Advancing Toward Social Justice via Student Affairs Inquiry

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Over the past two years, college students have engaged in social activism in ways that we have not seen since the 1960s and early 1970s. From large-scale campus protests, to sit-ins and teach-ins, significant activity has been undertaken in response to the ongoing subjugation of people from underrepresented groups in the United States. These events and efforts surrounding the events have prompted discussion across student affairs about the ways in which individual professionals can support students engaged in activism. Discussions have also taken place about the relationship of professional values and practices centered in those values to advancing social justice. As they now stand, the *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Educators* (College Educators International [ACPA] & Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education [NASPA], 2015) include social justice and inclusion as a distinct set of competencies for student affairs educators and practitioners.

Also included in the 2015 iteration of the *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015) are updates for competencies in assessment, evaluation, and research (AER). Central to the AER competencies is the expectation to use results in ways that lead to data-driven decision making. In other words, student affairs educators are expected to use assessment, evaluation, and research in ways that promote learning. Because social justice and inclusion are addressed as a distinct area, specific links to social justice are minimal in the assessment, evaluation and research set of competencies. However, what is included in the social justice and inclusion competencies is the expectation to connect principles of social justice across functional units and professional practices in and connected to the field of student affairs. What is

emphasized is that the AER competencies reflect assessment, evaluation, and research as a series of processes. At their core, inquiry and social justice share similar foci on larger-scale outcomes, with the process being equally important as the end goal.

Inquiry is about learning by seeking answers to questions, and so I approached writing this article as a way to answer a series of questions about social justice in inquiry. Through this article, I address the following questions:

- What is social justice?

- Why frame assessment as inquiry?

- What is the role of student affairs inquiry in advancing social justice?

- How can data be used in transformative ways?

- Is there an ethical dilemma in looking at inquiry in this way?

In answering these questions, I provide a narrative that takes the reader on a path from the concepts of social justice, to framing assessment work as inquiry, to connecting social justice to inquiry, and ending with ethical and other implications that arise from following this path. You will notice that I use the terms assessment and inquiry throughout the article. Where I use assessment, I do so to highlight practices that carry a solely pragmatic perspective, e.g. use of assessment practice in response to external demands. Inquiry represents efforts to engage in practices of assessment, evaluation, and research with an eye toward learning. In this way, borrowing from Friere (1970/2008), inquiry represents both a process and a goal.

What is social justice?

Social justice has been described as "both a process and a goal" (Bell, 2007, p. 1). As a process, social justice involves action (Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005). But action needs direction, and purpose. Freire (1970/2008) emphasized the importance of

actions and words becoming one. This Freirean concept, represented as praxis, reflects efforts to meld theory into practice (Bell, 2007). For example, if, as a field, we suggest that equity is value of the profession, then our practice should demonstrate commitment to equity through action. Pope, Reynolds and Mueller (2004) note praxis as a process of reflection followed by action. Praxis should also be viewed as recursive in nature (Gilpin, 2009), in that the process of reflection and action requires ongoing reflection, which in turn informs action through professional practice (hooks, 1994).

The goal of social justice is difficult to strip down to a single label or word, but liberation is often noted as the end goal (a note of caution regarding liberation will be shared later in this article). Regardless of the label, through engaging in the process of social justice, we have to focus on sets of outcomes, namely "hope, equity, and fairness" (Manning, 2009, p. 16). Manning suggests focusing on these outcomes because we can see the application of these goals in our everyday lives, and our everyday interactions. There can be a direct emotional response to working toward hope, equity, and fairness in the work that we do, day in, day out.

Achieving social justice is multifaceted and complex. The process of social justice requires effort, active participation and collaboration, and sustained advocacy with members of groups who experience oppression on campus and beyond. Social justice, as a goal, is equally complex. Dismantling systems of oppression is a big task. Each of us have to determine our place, and identify our sphere of influence.

