

Higher Education

Diversity Initiatives in Higher Education: Social Justice from Classroom to Community

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Introduction

In the Fall of 2003, the Office of Human Relations Programs (OHRP), the campus-wide equity compliance and diversity education arm of the Office of the President at the University of Maryland, College Park, created, developed, and began implementation of the three-year *Social Justice from Classroom to Community* (SJCC) project through its Student Intercultural Learning Center (SILC). That implementation is ongoing.

This article is the first of three in a non-consecutive series of articles on the SJCC project. This article will provide a detailed overview of the project, the next will report on the project's findings, and the last will discuss project institutionalization and future directions.

Purposes

The SJCC project was established to provide second and third year undergraduate students with meaningful and practical ways to connect the concepts and theories of social justice education that they learn in their campus-based courses, with the concrete applications of social justice action in "real life" through paid internships in progressive, community-based, private, non-profit organizations (i.e., orga-

nizations that address the political, economic, health/human services, and educational needs of members of traditionally underrepresented communities). Toward that end, the SJCC project was designed to:

(1) bridge the *theory-practice gap* between traditional academia and community activism by building understanding of the knowledge, reflection, and action circle—of praxis—among university faculty who teach multicultural and social justice education-oriented courses, as well as community activists engaged in grassroots level social change work;

(2) bridge the *knowledge-action gap* by connecting students—knowledgeable about and skilled in multicultural and social justice education, and interested in putting this knowledge and these skills into action—to internships with progressively focused, private, non-profit community-based organizations;

(3) provide students structured opportunities to apply the philosophies of service-learning, civic engagement, and democratic citizenship they learn in classroom contexts to effect social change in the larger society;

(4) afford students who are financially constrained, particularly Students of Color, professional opportunities to practice social action that also enable them to earn a living;

(5) offer private, non-profit organizations—who are also financially constrained and, therefore, often only able to secure largely middle-class and White student interns—seed money for, and support and guidance in, build-

ing recruitment practices that are effective in accessing and sustaining diverse pools of student interns and, subsequently, committed future employees; and,

(6) continue the university's, OHRP's, and SILC's traditions of developing programs in response to students' stated concerns, needs, and interests.

Rationale

Higher education researchers have demonstrated the direct and influential relationship between the co-curricular involvement of students (e.g., holding leadership positions, engaging in volunteerism, participating in educational workshops) and attitudinal and behavioral and outcomes on many levels (including increased levels of satisfaction with schooling, and improved learning, social success, and persistence toward graduation, among others) (Astin, 1984, 1993; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993).

Research has also shown that student participation in diversity education seminars and cross-cultural dialogue experiences leads to positive immediate and long-term personal, academic, and professional growth (McTighe Musil, Garcia, Hudgins, Nettles, Sedlacek, & Smith, 1999; Milem & Hakuta, 2000). Building on this research, OHRP conducted longitudinal, mixed methodological assessment of students engaged in the range of curricular and co-curricular experiences organized around community service, service learning, and civic engagement as well as diversity and social justice.

The results of this assessment were clear: college students are looking for practical and meaningful ways to connect diversity and social justice concepts and theories

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Higher Education

from their classes to real life experience where they can be concretely applied. While community service-, service learning-, and civic engagement-oriented training and volunteerism begin to provide such experience, students indicate that the nature of this experience is, too often, superficial.

Classroom to Community, Theory to Practice: Continuing a Tradition of Student-Driven Program Development

The University of Maryland, College Park, a public research university and the flagship campus of the University System of Maryland, has an undergraduate student population of 25,000. It also has a long track record of developing and implementing cutting-edge, diversity-related, social justice-oriented initiatives, that are not only student-focused, but based on students' expressed concerns, needs, and interests.

Many of these student-driven initiatives began with grant support, became nationally recognized model programs, and have subsequently evolved into institutionally sustained endeavors. Of particular note in this regard, are the model initiatives piloted, developed, and institutionalized by OHRP. In fact, OHRP's initiatives have been highly recognized by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the American Council on Education, (ACE), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and the White House Initiative on Race. These initiatives—housed within SILC—include:

- (1) a student advisory board called SATIN (Student Action Through Intergroup Networking);
- (2) an Intergroup Dialogue Program (initiated with funding from the William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, now institutionalized with university monies);
- (3) a Diversity Leadership Retreat (also initiated with Hewlett support and now sustained by the university); and,
- (4) an array of intergroup dialogue-based academic coursework and scholarship.

It is important to note that these initiatives were not only developed in response to the expressed concerns, needs, and interests of students at the University of Maryland, but that the establishment of SILC itself emerged from a large-scale assessment and other coordinated research of students' perceptions of diversity at the university. Currently, SILC programs engage an average of 900-1200 students per year in intercultural

knowledge-building and cross-cultural interaction skills development.

The SJCC project continues the university's, OHRP's, and SILC's traditions of developing programs in response to students' stated concerns, needs, and interests. In so doing, it augments our earlier programming successes, offering students opportunities to extend their social justice education from campus contexts (classroom and co-curricular ones) to social justice action in community milieus (as paid interns and future professionals).

