It shamelessly exposes itself for the sake of creating new social ties...It defines, on its own terms, the subjects which it wishes to debate. It self-organizes."

In addition to the role of media, Aristotle's rhetorical pathos played a role in the campaign's success. In the emails to the traditional fraternities and sororities, I made pathetic appeals depending on the audience. To fraternities, I tried relating the issue of menstruation to men by framing it from the perspective of their mothers, sisters, and girlfriends, and to the sororities, I highlighted on the emotions associated with female empowerment and the shock of disparity on the institutional treatment between condoms and menstrual hygiene products. In pathetic appeals, audience emotions are harnessed to foster greater connection and engagement (Wrobel, 2005). My piece in *The Breeze* and the emails I sent to various organizations contained language to ignite audience dissatisfaction or engage in a student's perceived civic identity.

The passage of the bill signified the campaign's success. Because of the campaign's effort, menstrual hygiene products are located in female and gender-neutral restrooms in major buildings across campus. Students, faculty, and visitors of JMU now have free access to these necessities without facing undue burden.

Chapter 4: Sexism in Public Activism

Free the Tampon was a collaborative process that required the support of many different people and organizations. Given the scholarship on public writing, the need to establish a group of interested, diverse stakeholders were not surprising. In doing so, it aligned with Welch's idea of being an art enjoyed and used by a wide variety of people, rather than a radical few (2005). Indeed, a large part of this campaign's success can be directly attributed to the many hours of work individuals put in to gather signatures and prepare class presentations. Gathering other people's perspectives helped me learn important considerations regarding the campaign and how I might steer it toward success. For instance, JMU's housekeepers let me know about the infrastructure of the bathrooms and the dispensers. Various professors challenged me to learn more about the ethical considerations of menstrual equity, and SGA was invaluable in sharing their expertise and laying the foundation for the Bill of Opinion. These conversations, demonstrations, and experiences fostered information-sharing and inclusivity amongst various stakeholders. The foundation of the public sphere rests on deliberation among individuals to bring about a more inclusive, just society (Rai, 2016). Even the most innocuous conversation or presentation about Free the Tampon is not divorced from the idea of public rhetoric. Rhetoric can not be separated from public life, because public life is the foundation of the rhetorical tradition (Kahn & Lee, 2011). Free the Tampon led to a movement of individuals making noise and taking up space to get across their message.

The campaign focused on opening lines of dialogue about topics that were previously restricted from the public sphere. It contained elements of self-risk and unearthed moral conflicts. In discussing women's liberation, Campbell describes that the movement made moderate demands, but that they were seen as radical because they attacked foundational

principles in society (1973). In fact, the very idea of women assuming the role of public rhetor can be seen as radical because that position has traditionally been withheld and restricted to certain privileged members of a society (Campbell, 1973). As I conducted the campaign, I felt these restrictive forces that limited my agency and credibility. Neoliberalism also created barriers, such as Welch's considerations of a bourgeois liberalism that distrusts democratic participation and attempts to reduce agency (2005). In Welch's case, officials at the University of Vermont restricted protesters only to a small space on the campus lawn rather than the variety of areas within UVM's campus. In my case, I was denied decision-making capacities and watched as some of the campaign's message was reappropriated to another agenda entirely.

Mark was an acquaintance I met during a volunteer shift for an electoral campaign. When I talked to Mark about menstrual equity, I had no idea how interested in the policy he would become, nor could I predict the support he would provide as I moved the initiative forward. Early on in the project, when I described the objectives to non-menstruators, I made an effort to make them feel more comfortable about periods by explaining some of the practical issues involved in the process, such as needing supplies and experiencing scheduling conflicts. I would then try to provide a narrative of what would happen if a menstruator did not have access to hygiene products. Usually, non-menstruators were both shocked and appalled as they had no idea of the everyday difficulties menstruating women face when they do not have access to hygiene products. Mark was quite amenable to discussing menstruation; we talked about the philosophy of menstrual equity and the practical applications these types of discussions could have at JMU. I expressed my desire to see free, accessible products in campus bathrooms, so menstruators would not have to face any undue burden on their way to class or in a professional setting, and I was delighted to learn that Mark agreed with me so wholeheartedly after a short conversation.

After that conversation, weeks went by before I heard from Mark again. During that time, I had spent a considerable amount of time organizing people into a GroupMe dedicated to talking about menstrual equity. I created this GroupMe in response to feedback from many other people I had met who wanted a forum to talk about their experiences and push for free products on JMU's campus. The group increased to nearly 50 members in a short amount of time by sheer word-of-mouth. It included mostly women, but a few men were also interested in learning more. As I ran the forum and looked for ways to start a wider conversation about menstrual equity across campus, unbeknownst to me, Mark was also working on a related initiative. About two months after we had our conversation, Mark wrote me to let me know that he thought the political climate was ripe in SGA to pass a policy that would provide free tampons and sanitary napkins on campus and wanted my help drafting a bill and getting it passed through SGA and the JMU administration. Naturally, I was ecstatic. While I had wanted to do more research prior to officially advocating for a policy, a window like this was a hard opportunity to pass. I felt that the kairotic moment was coming to the fore.

When Mark and I met to discuss the proposed policy, I had prepared research and talking points to key in on some of the nuances of menstrual equity from the literature and to discuss the practicality of a JMU policy. I was, therefore, surprised to attend the meeting and see that a lot of the groundwork for the policy was already established. Mark very much took ownership of the initiative; hearing him speak to his SGA colleagues about the project very much insinuated that I was a mere supplier of a personal narrative while he, as a male SGA member, was spearheading the campaign. He gave the impression, in fact, that the campaign had been his own creation and passion all along, and he made it clear that this was actually now *his* project, and he'd let me play a minor role since I menstruate. This reminded me of Cheryl Glenn's discussion of

Aspasia—a scholar and intellectual who was denied her rhetorical agency and denigrated to a sex symbol by the men around her (1989). What I was experiencing certainly wasn't new, it was just a continuation of the dominant, male culture that my campaign sought to disrupt, albeit in a small way.