A sphere of influence represents the space we inhabit in which we are able to accumulate and draw upon social capital (Massey & Brodmann, 2014). As we recognize the extent to which we are able to exercise social capital within a sphere of influence, we need to also understand the links between social capital and privilege. Social capital is

understood as a process through which individuals build, possess, and use varying degrees of capital based on group membership (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Those who occupy positions of privilege need to seek opportunities to utilize what Stanton-Salazar (2011) describes as empowerment social capital, which is the use of relationships with those in higher-status positions in acts of advocacy. The goal of empowerment social capital is to "enable the empowerment of low-status individuals in need" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1097).

I include social capital in this discussion of social justice as a means to propel social justice from a set of concepts or constructs that we treat as ideals, to seeing social justice as embedded in our everyday exchanges. Getting work done requires exchanges of social capital. Maybe we build social capital when we agree to serve on a committee, or fill-in for some indeterminate amount of time when a position is vacated. We spend our social capital when we use our willingness to help and be part of the team effort to highlight our individual accomplishments, hoping for future advancement. We have the capacity to use the social capital we accrue to pursue social justice. Part of social capital has to do with the ways in which we are perceived by those around us, within our spheres of influence. We each have to critically examine how we can draw on our social capital in the aims of social justice.

Why frame assessment as inquiry?

The answer to this question rests in the purposes of assessment work. Schuh (2015) casts assessment as an umbrella, under which rest two primary purposes: "assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement" (p. 8). To frame these two purposes as questions, we would ask "are we doing what we said we would do?" and, "how can we do it better?" By framing assessment work as seeking answers to these two

primary questions, we situate ourselves and our work around learning. But the learning is not situated within individuals, but as organizations, which represent collectives. Assessment is supposed to be about organizational learning. Organizational learning has two primary outcomes: identifying what the organization does well, and identifying areas in which the organization needs to improve. As Newhart (2015) notes, "the term inquiry . . . represent[s] the ongoing reflection upon and implementation of assessment efforts in student affairs" (p. 4).

In drawing on neuroscience to stress the importance of embracing student affairs inquiry as a means to learn about student learning, Bresciani Ludvik (2015) implores us to "embrace the ambiguity" (p. 9). Part of learning, especially deep learning, is the exploration of the unknown, and the questioning of what is known to us. "Inquiry serves as a tool for engaging curiosities about the work of student affairs and helps to uncover the best ways to serve diverse student populations" (Cochran, 2016, p. 3).

One question comes up when shifting our mindset about assessment to inquiry: is this a new idea? My answer is no. Palomba and Banta (1999) provided some pointers to help us frame our assessment efforts that relate directly to framing the work as inquiry. In addressing what a good assessment program should do, they offered a number of suggestions, including that a good assessment program should ask important questions, is linked to decision making, and leads to reflection and action. These three items demonstrate that assessment *is* inquiry. When done properly, and for the right reasons, inquiry is about learning, which is guided by reflection, leads to data-driven decision making, and ultimately action.

Inquiry is not solely about learning as an outcome, but when applied to assessment practice, inquiry is about the process of learning. Inquiry as a process is

about deep learning – that learning that can be mapped from lower-order to higher-order thinking. Inquiry also represents modes of contributing to bodies of knowledge. When we share what we assess and our processes of inquiry that includes implementation through reflection, we enter another dimension of inquiry: critique. By opening our inquiry efforts to public consumption, we create new paths for feedback. Feedback is a key component of inquiry – we should not engage in this work within a vacuum. By exposing our work (and ourselves) to others, we become vulnerable. Vulnerability can foster the conditions of cognitive dissonance, the cognitive state where an individual's beliefs and/or assumptions are in conflict (Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007). When experiencing cognitive dissonance, the individual is driven to consider alternatives and seek a resolution. The consideration of alternatives is the point at which learning occurs. For inquiry work to approach deep learning, there have to be moments of cognitive dissonance.

What is the role of student affairs inquiry in advancing social justice?

If you have attended a student affairs conference or picked up a journal published by one of the field's professional associations in recent years, you have likely noticed an uptick in presentations and articles that address social justice. Social justice, with its focus on praxis, has been elevated as a central professional competency in student affairs. I make the reference to praxis to connect to the role of student affairs inquiry in advancing social justice purposefully, and will expand on the idea moving through the rest of this section.

