Social Justice in Higher Education

From Awareness to Action

BY REV. JAMIE WASHINGTON

Diversity. Multiculturalism. Social justice. As higher education manages the changing demographics of students, faculty, and staff, these terms have been used synonymously to describe initiatives to create more inclusive and welcoming campus communities. Yet, each of these terms means different things to different people.

Mention diversity and the first thing that comes to mind for many individuals is race. Even in areas of the country with large numbers of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, the race paradigm is often perceived in terms of "Black and White." When diversity is engaged, is it primarily a race issue with the possibility for other issues to be considered, or is the discussion intended to include all areas of difference? If higher education is committed to creating welcoming and inclusive campus communities for all, that means everyone across all races and cultures. Still, it is important to state clear community and cultural standards and reinforce those standards when individuals join communities. Diversity often takes a "we are the world" perspective. The underlying assumption is that a level playing field exists, and that all people have the same opportunities to achieve the American dream. This

perspective sees people as individuals, rather than as members of groups with defined social identities.

Multiculturalism often takes differences in culture into account. While still a race and ethnicity conversation, multi-culturalism acknowledges different norms, values, rules, and behaviors that are important to understand when engaging individuals across cultures. This concept also assumes a level playing field, but often lacks critical analyses of the prevailing cultural norms, values, or ways of being. Additionally, this encourages learning about the different "other" with very little attention to learning about one's self.

If institutions are to move beyond the diversity numbers game, the dynamics of difference must be addressed. Social justice requires an examination of self as well as others. It also requires a look at group patterns and systematic processes that

are incongruent with the values of "liberty and justice for all." In *Teaching for Social Justice* (2007), Maurianne Adams and Lee Anne Bell state, "We believe social justice is both a process and a goal." The goal of social justice is to create equal access and participation for all groups in society. This concept engages all differences, while recognizing the elements of power and privilege.

Social justice does not give one form of oppression priority over another. It acknowledges the various forms of oppression, their similarities and differences, and how they manifest. It involves moving beyond comfort zones and making decisions to change the status quo.

Creating Social Justice

Colleges and universities are prime environments for students, faculty, and staff to develop the skills necessary to create a world more congruent with the values of liberty and justice for all. Rather than simply diagnosing and analyzing the current problems of injustice, senior student affairs officers can prepare students to actually address the world's injustices.

To achieve both the process and the goal of social justice, individuals and institutions must move through four stages: awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions. This process—familiar to those engaged in outcomes assessments, organizational change, or cultural change—requires intentional and deliberate action. It also requires an understanding of dominant and subordinated group memberships and the behaviors, attitudes, and feelings that accompany any given social identity.

Awareness: a greater consciousness of who you are and all of your social identities. Examine how your current behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and ideas align with core values. What parts of your identities place you as a member of the dominant group, affording you opportunities and privileges taken for granted? What parts of your identities make you a member of the subordinated group, leaving you feeling less than adequate and striving to fit in? How do you participate on a daily basis in keeping the status quo alive and well? What do you do on a daily basis to shift your world and the world of others to be more congruent with the values of social justice?

Knowledge: what you know and what you do not know about yourself and others. What are the missing pieces of your education? What do you know of the contributions of historically underrepresented groups? What do you know of the current struggles of these groups? What would equal access and an equitable society look like to people who are members of the subordinated group? What does privilege look like for the dominant group? What does internalized oppression look like? How do the dynamics of oppression manifest at the individual, group, and system/societal levels? Answers to these questions provide the knowledge to move toward a more socially just world.

Skills: engaging effectively across difference about difference. Many of us participate in "work or school" diversity. We go to work or school with people who are different by race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or nationality. Yet we grew up in and return home to monocultural experiences, leaving us unprepared to engage effectively across cultures because we lack practice. The skills needed to engage difference effectively include listening, asking, slowing down, paying attention to process, and recognizing complex human dynamics that occur at the intersections of difference.

Action: take steps to shift the status quo. A socially just world cannot be created without this step. Good people maintain the status quo by believing all they need to do is to behave as good people. Good people can consciously and unconsciously do harm if they are not clear about actions needed for change.

A Socially Just Environment

Within higher education, a socially just environment is one in which:
- All students learn and contribute to the best of their abilities.
- All faculty, staff, and administrators teach, learn, and serve to the best of their abilities.
- Curriculum, culture, and practices are both windows and mirrors, allowing community members to see themselves and to view the rest of the world.
- Leaders teach and model the skills and personal awareness competencies to succeed in a pluralistic society.

Key Values of a Socially Just Campus

- Engagement, exploration, and examination of the dynamics of difference
- Inclusion
- Empowerment
- Visibility
- Equity
- Access
- Social justice
- Shared responsibility, accountability, and leadership

Building Diverse Community Foundations

What does all of this mean in the context of higher education and particularly student affairs? Many student affairs preparation programs offer opportunities through course work and assistantships to develop the knowledge and skills for competence in the social justice area. The challenge is that when individuals leave that environment, unless they continue to challenge themselves, they will slip back into unconscious behaviors that do not serve the goals of social justice.

Certain elements form the foundation of any socially just campus community. Consider how your campus would benefit from adhering to the following tenets of diverse community foundations.

Build relationships of commitment and trust. In every long-term relationship, there are many moments when you are ready to quit. As with any type of relationship, when it comes to building communities across difference, you must be willing to stay when it does not feel comfortable. Do not give up on each other because the "ism" clouds judgment and hearing. Be willing to move through the tough conversations and build deeper levels of trust and honesty that make for more authentic relationships.