Of course, I claim no ownership to the menstrual equity movement here at JMU nor elsewhere, nor do I think that my story as menstruator is any better than others', but I was shocked to hear that plans and activities were being set up that didn't involve me in any way, nor did they involve the group I'd mobilized for this initiative. During that meeting, I expressed how earnestly I wanted to be involved in the process. Dauntingly, though, a power differential continued to characterize my working relationship with Mark as I had to constantly fight for a seat at the table. In meetings and presentations to interested parties, I had to work twice as hard to be heard. In one meeting with the SGA general body, Mark spoke for virtually the entire time—even after promising me I would have the floor. I spent a lot of time carefully preparing remarks, but the only words I could say were those interjected between his sentences, and even those were forced in an aggressive way that felt unfair to me.

These instances were incredibly disheartening. Mark and I were supposed to have equal roles. Influenced by the ideas of invitational rhetoric and public rhetoric's emphasis on collaboration, I found his desire to collaborate very appealing. However, and as we continued, I realized that Mark might have ulterior motives and might not be entirely passionate about the project. I was primarily interested in starting a campus conversation about menstrual equity and raising awareness about accessibility issues so that menstrual products would be more accessible to everyone who needs them. Mark was also motivated by that end goal, but he also seemed to be motivated by political forces within SGA. At one point, I wondered if the only reason he wanted

to help was to increase his credibility and visibility within SGA. In a rather brazen fashion, he was comfortable co-opting my project to get ahead. At one point, in fact, I discovered that I was not going to be invited or permitted to attend a significant meeting with JMU's upper-administration related to the project. This very clear slight helped me come to terms with the fact that I was dealing with textbook sexism. I do not think Mark was ever intentionally misogynistic; instead, I think that Mark simply did not think about the effects of his actions— that emboldened him and silenced me. Mark is part of a larger patriarchal culture where everyday sexism and systems of oppression are all too common. I cannot help but wonder how much more difficult these systems of oppression would be to navigate for a woman of color or transgendered man.

In establishing the campaign, I was influenced by the ideals and theories espoused by feminist rhetoric. Historically, those who didn't fit the pattern of being white, male, and powerful were all together left out of the rhetorical process (Ede, Glenn, & Lunsford, 1995). The experience I had was simply a reverberation of this same paradigm. Even the very principles of rhetoric have masculine qualities that require domination and submission of audiences into adopting a specific viewpoint (Koss & Griffin, 1995). However, feminist rhetoric offers an alternative; one that is focused on inclusion and equality, but it also provides ammunition for creating change. Postmodern feminist rhetoric, as Dianne Davis so amply puts it is "an attack on the horrors that have led us around the nose" for almost all of history (2000). In many ways, it is one of outrage and moral conflict that seeks to push back against systems of oppression that aim to silence and deny.

As an illiterate slave, Sojourner Truth had to reappropriate traditional mediums to make room for her rhetorical style. These mediums were intent on silencing and restricting her rhetorical agency. Suzanne Pullon Finch observes that Truth's "use of the simple language of the

uneducated, which she could weave into striking narrative and metaphors, her nearly six-foot frame that revealed the strength developed working as a farmhand and housemaid, and her powerful low voice telling of her denied rights as a woman and an African-American made her one of the most forceful instruments of reform" (1993). Truth is an example of a woman who had to fight back against a system that was not only designed to be unaccommodating but also denied her agency. Audre Lorde observes that silence does little to bring change, instead it aims to keep one afraid and immobile (1978). Her fear would have remained unchanged if she had remained silent. Audre Lorde's observations on silence offered me a powerful reason to not only continue fighting for the campaign's goals, but also to reform the attitudes and domination that were internally inherent in the hearts and minds of my collaborators. In feminist Trinh T. Minh-ha's writings, she discusses the ways in which rhetoric inevitably involves some form manipulation to get an audience to exhibit a behavior or take a specific action (1989). Even in the simplest of conversations with Mark, I felt the undercurrents of manipulation.

It is ironic that such a campaign would have misogyny and a culture of silencing running in the background. Trinh T. Minh-a's defines feminism as a movement that questions and challenges systems of oppression (1989) such as the related domains of sexism, racism, and class elitism that bell hooks describes (2015). I started the project because I did not want anyone who menstruates to feel silenced or humiliated over such a natural process. From the very first incident at the UHC, I realized that people need to feel empowered and emboldened to take a stand against stigmatizing forces and the systems of oppression that created those very forces. As I conducted the project, however, I experienced both explicit and implicit misogyny. Explicitly, certain individuals had questioned why they should care about the issue. Some Facebook commenters asked, "Why should I care about this if it doesn't affect me?" In fairness, these

comments were few and far in between. Instead, the most common type of sexism I experienced was mostly in the form of belittling, silencing, and "mansplaining"—in which a man explains something to someone in a condescending or patronizing manner. In my work on this project, I experienced mansplaining multiple times from a wide variety of people. Even those experiences, though, paled in comparison to Mark trying to take over my project for his own professional gain--even while knowing that the project had a personal value to me as well as a clear academic payoff in terms of my Honors capstone. Feminist methodology calls on us to recognize our own power in relation to our research, and critically examine how social positions derived from gender, class, race, and other categories can impact one's power (Deutsch, 2004; Dill, 1987). It was important for me to recognize my position as a white, college student and the social power I had in emphasizing the project's academic basis.

In Mark's case, I do not believe he was ever intentionally trying to act in a sexist manner; instead, I think that he simply did not think his actions were problematic. Instead of our working relationship being characterized by collaboration and an exchange of ideas, it seemed to be defined by power differentials that were punted back and forth like a football. Eventually, the dynamic seemed so strained that my academic advisor got involved to address the issue. The intervention of my academic advisor seemed to be the breaking point for the situation. Immediately after my advisor had sent an email, we both received an email from the SGA president at the time that was profusely apologetic and outlined an action plan to address the issue. As a result, I was promised to be given more speaking time at the next meeting and would be present at the final meeting with senior administration.

Despite these promises, however, I found that very little changed to address Mark's behavior. As the campaign came to a close, I still felt that I was being used a mouthpiece for a

campaign that I created. In truth, this feeling has never truly left me. I felt it in the final push to get signatures, in the final pitch meeting with upper administration, and when a viral news story about the campaign failed to credit me and only credited Mark. Perhaps, it is a testament that even well-meaning people can perpetuate a culture of oppression. Because of that, I had to work twice as hard just to be part of something I created. I was expecting some form of sexism from targeted audiences, but I was surprised to see such sexism playing out within the campaign itself. While this chapter is certainly cathartic, it also serves as a case study on the nuanced ways sexism rears its head in social activism campaigns.