Through the *Professional competencies for student affairs educators* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), practitioners are urged to "implement appropriate measures to assess the campus climate for students, staff, and faculty" (p. 31). Campus climate is an area of

critical concern when we consider the experiences of members of oppressed groups on college campuses, particularly at predominantly White institutions (Bourke, 2016). However, it is not enough to simply measure the campus climate; the process has to be undertaken with care, and the results evaluated. This brings me to the key point in addressing praxis as a social justice tenet in the context of student affairs inquiry. Praxis, the process of making words and action one (Freire 1970/2008), reflects a commitment to the process of inquiry. We have to commit to evaluating the data collection process, including instrumentation, to ensure inclusivity. The same goes for sampling procedures. Not only do we need to work to ensure representative samples, but we need to provide spaces where the voices of members of oppressed groups can be lifted. Inquiry practitioners have to be prepared for revelations that can come through analysis of climate studies, which can reflect some ugly truths about the campus. Sharing hard lessons with veracity is critical in addressing social justice through inquiry. The work of social justice involves the naming of truths learned through inquiry.

Inquiry as advocacy

I begin this section with a warning: avoid the trap of the liberal savior. As noted in the section addressing social justice conceptually, I referenced the connection of social justice to liberatory practices. Freire (1970/2008) implores those engaged in educational practices aimed at reducing oppression, to not fall victim to becoming a great emancipator. The goal of liberatory education is to address the systemic issues that have led and continue to lead to oppression (Freire, 1970/2008).

Advocacy, as an aspect of multicultural competence, is focused on addressing systemic issues (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004). Of particular importance is first recognizing the existence of barriers that preclude or prevent students from fully

engaging in or benefiting from the educational experiences of the institution (Bourke, 2012). We, as educators, have to fully understand ourselves (meaning our departments, divisions, institutions, and yes, some of us individually) in order engage in advocacy processes.

There are areas of scholarship that are firmly situated in advocacy, such as legal scholarship framed by Critical Race Theory. We sometimes lose sight of the responsibilities we have with inquiry efforts. While there are certainly uses for assessment in making the case for the importance of student affairs (Henning, 2016), the significance of the role of assessment is much larger. As I noted previously, assessment practice as inquiry has its focus on learning as a process, not simply on outcomes. In connecting inquiry as an act of advocacy, we have to be open to the possibilities of what can come about when learning about ourselves. We have to be okay with learning negative things. If we truly embrace the role of social justice in inquiry work, we have to be prepared to learn some ugly truths about ourselves.

Universal design

When I speak with people about social justice, the conversations most often focus on systems of oppression experienced across difference based upon ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and sometimes class. An aspect of difference that rarely comes up in those conversations is inclusion centered on ability or disability. While universal design does not solely represent considerations for individuals who experience disability as part of their daily lives, the concept receives the most attention in that regard. However, universal design represents a number of key reminders and critical considerations when it comes to the connections between student affairs inquiry and social justice.

Universal design represents "user-centered design, where every individual is considered" (D'Souza, 2016). Through this comment, D'Souza reflects a central tenet of universal design, equitable experiences. When we look at inquiry as an iterative process, we see multiple opportunities to address equity in experiences. D'Souza points out the importance of sampling as a first step in addressing equity. "If there are people missing in your sample, then make the effort to include them so that the data is truly representative. This is how we can collect information that will define universal access in our programs and services" (D'Souza, 2016). Through this statement, she makes a connection between inquiry and student experiences, that universal design concerns in inquiry are not simply about our efforts to collect, analyze, and interpret data. Inquiry does not exist by itself in a vacuum, but is part of and impacts the lived experiences of people within our communities.

How can data be used in transformative ways?

If we accept that as professionals in the student affairs realm, those engaged in student affairs inquiry have responsibilities and obligations to advance social justice, then we can conceive of these professionals working with data in transformative ways.

