

Re-envisioning Diversity in Higher Education: From Raising Awareness to Building Critical Consciousness Among Faculty

By Dana M. Stachowiak

As a faculty member in the College of Education at my current university, I am charged with teaching about “diversity issues” in pre-K–12 education. Diversity is a largely nebulous idea in this arena, but I do not find it much better understood in higher education, where it “is generally understood as the body of services and programs offered to students, faculty, and staff that seek to ensure compliance with non-discrimination and related policy and law, and to affirm social membership group differences (broadly considered) in curricular, co-curricular, and workplace contexts.”¹ As such, diversity has become a buzzword; equity is misunderstood as being synonymous with equality; and social justice is often conflated as meaning how we treat people with diverse or multicultural backgrounds (i.e., non-white people) equally.

Most higher education faculty members, and even so-called diversity or multicultural education scholars, have conflicting definitions for diversity, and the transfer of this is evident in our students, who often think diversity has to do with race issues alone—and nothing to do with themselves. There is a dangerous disconnect between knowing *about* diversity and *understanding* diversity. This disconnect threatens faculty’s professional

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obligation to assist students in being reflective and productive citizens who possess self-efficacy and socially just mindsets within a larger global context.

This is not to say that we, as a higher education community, have not come a long way in breaking down disparities between women's salaries, hiring of faculty members of color, and providing services for faculty and

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students with disabilities, for example. Actually, support for campus diversity and related diversity education continues to be extremely strong, often landing at the top of presidents' strategic plans, in the form of new diversity think tanks or committees; women's and LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer] support centers; African American studies, and women's and gender studies coursework; multicultural resource

centers; and even entire diversity offices with a designated diversity officer. Initiatives to recruit and retain faculty and students from marginalized groups, and task forces to create diversity or multicultural curricula are often a part of strategic diversity plans as well. It is important to note here, that most of this programming is centralized in the student affairs arena of higher education.

Don't get me wrong. These supports and means of awareness are incredibly important for our student body, and I am by no means suggesting that existing programs don't excel in supporting diversity in meaningful ways. However, we must admit that no matter how good the intentions of these strategic plans or support centers, we will fail to fully support our students in critical and transformational ways if we do not truly address the deep-seated needs of related faculty development. What the majority of the above-mentioned plans accomplish really well is that they raise awareness to issues of diversity and equity. What I am suggesting is that raising awareness is not enough; we must also raise critical consciousness, not only to diversity, but to issues of equity, power, and privilege and oppression, and move faculty from passive observers of diversity initiatives to active participants in social justice education. For transformative action to take place within a social justice education, critical consciousness is necessary.

WHAT IS CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND HOW DO WE BUILD IT?

The notion of critical consciousness spans many disciplines and, as such, there are varying components to the concept. I use the work of Paulo Freire and bell hooks, who both explain it as having a critical awareness of one's socialization and the structures that work to inform it.² This awareness of our socialization requires us to be thoughtful about our positionalities and how those positionalities are influenced by culture and society.³ Critical consciousness is "an essential tool to help us recognize, understand, and work to change the social forces that shape our societies, ourselves, and the lives of our [students]."⁴ It entails ongoing action and reflection

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of the interrelatedness of diversity, social justice, and equity within the system of privilege and oppression of which we are all a part.

The process of building critical consciousness is an organic, ongoing practice that varies from person to person. While there are no concrete steps involved, there are important things to keep in mind as we consider critical consciousness within our faculty. Reed et al., discuss 10 basic principles encountered by individuals working to build critical consciousness, and they largely hinge on personal and structural components that involve differing and interrelated aspects of cognition and emotion.⁵

It is not my intent to summarize those principles. Rather, I intend to pull out some of the most important concepts on which we need to focus as we build critical consciousness among higher education faculty. I first suggest that we move from our current framework of diversity to one of social justice. Within that, we need to be clear in our conversations about equity versus equality, as well as how these two affect and are affected by privilege, power, and oppression. Finally, in all of this vital dialogue, we need to encourage and support our faculty members to be both reflective and reflexive.