Chapter 5: Criticisms of the Campaign

While *Free the Tampon* was successful in passing the SGA Bill of Opinion to pass and creating a campus-wide conversation about menstrual equity, it did have certain notable criticisms. These criticisms ranged from unproductive and banal to constructive and helpful. For instance, one Facebook comment referencing the campaign stated that “at least the women of JMU can take solace in the fact that they’ve been able to enjoy the free pinball machines, snacks, complimentary mints, and cool urinals that I’ve seen in all the bathrooms I have been in.” The commenter was trying to make the point that accessible menstrual hygiene supplies was simply too much to ask for and that perhaps the campaign is akin to other signs that college campuses operate like for-profit resorts rather than spartan institutions of higher education. I received similar comments from students about the campaign, but this one stood out to me in both creativity and snark.

Some of the criticisms appeared to be nothing more than a few people trying to assuage their anger at the world by directing it towards the campaign like the commenter who sarcastically said I should direct more efforts towards making arcade machines available in all bathrooms. Others thought the entire premise of the campaigns was gross and not worth the merits of public discussion. While these comments were amusing, they also pointed to the absolute necessity of the campaign to encourage dialogue and disrupt the narrative that periods are shameful. feminist rhetoric acts to eliminate systems of elitism and domination to create relationships built on the democratic topoi of equality (Koss & Griffin, 1995). It would have been easy to remain silent and submissive, but as Audre Lorde puts it there is a revelatory power in “transform(ing) silence to language” (1978). If I would have stayed silent and afraid of the criticisms that the campaign could generate, I would have remained that way indefinitely and

there would be no policy. The campaign had a tangible benefit in providing menstruators with free, accessible tampons and pads. Without the campaign, that benefit simply would not exist, and menstruators would continue to face barriers and hardship in acquiring basic necessities.

Of course, other perhaps more valid forms of criticism were deserved. Some argued that the campaign was not inclusive enough in its rhetoric towards members of the trans community and that the policy did not effectively grant access to tampons and sanitary napkins for all JMU menstruators. Additionally, *Free the Tampon* did not do enough to address systemic issues associated with menstrual equity and had no framework for what could be done after the successful implementation of the policy. For instance, there were no evaluative measure for success after the program was implemented. To this day, I only receive anecdotal evidence about the policy's success

Transgender inclusion, or the lack thereof, was the most common and significant criticism of the campaign, and this is a criticism that I take very seriously. In both the campaign's rhetoric and policy implementation, some argued that transgender students were left out of the dialogue about menstrual product accessibility on campus. After the publication of *The Breeze* editorial "Let's talk about tampons," I received emails and Facebook comments from people who wished I had used more inclusive language in the piece. To be honest, at first, I was confused by the comments as I had made an effort to use "people with periods" instead of "women" in the piece. On a closer reading, I discovered the source of their frustrations. In the editorial, I refer to menstrual products as "feminine hygiene products." Some commenters were even frustrated that I had used the term "female" in the piece. In particular, one Facebook commenter stated that in saying female, I "excluded an entire group of people" and failed to realize that "not all menstruators are women."

At first, I found the comments to be a bit over-sensitive as I had made a conscience effort to do the opposite. It discouraged me to think that my efforts to be inclusive were simply not enough, and I was confused about ways to discuss biological reproductive processes without referring to sex-designations. Upon closer research, I realized that most of their points were valid. As a cisgender female, I have latent *gender congruence capital*. As Andrew Cutler-Seeber describes, gender-congruence capital refers to the ways in which people have power in possessing a gender identity that matches their sexual identity (2017). I had used the power that comes from gender-congruence capitol to a group of people with whom I was trying to connect.

This experience helped me come to terms with the need to think critically about gender-based word choice in activist campaigns because word choice that, at first, seems benign can easily include or exclude specific groups. For instance, the term "feminine hygiene products" indicate that only women or those who perform femininity have use for them, which is obviously not the case. Transgender men or women who masculinity can be left out due to this exclusionary term. Transgender advocates, instead, promote the use of the term "menstrual hygiene products" when discussing tampons or sanitary napkins (Licorish, 2017). I should have anticipated this issue as my academic studies in gender and sexuality have made it clear that sex and gender are two very different concepts. Sex refers to a generally binary designation of male or female based on one's biological reproductive system. Gender, however, knows no such binary as it refers to a socially-constructed set of performances based on the male and female identity. Gender in effect isn't real, instead it is a "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigin regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1999). While I consider my reference to "females" in the piece to be referring to biological reproductive systems and

processes, I believe the other terms I used were exclusive to a cisgender experience left and further burdened the transgender community at JMU. This was an unfair thing to do since transgender youth and young adults are already burdened with negotiating their gender identities with the outside worlds starting from a very young age (Dietert & Dentice, 2013).

JMU does not have the kinds of everyday signs of progress that other, further along campuses might, such as an appropriate number of gender-neutral restrooms. JMU students who identify as transgender must constantly consider which bathroom they are able use throughout a normal school day; they must also endure the awkward stares and sometimes outright disrespect that is perpetuated by a heteronormative culture. Heteronormativity rewards or sanctions individuals based on presumed binaries (Jackson, 2006). These sanctions can be in the form of exclusion, such as my piece's reference to "feminine hygiene products" or outright discrimination. For instance, the *Human Right's Campaign* currently calculates that only 18 states prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in the workplace (2017). In the other 32 states, transgendered people are not protected against discrimination in the workplace. Due to these realities, exclusion and discrimination can become a part of a transgender person's daily routine, and this is why inclusive language and rhetoric is so important. The very systems that trans people operate in are unkind and hard to navigate; they alienate rather than nurture their identities. For instance, trans students at JMU face barriers based on wrong dorm assignments or can be called the wrong pronouns by classmates or professors. Using exclusionary language that denies them their experience is not just ignorance on the part of the speaker or writer, it can be seen a denial of the trans identity.