Pointing again to the *Professional Competencies for Student Affairs Educators* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), student affairs practitioners are called upon to "demonstrate institutional effectiveness in addressing critical incidents of discrimination that impact the institution" (p. 31). Members of the profession are expected to use data to exhibit the ways in which the members of the institution respond to discriminatory issues. But a challenge that we often face as a field is remaining reactive rather than proactively working to address systemic issues that result in critical incidents.

Part of being proactive involves the ongoing examination of institutional policies (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). As I noted earlier, we focus many of our student affairs inquiry efforts on data collected from humans, particularly students. However, we need to recognize that data exists in a variety of forms, including policies. When was the last time you viewed a collection of policies as a dataset? We can engage in analyses of policies through critical lenses. We can conduct comparative analyses of policies against those from peer institutions.

When analyzing policies or other institutional documents, there can be benefit in utilizing a particular framework or schema. Altheide (1996) provides a guide to analyzing textual data with the use of theoretical or conceptual schemas. This type of approach can be very beneficial when attempting to answer questions about institutional policies connected to social justice. For example, we might want to know how policies demonstrate an institutional commitment to inclusivity. Or, imagine we work at an institution that uses language about student-centeredness. We might want to examine institutional policies to determine how student-centeredness plays out through the lens of social justice.

Approaching the use of data for transformative means is a direct approach to advocacy through action. Those who work with data have unique opportunities to help shape campus dialogs around social justice. To use data in transformative ways that can shape campus dialogs, we must be committed to critically examining data through analysis. When available, we need to examine differences between groups. This process involves comparisons of individual groups (e.g. markers of identity) against overall means, as well as against dominant and normative groups. For example, if analyzing data from a quality of life survey administered to students living on campus, how do

students of color rate their experiences and perceptions, compared to both the mean and to White students. We do not know what the data bears out until we take the time to ask questions that lead to deeper analysis.

Conducting these types of analyses represents only one step in a process of using data in transformative ways. As results help us develop insights into the experiences of marginalized students, and more directly their experiences with oppressive forces on campus, we have responsibilities to use those results.

After determining what action steps will be taken following these analyses, there remains a critical task: communication. I propose a multi-pronged approach to communicating the results, along with decisions and recommendations. First, forego the three-ring binder, unless they are placed in a shared location and utilized to guide further discussion. Focus instead on communicating focused information to key stakeholders, starting with students. Tell students what was learned through analyzing data based on markers of identity, and when results suggest differentials between groups, the steps that the unit or division will take to address the differentials.

Reflexivity

Just as we need to understand interactions and connections within datasets, those engaged in inquiry work need to consider not only our own subjectivities, but also our relationships to data, and the people represented within the data. Stewart (2010) points to reflexivity as a means of transparency. While ze shares zir thoughts on reflexivity in direct relation to qualitative inquiry, Stewart also highlights the importance to reflexivity in student affairs practice. "Reflexivity acknowledges 'the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective' (Patton, 2002 as cited in Stewart, 2010, p. 294). Through drawing on

Patton's work, Stewart is reminding everyone engaged in student affairs practice, not only those conducting qualitative research, of the significance of self-knowledge that is situated in sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts and constructs. I include this perspective on reflexivity embedded in a section on transformative uses of data purposefully.

Reflexivity is a tool that reminds us that we are, as inquisitors, seated within the data we collect, analyze, and interpret. We are seated there cooperatively and collaboratively. We are not separate from the data we collect, analyze, and interpret (Stewart, 2010). When we acknowledge the links between ourselves and the people represented in data, thanks to sociocultural and sociopolitical awareness, we are better prepared to engage with data in ways that leads to action. To sit, in cooperation and collaboration in a reflexive pose, has to involve everything we learn through inquiry efforts, both positive and negative. Through reflexivity, we understand that negative findings represent not only things that need to be addressed, and people who need to be acknowledged, and that barriers might exist.

Is there an ethical dilemma?