FROM A FRAMEWORK OF DIVERSITY TO A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

To begin building the critical consciousness of our faculty, one of the simplest things we can do is turn our current discourse from a framework of diversity to a framework of social justice. Diversity is a call to be aware of

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the differences among students and faculty (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual orientation) and how these differences enhance the campus experience, both curricular and extra-curricular. This framework of diversity too often allows for passivity; simply being able to direct students to the multicultural resource center or viewing a film during the “diversity training” every fall semester can legitimately constitute being *aware* of diversity.

But, after a faculty member signs their name and gets their certificate of completion for campus diversity training, the chances of he or she having to be anything more than mindful of campus diversity resources are slim. This framework has created a dangerous climate of faculty irresponsibility and indifference with regard to personal, social, and institutional dimensions of injustice, and as such, has worked to reify systemic oppression in higher education settings. Diversity is an issue, but diversity, simply put, merely means difference, and “the trouble with that surrounds difference is really about privilege and power.”⁶ A framework of diversity does not often engage people in discussions of privilege and power.

Social justice, on the other hand, is a call to understanding and action, a process with a goal “to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part.”⁷ In other words, when it comes to issues of diversity and equity, a social justice framework necessarily puts the onus of responsibility onto the individual faculty member rather than the institution alone. In an academic environment, I envision faculty members who promote equity in hiring practices

and the acceptance of students into the university system; who engage in explicit discussions regarding issues of privilege, power, and difference, not only with other faculty members, but with students in the classroom; and who work to encourage university policies that foster equity and social justice. As such, a framework of social justice shifts the focus to ways in which people *respond to* diversity related matters.

In pursuit of critical consciousness, we necessarily need faculty development that provides a social justice lens that “recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e., as structural), and actively seeks to change this.”⁸ If social justice frameworks, rather than diversity initiatives, are centered in higher education discussions and practices, the prospect

of faculty members being moved to truly transformational action will be greater. Providing faculty development within a social justice framework requires that universities first conduct an assessment of current faculty understanding of and investment in social justice initiatives. The hope here is that, in meeting the faculty where they are, we will see members who are deeply committed to social justice and engage in strategic planning initiatives that encourage the inclusion of social justice into university and departmental missions and visions. The likelihood of graduating students who are reflective and productive citizens with social justice mindsets will, in turn, rise as well, because social justice will not only be an expectation, but it will be embodied.

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UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EQUITY AND EQUALITY

Working within a framework of social justice requires a critical consciousness of issues of (in)equality and (in)equity in higher education settings. Yet, I have found that these two terms are frequently and incorrectly considered interchangeable. One of the first conversations that I have with the education majors in the diversity course I teach is about the difference between equality and equity. I start with this for

two reasons: (1) it has the possibility of producing a significant fissure in what they *thought* was their strong understanding of diversity; and (2) it (I hope) creates an “a-ha” moment in understanding how educators unknowingly contribute to oppression and injustice in schools. Thus, they automatically start questioning the ways in which they have moved

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through the world as oppressors or oppressed (even though that’s not the terminology they are using just yet). I begin by asking my students to individually define diversity, and almost all of my students typically write something like, “Diversity means to recognize differences and to make sure you treat all of your students equally and/or fairly.” I give the students credit here because they recognize the need for action in working with

diversity in education. But this is where the difference between awareness and critical consciousness begins to emerge. While making sure you “treat all of your students equally” seems like action toward justice, it may be just a masquerade. The action (and social justice framework) comes in when you start considering equity.

Let me explain why, in the same way I do with my students. Because I live in Cajun country, I use a Mardi Gras example. Every spring, it is common to see elaborately decorated ladders along the Mardi Gras parade route. The logic behind this is simple: the higher you are, the nearer you get to the people on the top of floats throwing beads, and the more beads you can catch. I’m just short of average height for a woman in the U.S., so a ladder would be ideal. My friend, Toby, is quite taller than me, so he doesn’t really need a ladder to help him catch beads. Let’s pretend, however, that Toby and I are at the back of the crowd, putting us both out of reach of a good amount of beads. In all fairness, Toby and I should each be given ladders, and to make sure we’re treated equally, we should be given the same ladder. So, now equipped with 3-foot ladders, we climb to the top step. At 6’1,” Toby has a clear space between him and the people throwing beads. He loads up. At 5’4,” I still can’t see over the crowd, and I am still not catching beads.