After realizing the burden transgender students face at JMU and the exclusive language I had used in the editorial, I sought to correct my terms in all further writings, meetings, and

official documents throughout the rest of the campaign. For instance, the original SGA Bill of Opinion contained language referencing “feminine hygiene products” and the feminine identity. Additionally, the original policy only called on JMU to install accessible tampons and sanitary napkins in female restrooms. In editing the SGA Bill of Opinion, I removed any reference to “feminine hygiene products” and put “menstrual hygiene products” instead. In reference to the restrooms, I edited it to include all restrooms, left purposely vague to provide room for negotiation. These changes to the campaign mid-stream illustrate the importance of public debate and feedback from various publics while a rhetorician is in the process of fighting for specific change. Burke observes that rhetors must adjust their methods according to external influences (1967). Rhetors must facilitate a dialogue with their audience. By facilitating this process, rhetors open themselves to the risk that they could be wrong (Natanson, 1965). The self-risk and the feedback that arose out of it allowed for a better, more inclusive message. In part, I believe that the campaing’s capacity welcome criticism and use it constructively has roots in invitational rhetoric. Koss and Griffin note that invitational rhetoric is focused on dialogue rather than debate and works to validate all perspectives rather than a singular one (1995). This willingness to revise content and approach was highly important in making the campaign better.

Still, things being what they are here at JMU, Mark and I agreed that the JMU administration would not likely approve free menstrual product access in all restrooms, but we believed it would be likely that this language could entice their support for the policy’s inclusion in gender-neutral restrooms. One must always account for their audience, and that is precisely what we were doing. Still, some believed that advocating for products to be included in gender-neutral restrooms was not enough. After all, Brown University, one of the inspirations for the campaign, had successfully managed to include free products in all female, male, and gender-

neutral restrooms on their campus, but the proposed policies at James Madison University and Brown University were fundamentally different. At Brown, SGA paid for and implemented the policy independent of the institution. Brown, an elite ivy league institution, is a very different setting than a state's historic normal school turned comprehensive university. At JMU, we were arguing for the institution to pay for and manage the policy. In doing so, we wanted to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the program. The current policy and messaging, including gender-neutral and female restrooms, might not be popular with some who think that male restrooms should have been included as well, but I hope and believe that the *Free the Tampon* campaign laid the foundations for its eventual inclusion in the current program. We sought a path forward that was most responsive to local conditions—something that is very important in activist work.

As well, although I did not receive many comments about this aspect of the campaign, I believe that "Free the Tampon" did not do enough to address systemic causes and issues related to menstrual equity. Menstrual equity refers to the growing movement by activists to reduce the stigma associated with menstruation and to increase access to menstrual hygiene products for vulnerable populations. Disenfranchised populations include incarcerated, homeless, or low-income individuals who cannot gain access to products because of financial or social reasons relating to stigma. State governments have taken steps to address this issue by excluding tampons from their state's sales tax. Maryland, New Jersey, and Minnesota have long exempted tampons from their sales tax because they are classified as necessities. Other necessities exempt are prescriptions, prosthetics, and sometimes clothes. In other states, activists have argued that the tax is discriminatory against women who cannot help the natural menstrual process (Pearson, 2017).

By initiating *Free the Tampon*, I engaged in private politics rather than governmental politics. Private politics is defined by its institutional focus. Activists and organizations engaging in private politics push an institution to conform to social standards (Brietenger & Bonardi, 2016). If I carried out a campaign that focused on governmental politics, I could have attempted to address the foundational components of menstrual equity more holistically by focusing on vulnerable populations. Instead, my status as a JMU student and my personal experiences with the inaccessibility of menstrual hygiene supplies on campus propelled me to engage in private politics within JMU. Usually, activists engaging in private politics engage in rhetorical acts such as blockades, protests, radio spots, and television commercials to compel an institution to conform to a given standard (Bonardi & Keim, 2005). Generally, non-profits and other organizations carry out sophisticated campaigns that engage an institution in a specific debate tailored to the organization's agenda (Breitenger & Bonardi, 2016). While also engaging in the campaigns, activists can achieve a specific goal by criticizing a given institution through internet or other media platforms (Brietenger & Bonardi, 2016). At the heart of *Free the Tampon's* rhetoric was a central thesis that JMU should do more to decrease the burden on menstruating students. This conclusion was backed up by evidence explaining the UHC's response to my need for emergency supplies and the barriers menstruating students face. This type of criticism was a shared experience for many menstruators, and I believe that this caused students to support SGA's Bill of Opinion.I cannot help but wonder if I would have garnered similar student support for a campaign that was not for and about JMU students. I ponder how I would have had to approach things differently if I were trying to gain a local, interested public for more progressive aims. *Free the Tampon* might not have addressed root causes, but I hope that it can be a starting point for further conversation and exploration to address menstrual equity

in the local Harrisonburg area as well as on the JMU campus. Any social activism campaign comes with its fair share of criticism, and *Free the Tampon* is certainly no exception. While there may be many more valid forms of criticism than the two covered here, these two criticisms—trans inclusivity and addressing root causes—provide a basis for further exploration and potential improvements for other menstrual equity campaigns.

Chapter 6: Commodification of a Movement

Sometime during the midst of the campaign, a tampon company connected with me. They introduced themselves as a company dedicated to closing the accessibility gap people faced in acquiring menstrual hygiene supplies. I was ecstatic that they had reached out to me, and wanted to learn more about their business model. *Conscious Period* is a company that sells organic tampons to consumers, and then donates other menstrual hygiene supplies to vulnerable populations in a one-to-one donation model. In the summary for a fundraising campaign, they call themselves a movement and introduced themselves as an ally in the "menstrual revolution," and they "want to insure that every woman has access to the healthy period products she deserves, period" (2015). This type of rhetoric reminded me of the kind that Julissa Ferraras-Copeland had used in her campaign in New York City by calling tampons as "necessary as toilet paper" (Mettler, 2016). Fascinated, I began looking at other brands and products that were using the rhetoric of feminism and menstrual equity. Menstrual hygiene companies' language of equity and access were quite different from the emphasis on secrecy and protection that were espoused by mid-twentieth century tampon and pad advertising. (Freidenfelds, 2009; Dickinson, 1945; Bobel, 2010).

Beyond stressing equity and access, the founders of *Conscious Period* stress the numerous benefits of social enterprise models like their own (indiegogo). For instance, for each box of tampons that a consumer buys, *Conscious Period* will donate a box of pads to a homeless individual. This type of one-to-one donation model is not without its critics. Some argue that these models model can negatively affect local producers and can provide a surplus of unwanted, unnecessary products without addressing systemic community needs (Wydick, 2016). One often cited academic study estimates that one-to-one donations in Africa lead to a 40% decline in

production and a 50% decline in employment in the region (Frazer, 2008). In *Conscious Periods'* initial pitch to consumers, the company seemed cognizant of these criticisms by asserting that their donation model promoted sustainability and addressed a previous unmet need in homeless communities (2016). While *Conscious Period's* mission is restricted to the United States, other entrepreneurs are addressing menstrual hygiene needs internationally. For instance, Arunachalam Muruganantham has become known as the "menstruation man" because of his work in designing a machine to produce low-cost sanitary products for menstruators in developing companies (Gilson, 2016).

