

Social Justice: When Diversity Isn't Enough
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At a young age, my dad drilled an Albert Einstein quote into my head, “Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” The quote may sound similar to our work in Student Affairs. How many times have I expected fellow college administrators to respond in a new way to a crisis only to be disappointed by similar results? We can make new flyers and T-shirts, sponsor different speakers, and develop a strategic plan, but if we are doing the same thing we should not expect something different to happen. The same can be true for our approach to diversity and issues of social justice.

Over the past decade, the verbiage used has included tolerance, acceptance, celebration and awareness, evolving into today's buzz word, inclusion. The foundational concepts of multiculturalism and diversity are used to relate to issues of recruitment, retention, matriculation and community relations of diverse students and perspectives. The question remains whether these initiatives actually manifest into something widely different. Are we experiencing different results in chapters, departments and on campus? Despite an ever-evolving language, a consistent and comfortable sense of complacency remains supported by our institutions and colleagues. For “real change” to occur, we must be willing to become uncomfortable – to become aware of the active role we have in supporting the current system of rhetoric.

The motivation for this article stems from my visits to numerous campuses responding to ‘blackface’ theme parties, hate crimes and other acts of violence, or requiring mandatory diversity trainings for new chapter members over the past eight years. I am not, however, talking about affirmative action, desegregation, or media relations; my purpose is not to bring up feelings of inadequacy or defensiveness. My purpose is to acknowledge that to “walk the talk” and embrace concepts of social justice we must take risks, name our assumptions and judgments, and acknowledge our individual role in supporting systematic oppression. It means making a conscious change to the normal rhetoric. I must recognize my own privilege and my active role in perpetuating a system from which I benefit. Social justice is exciting and optimistic because each person can make a difference to society, it costs nothing, and there is no expectation of perfection.

The cause is hidden, but the result is well known. Metamorphoses, IV, 1. 287, Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid)

I hear statements like, “I’m not a racist,” and “Gender discrimination doesn’t happen anymore” from students, faculty and staff. Yet, I have moving conversations with the same people about inequities on campuses and in communities. It is as if most acknowledge there is a problem, but as a culture, we have lost sight of the cause. I am often asked if I feel society has been “backsliding” since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s¹. This is a tricky question because a number of ideas must be deconstructed. The ‘Civil Rights Movement is not over, because in retrospect, it left out several communities in the fight for equality. Furthermore, I believe the cultural result of the

'movement' was to teach the privileged what not to do publicly to maintain their power. While behavior modifications, no matter how slight, do have an impact on our social norms, they mask institutionalized oppression. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself stated "was not a gatherer of consensus but a molder of consensus."³ To ask if society is backsliding seems to suggest progress was secured, while many are experiencing the pain of oppression today.

After all there is but one race – humanity. 1900, *The Bending of the Bough*, III, George Moore

While the concept of "one race" is not a new concept, I find it is still harmful. Throughout western history, examples showcase that denying differences among people allowed privileged groups to distance themselves from messy or daunting social disparities. By claiming to be "color blind" and supporting the claim "we are all equal" it is much easier to remain oblivious to the group based privileges from which many of us derive benefit. I believe the idea of "equal footing" is the root of the "pull your self up by the bootstraps" mentality - the assumption that everyone starts at the same place and some just work harder to get what they deserve. Privilege is rarely earned but is often given at birth and through perceptions of other people. To believe that there is an equal playing field for all, but to award power to certain groups based on perceived membership is hypocritical.

We must differentiate between people in order to determine how our own identities "measure up." We judge others based on what we perceive their group memberships to be: race or ethnic identity, social class, religion, age, ability, gender, sexual identity, etc. Making such judgments informs us on how to navigate the world around us interpersonally. Again, in order to "walk the talk," an important first step is to recognize that we make judgments based on perceptions and our own experiences, while touting an assumption of equality.

Once a person's individuality is acknowledged through conversation or personal interaction privilege "points" can be distributed based on reality. This incongruence also leads to tokenism. I identify as a member of numerous socially-constructed groups. Based on you, the reader's group memberships, I may gain or lose privilege points with you for being a Texan, Democrat, Queer, vegetarian, Delta Gamma, student affairs professional, diversity speaker, woman, white, in my thirties, or a wife. I can not represent all members of these groups, however am frequently asked to "represent" the whole group. This may seem obvious, but how many times do professionals ask someone different, like a person of color, first-year college student, commuter student, international student, etc., what they think about an idea or program and treating the response like a community notarization. This is an illogical and incongruent pillar of our social norms that keep systems of oppression in place. This incongruence is also a hot bed for judgment, finger pointing, inner-group pride, and other-group hatred.