This is where equity comes in. To catch as many beads as Toby, what I really need is a ladder that is taller than Toby’s, and to make that happen, I need to quell my desire to make sure we remain equal. Because of our differences (i.e., diversity) in height, we will never truly be equal. The ladder that I need to have the same opportunity as Toby is different; it needs to be taller. The same goes for our diverse students: because of different learning styles, cultures, or family structures, for example, the resources our students need to be successful will not be the same. If we give a blind student the same book as a seeing student, the blind student—although given the same resource—will not have the same opportunity to be successful as the seeing student. In other words, we have equal resources, but inequitable opportunities.

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Just because we begin to think with equity in mind, we need not stop thinking with equality in mind, nor should discussions of equality be replaced with discussions of equity. Instead, conversations of equity and equality should happen in tandem. If we step back and take a critical look at the Mardi Gras parade scenario, we can start to ask important questions regarding power, privilege, and oppression as they relate to equality. The fact that Toby and I, as well as others in the crowd, were able to use ladders, gave us equality.

Equality does not necessarily result in fairness, however, because not everyone in the crowd is in the same position, nor does everyone need the same resources to catch beads. So, when we have conversations about equality, we need to ask related and important questions to make sure we don’t really need equity instead. For instance, why are some people in the front of the crowd, and others in the back? Did they arrive earlier, or is it because they were able to purchase better tickets that put them closer to the bead throwers? If they were able to get to the parade earlier, what enabled them to do that and how easy was it for them? We can ask similar questions about the people who purchased tickets: what enabled them? What about the people behind my friend and me, or those with-

out ladders? With these kinds of questions, we explore context, and ask what systemic factors have enabled some people to have better access to resources. In this way, as we push for an understanding of the difference between equity and equality, we inevitably begin to reconsider our role in the system of privilege and oppression.

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INTERROGATING OUR INDIVIDUAL ROLE IN PRIVILEGE, POWER, AND OPPRESSION

Building critical consciousness under a social justice framework “begins with people’s lived experience [in order] to create critical perspective and action directed toward social change.”⁹ In other words, before we can fully move to critical consciousness within a

social justice framework, we must look at ourselves, our own identity and experiences, our own privilege and power, and what makes us into the person we are.

An important first step is for an individual to name the social constructs (e.g., gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, income level, religious beliefs, and education) of their identity. Even though we use these social constructs on a daily basis to rank and categorize others and ourselves, naming them as they relate to us individually is essential to laying the groundwork for interrogating our role in privilege, power, and oppression.¹⁰ It also is important to name how each social identity category relates to being either dominant or subordinate (for example, male is dominant; female is subordinate). Dominant groups have power in society, but they “are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence.”¹¹ This step lends to self-actualization and greater consciousness of our role in oppression.

Self-actualization, however, does not necessarily follow self-reflection of one’s social constructs alone. Rather, it also requires us to consider our mind-body-soul connections to others in our social groups, and with dominant power. While “[m]any of us are both dominant and subordinate,” most of us do not think about how we have played the

part of the oppressor or oppressed, or been a part of the dominant or subordinate group.¹² We must examine these oppressor/oppressed relationship roles so that we can see how dominant powers affect us, others, and the connections within the institution. Understanding oppression “connects to the range of one’s social identities,” and begins to raise our critical consciousness.¹³

This work necessarily involves thinking about our own biographies, those intricacies of defining who we are as individuals. Specifically, we should think about who we are in a “multidimensional” sense regarding “individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts.”¹⁴ The dominant culture ultimately labels individuals as normal or other based on our social

constructs, but when we are able to think about our multidimensional selves, we can view our experiences not only as an integral part in shaping us, but also in shaping how we examine privilege, power, and oppression. The goal for this step is to encourage the choice to “see each other as [we] really are” and commit to the continuous process of building critical consciousness.¹⁵ It calls individuals to embody a framework of social justice.