Other companies like *THINX* use the rhetoric of feminism to advertise their products. THINX designs period-friendly underwear and offers messaging that promotes womanhood and reduces period stigma. In an interview with *Fast Company*, former *THINX* CEO Mikki Agrawal stated that "Every touchpoint that the consumer has with the brand, from the product to the website to the ads, needs to make a woman feel good about having her period. It has to hit the mark in terms of aesthetic design, product innovation and in accessible, relatable brand communication… [T}hese three prongs coming together can change culture" (Segran, 2016). Changing culture is a high watermark for a company's success. Language and perhaps other forms of textual rhetoric do not reflect the experiences of women and are more inclined to reflect the needs of those in power rather than those who are not (Kramarie, 1981).

No doubt, *THINX* is trying to persuade the audience to buy their product, but they are also questioning and challenging established systems while they are doing it which is the foundation for feminist rhetoric (Minh-ha, 1989). *THINX* uses visual rhetoric to push previously established boundaries and controls in a masculine culture. For instance, since its introduction, the company has been involved in controversial and risky advertising campaigns to reduce

period stigma. One ad features a halved grapefruit with copy that simply states "Underwear for women with periods" was deemed too suggestive for New York City subways. Other, perhaps more mainstream, menstrual hygiene advertising campaigns offer messaging more in line with the protection and secrecy rhetoric from older companies. For instance, these commercials depict menstrual flow as blue rather than red, as the mere allusion to menstruation is considered too risky. In a masculine culture, symbols depicting the female identity are silenced or recoded to deny and silence the female reality (Bobel, 2008), but *THINX* offers an alternative by being yet another voice in the "legion of noisemakers" that characterize postmodern feminist rhetoric (Welch, 2008).

Despite it's feminist rhetoric, *THINX* has faced criticism because of its founders disparaging comments on feminism and the culture of exclusion and domination it creates for its employees. In a profile for *The Cut,* Miki Agrawal stated that she didn't consider herself a feminist until she started the company, and that "every time I thought about the word *feminist,* I thought about an angry, ranty … girl" (Malone, 2016). Additionally, former *THINX* employees argued that there was a disconnect between the company's central message and its reality by offering poor maternity leave and a toxic work environment to those who work there (George-Parkin, 2017). I found these revelations especially troubling as it seems that feminism is being commodified to sell the company's period-friendly underwear.

In her book, *We were Feminists Once* (2017), Andi Ziesler uses the term "empowertising" to explain the phenomenon. She argues that feminist thought is being commodified to reach a larger, more general audience, and it is making feminism "empty, noncommittal, and retrograde." *THINX's* advertising joins a long line of brands seeking to capitalize on feminism, such as Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign or Beyonce's grand exaltations of

feminism during concert performances. However, this type of commodification has very little lasingt impact. Individuals may feel empowered at a personal level but do not face any compulsion to act outside of their individual experience (Riordan, 2001). Indeed, this type of feminism, or marketplace feminism, emphasizes individual transformation at the cost of depoliticizing and simplifying feminism's original message, that is, to confront and challenge authority. (Douglas, 2017) For instance, THINX's emphasis on empowerment does little to promote change if the point of the messaging is simply for consumers to buy and use their products. Catherine Driscoll wonders if such examples can even be authentic if feminism becomes a "mass-produced, globally distributed product" (Driscoll, 2002). Rather than being nullified, the foundations of feminist messaging can be redefined and revised by the existing power structures it is trying to fight. In her analysis on Spice Girls merchandise, Riordan observed "how the feminist rhetoric of empowering girls became subsumed in the dominant culture and in the process, became neutralized" (2001). In another study, Thomas and Zimmerman found that the feminist ideals of empowerment were co-opted to create a more market-driven model in women's health care facilities (2007). As a result, women were denied their agency as humans in need of care and instead, transformed into revenue-generating objects.

The effects derived from marketplace feminism are helpful in understanding the criticisms of *THINX* and in allowing us to place the company in a broader context of marketplace feminism. Companies engaged in marketplace feminism do not compel individuals to act outside the framework of dominant culture to challenge systems of oppression (Riordan, 2001). When I first received communications from *Conscious Period,* I was enthused and excited at the possibility of a partnership. Though the initial communications never progressed past the hypothetical, I wonder the ways in which a partnership would have influenced JMU's *Free the*

Tampon. The commodification of feminism can raise serious concerns, and I wonder if the partnership would have diluted the campaign's message of social activism rather than individual transformation that many companies emphasize.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Nearly a year after the conclusion of *Free the Tampon*, I was invited to a give a lecture on the campaign and concept to a group of students in a lecture series "MADtalks." As I prepared for the presentation, I reflected on the engagement and interest the campaign generated. People who had never before heard of menstrual equity wrote to me to express their support. More than 50 strangers joined a GroupMe to talk about ideas and create a strategy for the campaign, and over 2,000 students—both those who identify as female and male—signed a petition to push for free menstrual hygiene products at JMU. In doing so, the students of JMU participated in the "mass, popular art" that is public rhetoric (Welch, 2005). The campaign successfully brought about a new program at JMU—one that promoted accessibility of menstrual hygiene supplies for all who menstruate. While systemic social change can't occur over the course of a single semester (Mathieu, 2005), *Free the Tampon* succeeded in achieving a localized policy change. Social change, the kind that emerges victorious over systems of oppression, takes much longer to achieve.

The issues surrounding the emerging field of menstrual equity are far from over. In early February of 2018, the Virginia House Education subcommittee considered a bill that would require public schools to provide free menstrual products, but the bill failed in a 5-5 vote. The Virginia legislature is currently considering a bill to make menstrual products exempt from sales tax, thus eliminating the "tampon tax" in Virginia. Legislators in the House of Delegates are currently debating whether or not menstrual products should be considered a "medical device" as medical devices are tax exempt under Virginia law (Service, 2018). Readers might be surprised to learn that even though the Federal Food and Drug Administration considers tampons and pads to be medical devices, the state of Virginia currently does not. Virginia legislators and activists

are also working to provide safe access to menstrual hygiene for incarcerated individuals (Service, 2018). In facilities around the state, some menstrual hygiene products are not freely provided to incarcerated individuals. These actions by activists and legislators reflect the convergence of the "public of experts" and "public of activists" that Sue Wells discussed in her interview with *Composition Forum* (Minnix, 2017). The discourse between experts and activists has provided a space for the idea of menstrual equity to flourish. While JMU's decision to provide accessible menstrual hygiene products was certainly a victory for menstrual equity, the issue is reflective of a broader system of oppression that limits agency and voice to those who are not in a position of power, and it is the task of feminist rhetors to challenge and fight it (Minh-ha, 1990). In a localized setting, *Free the Tampon* challenged authority, but it is only one small step forward in a rather long fight.