The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.
May 3, 1976, Steve Biko

When discussing oppression, power and privilege, people often become defensive, protective or feel guilty. When given the opportunity to talk about oppressive experiences, they relive anger, frustration, disappointment, fear, and hopelessness. These negative emotions and painful experiences support a hierarchical concept of oppression. Members of dominant groups aim (consciously or subconsciously) to pit subordinate groups against one another.² In the movie *Color of Fear*, Victor Lewis states that in the movie *Color of Fear*, “the groups with less power fight amongst themselves and do nothing to take privilege away from those in power.”

Diversity initiatives have taught us that making real change can feel overwhelming if not daunting. We have been comparing apples to oranges, seeking a solution to the “difference” problem. Social justice is about comparing oranges to oranges and bridging the gap between our social norms and behaviors. Social justice is not about solving difference or even celebrating difference. It *is* about self-awareness and how your lived experiences make you different from those around you. This self-reflection will allow you to find your dominant group memberships. Change can be made from a position within a dominant group.

God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves. (13:11, The Koran)

As Einstein and my father alluded to, change that comes from innovation and trying new things is often uncomfortable. Being uncomfortable is where judgments, assumptions and behaviors meet real change. Nelson Mandela stated in *Long Walk to Freedom*, “I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken away from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.” In order to get different results, I must quiet the voice in my head that says I am not making difference and push myself to be uncomfortable. I can listen to the voices of those that came before me and trust that there are others hosting their own parties of one. It is up to me to show that “diversity” just isn’t enough.

Nominated for Best Diversity Speaker of 2007 from Campus Activities Magazine, Jess continues to work campus to campus being the change she wants to be in the world. For further conversations on tough subjects and progressive ideas, visit JessicaPettitt.com or CampuSpeak.com.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Cobb, Jelani (2008, January). The Noose. *Ebony*, 110.

Gilson, David (2008, January/February). We’re All #1! *Mother Jones: Smart Fearless Journalism*, 26-27.

King Jr., Martin Luther. "*I've seen the Promise Land.*" Speech and Following Questions and Answer Session, given, April 3, 1968, Lorraine Motel, Memphis, Tennessee.

Lama, Dalai His Holiness The (1999). Ethics For The New Millennium. New York: Riverhead Books.

Martin, Courtney E (2008, January). Love Your Fat Self. UTNE Reader. Retrieved January 1, 2007 from <http://www.utne.com/2008-01-01/Politics/Love-Your-Fat-Self.aspx>.

Nathan, Rebekah (2005). "My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student." New York: Penguin Books.

Schindehette, Susan (2007, November 12). Nooses: An Old-Time Symbol of Hate is Making an Ugly Comeback. People Magazine, 143-144.

REFERENCE FOR QUOTATIONS

Bartlett, J. Justin Kaplan, General Editor. Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, 17th Edition. Little, Brown, and Company, New York, 2002. Pg, 105, 16, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 1. 287. Pg. 601, 9, Geroge Morre, *The Bending of the Bough*, III. Pg. 839, 11, Steve [Stephen Bantu] Bike, Statement as witness, [May 3, 1976]. From *Black Consciousness in South Africa*. Pg. 121, 6, The Koran, 13:11.

FOOTNOTES

1 It is important to note that there have been a number of movements fighting for equality in the United States and in other countries. I find it quite typical for myself and other Americans to refer to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's as Martin Luther King Jr.'s work as if it is the only time equality was sought and that it was achieved. Thousands of people were involved in this movement and others in the 60's and other decades. Thousands are involved in similar movements today in the US and in other countries as well.

2 Lynch, William E. "*Slave Consultants Narrative.*" Speech, given in 1712, on the bank of the James River. The premise here is to have slave owners pit different groups against one another (field workers vs. house slaves, light skinned vs. dark skinned, young vs. old, men vs. women, etc.) to instill frustration and to set up a system where the slave owners are the only trusted people on a plantation. Analysis now suggests that the document was written in the mid to late 20th Century. The full-text of the speech is available. The site is maintained by the University of Missouri-St Louis, Thomas Jefferson Library. <http://www.umsl.edu/~libweb/blackstudies/lynch.htm>