Ethics is a topic likely addressed in every graduate-level introduction to research methods course, along with courses connected to student affairs assessment. In drawing on Kitchener's work on ethics in student affairs practice, Schuh (2009) proposed the following as ethical principles in student affairs assessment: respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful.

Beyond this interpretation of ethics in student affairs inquiry, there lie expectations of the very nature of scientific research (e.g. research in all its forms), including inquiry in educational settings.

There are perspectives present in the world of inquiry (e.g. research, evaluation, and assessment) that the researcher must remain objective. Through a positivist perspective, the researcher is disconnected from the research project, and research participants (Davis & Harrison, 2013). It is through this seeming disconnect that objectivity is maintained. To further clarify this perspective, positivism acknowledges that culture and power exist, but as separate variables, rather than a "lens through which reality – and, by extension, knowledge – are constructed" (Davis & Harrison, 2013, p. 4).

However, there are realities of engaging in inquiry. Regardless of the research design employed, or the nature of the data gathered, data is about humans. In the context of student affairs inquiry, data is most often provided directly by humans, and focus on the human experience and human interactions (Davis & Harrison, 2013). As we engage in the work of inquiry, we are faced with the realities of interacting with other humans. We carefully craft the wording for each question on a survey instrument to reduce confusion and increase our chances of receiving reliable data. Through analysis, we seek to tease out interesting and statistically significant differences among demographic groups; we examine predictability of one group to engage in a behavior versus another group. Through our inquiry activities, we are connected, if only through data, to other human beings.

To suggest that we are disconnected and objective is a fallacy. "Unfortunately, objectivity is probably never attained completely" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996, p. 116). We bring our own subjectivities to bare through all of our inquiry efforts. We often see subjectivity explicitly addressed in published works about qualitative research projects. An author might label a section "Role of the Researcher" and address their identities

and the ways in which they potentially impacted the research project. My suggestion is that regardless of the research design, we must always be mindful of our own positionalities (Bourke, 2014), and acknowledge the roles our lived experiences have on the ways in which we view and interpret the world. After all, the data we gather through student affairs inquiry are part of our world.

An additional concern beyond ethics is one of dissonance. In reflecting on his experiences with civil rights protests and efforts on campus as a senior student affairs officer, James Rhatigan noted tensions that exist between serving the institution and advocating for student needs (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, Tuttle, Ward, & Gaston-Gayles, 2004). There can be a fine line to be walked between enforcing policies and addressing unjust and oppressive policies.

My view is that there is no ethical dilemma when using inquiry as a tool to advance toward social justice. The two are not at odds with one another. Calls for some type of 'pure' objectivity are misguided. The subjectivities that influence and guide our daily lives cannot be switched off when engaging in inquiry practices.

Conclusions

Our 'why' in connecting student affairs inquiry to social justice is not likely self-evident. Social justice relies on connected actions, whereas approaches to assessment in student affairs have traditionally favored research-related activities that maintain strict objectivity. But just as our overall conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of student affairs educators have evolved, so too, must our conceptions of the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in student affairs inquiry.

As a student affairs educator tasked with conducting inquiry activities, one has to make choices about the process of gathering and analyzing data, and reporting findings.

There is an ethical obligation to do so with veracity. This ethical obligation to engage in the inquiry process with utmost honesty does not conflict with using inquiry as a tool to advance toward social justice.

Together, inquiry and social justice as linked processes are sure to lead to moments of cognitive dissonance. As we check our individual privileges when engaging in social justice work, we are likely to experience cognitive dissonance. When we use data in transformative ways, we might question the utility of what we are doing, and how it will be received by those in positions of authority. Also, by using data in transformative ways, we engage in the work of social justice that can lead to the dismantling of systems of oppression.

What I hope I have conveyed in this article is that inquiry and social justice share a similar focus: the process. Both processes are directed at larger-scale outcomes, but at their core, the work of inquiry and social justice are about the process. The processes, in the context of higher education, are rooted in learning. Whether learning about students through surveys or direct measures of student experiences, or about institutional policies, practices and procedures, and ultimately ourselves through reflexivity, our learning about people and our experience together take place in sociocultural contexts.

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