Before the menstrual equity movement found its footing, rhetorics surrounding menstruation primarily took up issues of hygiene and women's liberation. When women moved into the workforce and into public life, they took their periods with them, and commercial menstrual products soon became available in the public market (Bobel, 2010). These types of products advertised secrecy and protection above all else, and medical journals at the time extolled menstrual products' lack of smell and absorbency power while forgetting other important characteristics like safety and comfort (Freidenfelds, 2009). However, during the women's liberation phase of menstrual rhetoric, feminist activists pushed back on the attention paid to protection and secrecy arguing that it was a denial of the female experience, and superabsorbent tampons designed for "leak-protection" resulted in a Toxic Shock Syndrome Outbreak that took 39 lives. Activists argued that male-dominated industry harmed women by not taking their agency and narratives into account (Bobel, 2008).

Feminist activists like Gloria Steinem and Judy Chicago tried to push back against the stigma associated with having a period by writing essays and taking self-portraits to normalize periods. When the concept of menstrual equity came into the public sphere much more recently, it used concepts derived from its theoretical predecessors. By signifying menstrual products' necessity in daily life, menstrual equity activists elicit themes from the hygienic movement of protection by advancing the idea that menstruators deserve to feel comfortable in public spaces. The feminist movement also influenced menstrual equity's focus on vulnerable populations: homeless, incarcerated, or low-SES individuals. The movement's emphasis on empowerment and social action offer a chance to resist systems of dominance.

Free the Tampon also used social activism to change a policy within an institution. Influenced by Brown University's new accessible tampon policy and the work of Julissa Ferraras-Copeland in New York City, I attempted to push for change at an institutional level to provide free, accessable menstrual products to all who need them. As I conducted the campaign, I tried to harness the engagement of interested groups and individuals, and I also learned about the importance of using inclusive language and to affirm transgender students' identities and roles in the policy. After all, fighting against one system of oppression while dismissing other systems is not true feminism (Minh-ha, 1990). Building on the themes of menstrual equity such as inclusiveness, social justice, and accessibility, I tried to make the case to the JMU campus that we had a social responsibility to ensure all members of our community were comfortable and had what they needed to lead productive days.

Because the campaign's impetus was based on an everyday concern, I often felt thrust into the campaign. *Free the Tampon* also unfolded rather quickly over the period of a few months. If I had dedicated more time to intentionally strategizing, researching scholarship, and honing the message away from the public eye, I imagine I would have made a more concerted effort to incorporate inclusive

messaging and more resources to combat the sexism I faced. While I was struggling with the challenges presented by Mark's overreach, my attention focused more on consolidating my individual agency and power over the project's mission. If I had time to prepare, I might have had a more productive strategy to deal with that brand of sexism. However, public writing scholarship makes it clear that many activists stumble upon their work due to everyday issues that affect them locally. Linda Shamoon and Eileen Meideros argue that public writing is defined by its urgency as students begin to realize they have a responsibility and a right to civically engage with local, everyday issues (2010). Circumstances and events sometimes necessitate the need for immediate action.

The immediacy of Free the Tampon necessitated collaboration among many different people or rather a "legion of noisemakers" as Welch describes her observations of student activists (2008). As I presented at the "MADtalk," I realized that the campaign also had an unintended effect. After I finished my outline of the campaign, one of the audience members approached me to talk about the efforts of other students at neighboring schools and asked if I might give some advice to those individuals. I enthusiastically agreed, as I believe collaboration and sharing of information and resources can lead to policy change and systemic change. While *Free the Tampon* was ultimately successful in creating a local change, statewide and national policies need to address issues of equity and access for all who menstruate.

In the "MADtalk," I highlighted the origin of the campaign and used my personal narrative to justify the campaign's message. Discussing the everyday mundanities of my period and my yearning for more accessible hygiene supplies in front of an audience of strangers made me feel vulnerable, but it was an important step for the audience to understand the campaign's themes. In public rhetoric, rhetors must open themselves to self-risk to foster debate (Natansen, 1965). In talking about these personal experiences, I also invoked one of the themes of early feminist scholarship, that is, to make the personal, everyday experience something political and

subject to public discourse (Campbell, 1973). It is my hope that JMU students and staff no longer have to whisper about such a basic process. As I concluded the MADtalk, I realized that *Free the Tampon* did not end after the installation of free tampon and pad dispensers across campus. It continues each time someone uses one of the them on campus, and each time a JMU student talks about their period free of stigma or embarrassment. JMU's decision to add free products on campus is just a blip in the long battle ahead to decrease the burden on the world's menstruators. While systemic change cannot happen in a semester, the project shows that it may be worthwhile to try.

References

(2015). Conscious Period - Organic Period Products For All. Retrieved February 30, 2018, from https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/conscious-period-organic-period-products-for-all#/

Appell, L. W. (1988) Menstruation among the Rungos of Borneo: An unmarked category. In Buckley, T. T., & Gottlieb, A. (1988) Blood Magic: The anthropology of menstruation. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bacon, A. (2015). Paradoxes of logical equivalence and identity. *Topoi*, 34(1): 89-98.

Bobel, Chris (2008) 'From convenience to hazard: A short history of the emergence of the menstrual activism movement, 1971-1992. *Health Care for Women International*, 29(7): 738-754.

Bobel, C. (2010). The emergence of menstrual activism. In *New Blood (*pp. 42-64). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Bonardi, J. P. , & Keim, G. (2005). Corporate political strategies for widely salient issues. *Academy of Management Review,* 30(3): 555–576

Breitinger, D., & Bonardi, J. (2016). Private politics daily: What makes firms the target of internet/media criticism? An empirical investigation of firm, industry, and institutional factor. In Figueiredo, J., Lenox, M., Oberholzer-Gee, F., Vanden, R.G. *Strategy Beyond Markets. Emerald Group Publishing, 34: 331-363.*

Buckley, T. T. (1988). Menstruation and the power of Yurok women. In Buckley, T. T., & Gottlieb, A. (1988) *Blood Magic: The anthropology of menstruation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, J. (1999). Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity. [electronic resource}. New York: Routledge.