From Heroes and Holidays to Privilege and Oppression: Building Substantive Campus-Community Linked Diversity Programs

Prior to 1990, most university based diversity programs employed a "heroes and holidays" approach to cross-cultural learning (Banks, 1990). These programs, including food fairs, festivals, and other forums for cultural exchange, focused primarily on the superficial celebration of diversity, often failing to address issues involving social inequities and discrimination faced by People of Color, women, people with disabilities, and other historically underrepresented groups.

Since 1990, many universities have made significant progress in their diversity programming, moving beyond simplistic conceptualizations of mere difference, into more substantive multicultural and social justice education-based programming that directly addresses the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other forms of individual and institutional oppression regularly experienced by students from traditionally disenfranchised groups on campus, and impacting their families and communities of origin in the world beyond university borders (Bell, 1997).

These initiatives have transcended the "heroes and holidays" approach, providing forums for honest dialogue and critical self-reflection about social issues. Among these initiatives are intergroup dialogue programs and student-centered curricular reform projects. Such initiatives provide students with new intellectual frameworks for engaging social issues, preparing them to think more deeply about privilege and oppression and their roles in reinforcing and challenging both (Balón, 1995).

As a result, growing numbers of students are graduating from college, not only with more complex theoretical understandings of equity and justice, but with some of the practical skill sets necessary to put

their knowledge into practice in their chosen professional arenas.

Despite building relatively advanced theoretical knowledge as well as practical ability in diversity, students preparing for the world of work often find themselves at a loss for how to realize the praxis—the integration of knowledge, reflection, and action—of multicultural and social justice education in their future professional fields. This loss is, in part, a remnant of traditional academia—that an unfortunately large percentage of scholars who teach about multicultural or social justice issues, do so only from an intellectual vantage point, failing to put the ideals underlying these issues into action.

Likewise, traditional grassroots social activists have not always valued the role of research and ensuing knowledge production in effectuating individual and community self-determination and social change. The dearth of Scholar-Activists in the academy and Activist-Scholars in the community has led to the theory-practice gap in the development of student activists and, subsequently, activist employees and democratically engaged citizens.

The SJCC project bridges the knowledge-action gap by connecting students—knowledgeable about, and skilled in, multicultural and social justice education, as well as interested in putting this knowledge and these skills into action—to internships with progressively focused, private, non-profit community-based organizations. The impact of this connection is three-fold—it develops within participating students, involved university faculty, and partnering community activists a deep appreciation for and, thus, ability to walk the talk of, progressive praxis. It is through the development of meaningful, formalized, and sustained connections between the involved students, campus actors, and community players that the spirit of democratic citizenship emerges and proliferates.

Students as Cross-Fertilizers between Academic and Activist Worlds

Service learning-, civic-engagement-, and democratic citizenship-based learning are generally structured around a two-fold educational philosophy: training and volunteerism. The SJCC project goes much further with respect to both folds. In moving beyond training into educational transformation, the SJCC develops students as cross-fertilizers between the academic and activist worlds, teaching them how philosophy and action impact one another. Through

the paid professional activist internship, the SJCC then shows students how to test the parameters of the philosophy-action reflexivity.

It is important to point out that the current volunteerist or unpaid internship infrastructure that necessarily exists within the typically modestly-funded progressive, private, non-profit, community-based organizations, favors students who have other sources of financial stability. Indirectly, this “classes out” a great deal of diversity from the intern pool. By providing paid internships, the SJCC creates a context for recruiting, and, ideally, retaining Students of Color in social activist work.

Since so much of this work is done in disenfranchised communities that, because of institutionalized racism are disproportionately comprised of People of Color, it is particularly important to engage racial and ethnic minority students as activists. In so doing, common insider/outside dynamics that too often exist because of the White community activist/OfColor community resident dichotomy are broken down. In fact, for many Students of Color at the University of Maryland, these disenfranchised communities are their actual communities of origin. In other cases, these local communities bear striking similarities to their home communities in other urban centers in the United States and abroad.

Even for the Students of Color who come from more affluent communities, their racial and ethnic connection to these less fortunate communities’ residents facilitates their abilities to successfully engage these residents in self-determination-focused social action. And, a growing body of research supports the SJCC premise here, indicating that when resources are not an issue, Students of Color are more likely to become *and stay* engaged in social action work than their White counterparts (Bowen, Bok, & Loury, 2000; Milem & Hakuta, 2000).

Diversifying the intern pool and, ultimately, the employment pool, for social action-focused organizations also benefits White students and incumbent White professional activists. The presence of greater diversity encourages the interrogation of how whiteness impacts the movement toward social action in majority minority communities, leading dedicated White people to new information and knowledge, attitudinal shifts, and behavioral changes that are crucial to unraveling potential “savior” or “do-gooder” dispositions. Resultantly, in place of these superficial dispositions, more sophisticated and thoughtful orientations emerge that genu-

inely support the development of agency toward self-reliance within disenfranchised minority communities.