In addition to this self-reflection, it is also important to learn to recognize how privilege and oppression might be operating in others’ lives, and between others and us. Examining ourselves is only helpful if we then think about ourselves in relation to others. This requires reflexivity in addition to reflection, and so a final step in working to raise critical consciousness is to encourage reflective and reflexive faculty members.

HOW DO WE PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RAISING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG FACULTY

The intent of this piece is not to provide readers with answers; rather, it is to encourage changes in our current discourse on diversity, equity, and social justice. In this concluding section, I offer some suggestions for ways that we, as a higher education community, can think and discuss raising

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critical consciousness among faculty. Faculty recruitment is always important, as well as supporting new and veteran faculty members.

Within the current discourse on diversity, faculty recruitment is a priority, and it should remain so when shifting to a framework of social justice. Colleges and universities need to continue to attract diverse applicants,

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but they also need to attract diverse applicants who have an understanding of diversity, social justice, and equity. The reason is simple: it's a lot easier for a campus community to focus on and build a strong social justice framework when faculty members are already invested in social justice in higher education.

Equally important is the retention of socially justice-minded faculty members, and those efforts must start on day one, specifically

during new faculty orientation. The majority of new faculty orientations are passive—involving lecture formats that merely raise awareness around campus diversity issues. Instead, to be effective, orientation needs to move from the passive to the active, and encompass interaction, dialogue, and critical engagement. Rather than viewing a PowerPoint about campus demographics, what if new faculty heard from a diverse panel of students and faculty about their experiences on campus? Or, instead of being told that the curriculum and syllabi need to focus on social justice, how about they spend time with a faculty mentor to talk about the goals of social justice that they want their courses and syllabi to embody? Yes, these suggestions are more time-consuming than traditional faculty orientation, but a framework of social justice takes a deep commitment to building critical consciousness that goes beyond an avowal of advocacy for social justice.

Ongoing support for these new faculty members to build their critical consciousness is vital to a framework of social justice, as is continued support for veteran faculty members. A change in discourse and increase in action for social justice takes time. It is important to consider that this change needs to be gradual and strategic; a sudden shift or mandate for all faculty members to switch their mindset to social justice will do nothing but undermine efforts.

One way to ensure active training and ongoing support for faculty members is to focus on social justice leadership training, to sustain and grow the efforts of faculty members already leading efforts in a framework of social justice, and to cultivate the efforts of faculty members who desire to possess a critical consciousness. Trainings for these groups of people will vary, so it is important that the campus community carefully assesses the current climate and mindsets of faculty. When thinking of ways to accomplish social justice leadership training in higher education, I turn to the values set by the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership at Kalamazoo College that set forth to: (1) inspire unity, (2) spark intellectual growth, (3) nurture leadership, (4) build community, and (5) embrace change.¹⁶

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The type of work needed on each campus is going to vary, as is the work needed for each individual faculty member. But having a set of strong core values helps to work towards building critical consciousness among faculty members, and ultimately, to help to advance the goal of operating from a framework of social justice. 

END NOTES

1. Clark, "Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education: Just How Important Is Diversity in Higher Education?"
2. Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness*; books, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*.
3. Bettez, "Navigating the Complexity of Qualitative Research in Postmodern Contexts: Assemblage, Critical Reflexivity, and Communion as Guides," pp. 3-5.
4. Reed, et al., *Interpersonal Practice Beyond Diversity and Toward Social Justice: The Importance of Critical Consciousness*.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 84-86.
6. Johnson, *Power, Privilege, and Difference*, p. 12.
7. Bell, "Theoretical Foundations for Social Justice Education."
8. Sensoy and DiAngelo, p. xviii.
9. Bell, *op cit.*, p. 14.
10. Johnson, *op cit.*
11. Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, p. 26.

12. Tatum, "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" *And Other Conversations About Race*, p. 27; Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination."
13. Hackman, "Five Essential Components of Social Justice Education," p. 107.
14. Tatum, *op cit.*, p. 18.
15. hooks, *op cit.*, p. 183.
16. See the Arcus Center for Social Justice Leadership's website at <https://reason.kzoo.edu/csjl/>.

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