Burke, K. (1969) A grammar of motives. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Campbell, K. K. (1973). The rhetoric of women's liberation: An oxymoron. QJS, 59: 74-86.

Cutler-Seeber, A. (2017). Trans* Lives in the United States: Challenges of transition and beyond. London: Taylor and Francis.

Cardon, Dominique. (2010). La démocratie Internet. *Promesses et limites [translated]*. Paris: Seuil.

Conger, C. (2013). 1980: The worst year in tampon history. Stuff Mom Never Told You. Retrieved from https://www.stuffmomnevertoldyou.com/blogs/1980-the-worst-year-in-tampon-history.htm

Davis, D. D. (2001) Breaking up [at] totality: A rhetoric of laughter. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Deutsch, N. (2004). Positionality and the pen: Reflections on the process of becoming a feminist researcher and writer. Qualitative Inquiry, 10(6): 885-902.

Dewey, J. (1938) Experience and education. New York: Collier Books.

Dickinson, R. L. (1945). Tampons as menstrual guards. JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, 128(7): 490.

Dietert, M., & Dentice, D. (2013). Growing up trans: Socialization and the gender binary. Journal of GLBT Family Studies, 9(1): 24-42.

Dill, B. T. (1987). The dialectics of Black womanhood. In S. Harding (Ed.), *Feminism and methodology* (pp. 97-108). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Douglas, S. (2017). The diverting seductions of marketplace feminism. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society, 43(1): 204-206.

Driscoll, Catherine (2002), Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory, New York: Columbia University Press.

Ede, L., Glenn, C., & Lunsford, A. (1995). Border crossings: intersection of rhetoric and feminism. *Rhetorica: The Journal of the International Society for the History of Rhetoric* 8: 285-325.

Finch, S. P. (1993) Sojourner Truth, in Women Speakers in the United States; 1800-1925; 1925-1993. Ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell. Westport, CN: Greenwood.

Freire, P. (1973). Education for critical consciousness. New York: Seabury.

Friedman, N. (1955). Everything you must know about tampons. Berkeley, 1981. Print.

Gilson, D. (2016). India's Menstruation Man. Retrieved February 30, 2018, from https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/shorts/india-menstruation-man/index.html

George-Parkin, H. (2017). Thinx promised a feminist utopia to everyone buts its employees. *Racked.* Retrieved from

https://www.racked.com/2017/3/14/14911228/thinx-miki-agrawal-health-care-branding

Glenn, C. (1994). sex, lies, and manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the history of rhetoric. *College Composition and Communication*, 45: 180-99.

Glenn, C. (1997). Rhetoric retold: regendering the tradition from antiquity through the Renaissance. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Goldberg, B. (2016). U.S. women push back against stigma, cost of menstruation. Reuters. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-menstruation/u-s-women-push-back-against-stigma-cost-of-menstruation-idUSKCN0WA1RG

Goldman, H., Mahoney, L., & Bologna, M. (2016). What do women want? Menstrual equity. Bloomberg Businessweek, 4482: 23.

Ha, T. (2011). Greeniology 2020: Greener living today, and in the future. Melbourne University Publishing.

Haas, A. M. (2012). Race, rhetoric, and technology: A case study of decolonial technical communication theory, methodology, and pedagogy. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 26(3).

Habermas, J. (1962). The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. Trans. Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989. Print.

Hawkesworth, M. E. (1988). Feminist rhetoric: Discourses on the male monopoly of thought. *Political Theory,* 16(3): 444-467.

hooks, b. (2015). Feminist theory: from margin to center. New York, NY: Routledge, 2015.

Houppert, K. (2000). The curse: Confronting the last unmentionable taboo: Menstruation. New York: Farra, Straus and Giroux. Print.

Jackson, S. (2006). Gender, sexuality, and heterosexuality. *Feminist Theory*, 7(1): 105-121.

Frazer, G. (2008). Used-clothing donations and apparel production in Africa. *The Economic Journal,* 118(532).

Friedenfelds, L. (2009). The modern period: menstruation in twentieth-century America. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Human Rights Campaign. (2017). State equality index. Human Rights Campaign & Equality Federation Institute. Retrieved from http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/state-equality-index

Kahn, S., & Lee, J. (2011). Activism and rhetoric: theories and contexts for political engagement. Routledge, pp. 1-8.

Kane, J. (2015). Here's how much a woman's period will cost her over a lifetime. The Huffington Post. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/18/period-cost-lifetime_n_7258780.html

Kirsch, G. E., & Royster, J. J. (2012). Feminist rhetorical practices: new horizons for rhetoric, composition, and literary studies. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Kissling, E. A. (1996). Bleeding out loud: Communication about menstruation. Feminism & Psychology, 6(4): 481-504.

Knittel, A., Ti, A., Schear, S., & Comfort, M. (2017). Evidence-based recommendations to improve reproductive healthcare for incarcerated women. International Journal Of Prisoner Health, 13(3), 200-206. doi:10.1108/IJPH-07-2016-0031

Koss, S. K., & Griffin, C. (1995). Beyond persuasion: a proposal for an invitational rhetoric. Communication Monographs, 62: 2-18.

Kramarae, C. (1981). Women as a muted group. *Women and Men Speaking: Frameworks for Analysis.*

Licorish, E. (2017). Why we need to ditch the term “feminine hygiene products. Bustle. Retrieved from https://www.bustle.com/articles/194989-why-we-need-to-ditch-the-term-feminine-hygiene-products

Lorde, A. (1978). The transformation of silence into language and action. *Sinister Wisdom,* 6: 11-15.

Malone, N. (2016). Panty raid. *The Cut.* Retrieved from https://www.thecut.com/2016/01/thinx-miki-agrawal-c-v-r.html

MacDonald, S. M. (2007). Leaky performances: The transformative potential of the menstrual leak. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30(3): 340-357.

Mathieu, P. (2005) Tactics of hope: The public turn in english composition. Heinemann.

Miège, Bernard. (2010). L'espace public contemporain*. Approche info-communicationnelle [translated]*. Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble.