Admit you do not know all there is to know. One of our biggest challenges is helping people understand that it is acceptable to admit that we do not know everything about diversity. We live in a climate of "political correctness" in which we are afraid to express honesty about what we feel or think. Just because we have a Black or Latino friend, have been to a religious experience different than our own, or have viewed "Brokeback Mountain" several times, we do not fully understand diversity. Without this acknowledgement, we cannot learn. To build community, we must be honest with ourselves.

Do the best that you can. Most people get up in the morning and try to do their best throughout the day. Even so, we can always do better. Few people intentionally express, "I'll demonstrate racism or sexism today." To motivate others to do better, we must meet them with energy that reflects we truly believe they are doing the best they can.

Acknowledge that inclusion in a group does not mean you understand the group. One of the most common questions posed to under-represented individuals about a particular situation is, "What do your people think, want, or feel?" The assumption is that because you are a member of a certain group, you can speak for the entire group. You may be able to share a personal perspective as a member of a group, but it does not mean you know everything about that population or the experiences of all members of that community.

Recognize you can understand even if you are not a member of the group. While you may not share particular identities or struggles, it does not mean you cannot empathize or have the genuine desire to be an ally.

Understand oppression is pervasive and impacts everyone. "Does everyone agree that some groups get treated with dignity and respect, get heard, get valued, and get access to resources, and other groups do not?" In posing that question in presentations, the answer is yes 100 percent of the time from 100 percent of the audience. Given the response to this simple question, it is clear that we all know the pervasiveness of oppression. The challenge is to take ownership of the places where we gain privilege and the places where we have internalized oppression as we make conscious decisions to create change.

Accept responsibility. No one individual created oppression. It is not our fault that we were born into, adopted into, or even chose, in some cases, the groups that are more privileged in this society. However, we must accept responsibility for who we are, where we are, and what we do everyday to maintain the status quo and for what we can do to move toward liberty and justice for all.

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Seek first to understand, then to be understood. This foundation comes from Stephen Covey's *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 1989). It is also very important in the context of diversity. Often we are engaged in conversation where we are so busy trying to be heard, that we are not hearing or listening. If we are to build communities across difference someone must be willing to slow down the process, seek to understand, and be understood. In this process, we often find common ground.

Make conflict and discomfort a part of growth. Most individuals seek engaged, supportive, diverse communities, but want to remain in their comfort zones. There is no way to build community across difference without engaging in conflict and discomfort. When people successfully move through conflict and discomfort, relationships are strengthened and community develops.

Self-work and healing are necessary to accept others. Much of the negative energy that is expressed about difference is from people living in pain. The pain may have been caused by a particular group or person during childhood, but individuals have never been able to move beyond the pain. These

are real and valid feelings. However, unless you heal old wounds, it is hard to move forward in building community across difference.

Practice forgiveness and letting go. Forgiveness begins with one's self. If you are not able to forgive yourself, it is not likely that you can forgive others. Where there is no forgiveness, there is no community.

There are no quick fixes. Students often comment, "Didn't we do diversity last semester?" You cannot "program" your way into a supportive diverse community. You cannot "speaker" or "policy" your way into community. Nor can you "train" your way into community. Building community across difference is a life-long learning and unlearning process. We did not get to our current state in a three-hour or day-long time frame. A diversity speaker or program is not going to be the quick fix.

Acknowledge, celebrate, and appreciate progress. Many people always see the glass as half empty. They operate from a deficit model or framework, mainly perceiving the negative. This mode of operation creates an environment in which diversity is a burden or something that has to be fixed quickly. If we only see the problems and refuse to acknowledge the progress, good work, and effort of the community, we are likely to create a culture of hopelessness. Additionally, we dishonor our predecessors who worked to bring our institutions and organizations to their current levels of success.

Individuals and organizations do grow and change; there is hope. As a social justice educator, I can say without a doubt that people and organizations do grow and change. I have watched it happen instantly, and I have watched the change happen over five- to ten-year periods. The challenge with culture change is that it is often a slow process that may leave some people feeling little hope. I constantly see young and old, homosexuals and heterosexuals, Christians and followers of other faiths, who are naming, owning, and working to shift the dynamics and ensure all people are treated with the same level of dignity and respect. Within those groups, I see individuals who are healing from internalized oppression and serving as empowered agents of change. All of this reminds me that our work is not complete, but we have done our part to make the planet a better place for all people.

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Arcadia University: An Outcome of Global Understanding

BY NORA SHULTZ AND JAN WALBERT

What are the messages we send? Are they intentionally crafted to focus on outcomes? Arcadia University recognizes the value of the process, the content, *and* the outcome. Recognition that social justice is based on individual understanding and societal expectations frames the engagement of Arcadia students in their learning environments. Clarifying its message, understanding the role student affairs officers play as educators across all lines, and assuring that outcomes are intentionally created contribute to Arcadia's success with its students.

Recently Aracadia University has been involved in the Shared Futures: Global Learning and Social Responsibility initiative through the American Association of Colleges and Universities. This work was central in the development of Arcadia Explorations, a new general education program focusing on the quality of student learning. The program blurs the lines between academic disciplines and general education courses as well as between the perceptions of curricular learning and extra- or co-curricular learning.

Global education is one of the backbones of Arcadia Explorations. Globalization, compared to internationalization, specifically includes U.S. diversity and focuses on interconnections and interdependencies across and within nations and groups. Further, and most importantly, when considering social justice, global education takes into account inequities that result from these relationships.