Meadows, M. (2000). Tampon safety: TSS now rare, but women still should take care. *FDA Consumer*, 34(2): 20-24.

Mettler, K. (2016). Free tampons for all at Brown University this school year—even in the men's room. The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/09/09/free-tampons-for-all-at-brown-university-this-school-year-even-in-the-mens-room/?utm_term=.4c6ecf75604b

Mettler, K. (2016). ‘They’re as necessary as toilet paper’: New York City Council approves free tampon program. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/06/23/menstrual-equity-ny-city-council-approves-giving-away-tampons-to-women-in-schools-prisons-and-homeless-shelters/?utm_term=.a74a6819024a

Mills, J.S. (1859). John Stuart Mill on liberty and other essays. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.

Minnix, C. (2017) The perennial question—“What do we want from public writing?”: A conversation with Sue Wells. *Composition Forum,* 36.

Minh-ha, T. (1990). Not you/like you: Post-colonial women and the interlocking questions of identity and difference. In Foss, K., Foss, S., & Griffin, C. (2004). Readings in feminist rhetorical theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Natanson, M. (1965). The claims of immediacy. In M Natanson & H.W. Johnstone, Jr. (Eds), *Philosophy, rhetoric, and argumentation*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Pearson, C. (2017). Florida just became the latest state to ban the ‘tampon tax.’ *Huffington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/florida-just-became-the-latest-state-to-abolish-the-tampon-tax_us_59282d4de4b0df34c35b77cf

Rai, C. (2016) “2: Democratic persuasions in contested publics.” *Democracy’s lot: rhetoric, publics, and the places of invention.* Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.

Riordan, Ellen. (2001). Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism. Journal of Communication Inquiry 25(3): 279-297.

Ridolfo, J., & Devoss, D. N. Composing for recomposition: rhetorical velocity and delivery. *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, 13(2). Retrieved from http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo_devoss/velocity.html

Rome, E. R., Wolhandler, J., Reame, N. (1988). The absorbency of tampons. *JAMA: Journal of American Medical Association*, 259(5): 685-686.

Service, T. M. (2018, February 12). Bill to remove Virginia 'Tampon Tax' clears first hurdle. Retrieved February 30, 2018, from http://www.fairfaxtimes.com/articles/bill-to-remove-virginia-tampon-tax-clears-first-hurdle/article_ac145902-1044-11e8-a6fc-2fa0393b1f80.html

Segran, E. (2016). Bleeding on the job: A menstruation investigation. *Fast Company.* Retrieved from, https://www.fastcompany.com/3061417/bleeding-on-the-job-a-menstruation-investigation

Shamoon, L. K., & Medeiros, E. (2010). In Rose, S. K., & Weiser, I. (2010). Going public: What writing programs learn from engagement. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press.

Sundvall, S., & Fredlund, K. (2017) The writing on the wall: Activist rhetorics, public writing, and responsible pedagogy. *Composition Forum*, 36.

Stein, E., & Kim, S. (2009). Flow: The cultural story of menstruation. St. Martin's Griffin.

Steinem, G. (1978). If men could menstruate. *Ms.*

Thomas, J. E., & Zimmerman, M. K. (2007). Feminism and profit in American hospitals: The corporate construction of women's health centers. G*ender and Society*, 21.

Toth, E., Lupton, M. J., & Delaney, J. (1988). The curse: a cultural history of menstruation. University of Illinois Press.

UNESCO. (2014). Puberty education & menstrual hygiene management. *Good Policy and Practice in Health Education, 9*. United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization.

Vostral, S. L. (2008). Under wraps: A history of menstrual hygiene technology. Lexington Books.

Welch, N. (2005). Living room: teaching public writing in a post-publicity era. *College Composition and Communication*, 3.

Welch, N. (2008). Living room: teaching public writing in a privatized world. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, c2008.

Wrobel, S. (2015). Logos, ethos, pathos: Classical rhetoric revisited. *Polish Sociological Review*, 3(191): 401-421.

Wydick, B. E., et al. (2016). Shoeing the Children: the impact of the TOMS Shoe donation program in rural El Salvador. Unlisted.

Ziesler, A. (2017). We were feminists once: From riotgrrl to Covergirl. New York: PublicAffairs.

Appendix

"Let's Talk about Tampons"

Previously published in The Breeze

I've been there. And if you're part of the 60 percent of students on campus who have a vagina, you've been there, too. You're in class all day, you forgot to pack tampons and you realize you need some — fast. Of course, you have a few options: You can buy a pack for $7 at one of the few places on campus that sells them, or you can guiltily ask the University Health Center for some.

Because I'm a broke college student, I chose the latter. The people at the UHC were professional and nice, but the process to obtain a tampon was confusing and if I'm being honest, somewhat humiliating. The woman at the desk even asked me if I had a bag in which to hide them.

Over the following days, I kept thinking about the accessibility of menstrual hygiene products on campus. I even went so far as to email a campus official to see if they'd consider making tampons and pads slightly more accessible — we could even make them as accessible as condoms. The response I got, however, was more than a little dismissive. They implied that the lack of responsibility on my part was the real issue and encouraged all students in a similar situation to "be creative" when they lack the necessary sanitary products to carry out life's most important biological function.

Now don't get me wrong, the UHC and other departments on campus are wonderful places that serve an important role on campus. The people who replied to my email simply

thought I was another student whining about wanting free things. The response I got, however, is a sign that we need to have more discourse concerning the issue of menstrual supplies.

Tampons aren't a luxury — they're a necessity. Since the beginning of time, females have undergone menstruation. Over half of JMU students (and people in the world) go through this process, and it's highly unpleasant. Besides the cramping and moodiness, we also have to be concerned about basic hygiene. Tampons, pads and other sanitary supplies enable people to go through this process without bleeding through their pants. Not having proper supplies can prove detrimental to a student's coursework, extracurricular activities and general JMU experience.

Basic feminine hygiene supplies should be treated more like toilet paper and hand soap and less like candy and chips. In fact, **some students at Brown University** are making tampons and pads available in all campus restrooms (that's right: all, including male and unisex restrooms).

It's unacceptable that basic life processes are stigmatized. It's unacceptable that such supplies aren't viewed as necessary when anyone who's ever found themselves in need of them will tell you otherwise. It's also unacceptable that such basic products aren't readily accessible in campus restrooms. JMU is a national leader in civic engagement and community outreach. We should be a leader when it comes to accessibility of tampons and pads as well.

End the stigma, and free the tampon.