In these ways, the SJCC project enables students of *all* racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities to recognize and resolve privilege and power dynamics operating within disenfranchised contexts across the range of social identities—for example, poor Whites, people with disabilities, elder communities, and Muslims—in building the movement for equity and justice *for all and by all*.

Project Specifics

The SJCC directly impacts and engages, through targeted and open invitation, 235 students, 85 community activists and the organizations they represent, 65 faculty and the departments they represent, and six major campus units (in addition to OHRP) each year.

Phases II through VII of the SJCC were designed to engender different kinds and degrees of student, activist, faculty, and campus partner participation in the project in order to amplify its impact across the range of participants. In this way, the SJCC builds understanding of, and commitment to, social justice action among all participants over the life of the project—be they at introductory, intermediate, or advanced levels of development at its inception.

Phase I: Building Participation

Phase I focuses on building the campus partnerships with the:

- (1) Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity (CRGE)—which focuses on developing faculty social justice-focused scholarship;
- (2) Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE)—which works with faculty to improve their teaching pedagogy to better engage a diverse pool of learners;
- (3) Curriculum Transformation Project (CTP)—which works with faculty to integrate diverse perspectives into their discipline content;
- (4) Maryland Institute for Minority Achievement and Urban Education (MIMAUE)—which works with university faculty and P-12 teachers to improve educational outcomes for minority students;
- (5) Democracy Collaborative—a research consortium dedicated to the study of civic engagement; and,

(6) Office of Community Service—which works with faculty to integrate community service and/or service learning components into their courses, and with students to place them in service sites.

Through the campus partnerships, faculty dedicated to social justice-oriented social action, students involved in social justice-oriented social action, and social justice-oriented community activists and community-based organizations are identified and targeted for participation in the subsequent phases of the project.

Phase II: Assessment

The SJCC assessment involves—through targeted invitation—15 faculty, 15 students, and 15 community activists in three constituent-discrete, facilitated focus groups. Specific information needed to build a successful social justice pipeline for students to move from classroom to community is garnered.

Phase III: Praxis Dialogue

The praxis dialogue engages—by targeted invitation—three groups of 20 participants each (10 faculty and 10 activists in each) in facilitated intergroup dialogues about the Scholar/Activist dichotomy. Information relating to the praxis circle of knowledge-reflection-action needed to build and sustain Scholar-Activist/Activist-Scholar partnership, is elicited.

Phase IV: Peer Activist Conference

Two half-day peer activist conferences connect—through open invitation—50 students, in moderated interactive discussion, with an invited panel of 5 recent graduates who are employed in a progressive, community-based, private, non-profit organization. Student awareness of the social action-focused professional employment opportunities that exist is cultivated.

Phase V: Professional Activist Conference

Two half-day professional activist conferences connect—through open invitation—50 students, in moderated interactive discussion, with an invited panel of 5 long-time professional community activists to build: (1) student enthusiasm for life-long careers in social action; (2) student advocacy for the development of social action consciousness within more mainstream employment arenas; and, (3) student investment in democratic citizenship as members of local, national, and global communities.

Higher Education

Phase VI: Pre-Internship Retreat

The weekend (Friday through Sunday) pre-internship retreat brings together 20 students, 20 faculty, and 20 activists (with 10 facilitators) to fully substantiate the classroom-community social justice connection. All 60 participants are identified through a competitive application process. The retreat convenes:

- (1) students, activists, and faculty (in 4 groups of 15 [5 of each constituency]) to determine, through facilitated discussion, what theoretical knowledge and practical skills gaps remain that need to be filled so that students can enter their internships with appropriate and adequate social justice content area knowledge and multicultural interaction competency;
- (2) students, activists, and faculty (as a group of 60 distilled down, through facilitated open space dialogue, to 20 groups of three) to establish their internship placements and mentorship connections; and,
- (3) student-activist-faculty triplet cohorts (20 groups of three) to articulate, through externally structured discussion, the expectations and objectives for each internship.

Phase VII: Internship

The 45-day internship engages the internship triplet cohorts in the actualization of the student's internship experience—meeting the expectations and realizing the objectives they collaboratively articulated at the pre-internship retreat.

Phase VIII: Evaluation

As campus diversity initiatives have increased, so has the need to effectively assess and evaluate them (Garcia, Hudgins, McTighe Musil, Nettles, Sedlacek & Smith, 2001). Currently, OHRP/SILC employ a number of methodologies to document the effectiveness of on-going diversity initiatives. These include participant/observation, ethnographies, focus groups, advisory boards, web-based surveys, pre- and post-tests, reactionnaires, and Likert scales, among others. The data garnered from these efforts give us the ability to track longitudinal initiative successes.

OHRP continues these efforts with the SJCC project initiative. Additionally, we have solicited Dr. William Sedlacek, a consummate educational researcher based at the University of Maryland who is nation-

ally recognized for his specific expertise in diversity-related assessment and evaluation, to design and implement additional appraisal tools uniquely adaptable to SJCC project goals and intended outcomes (discussed below) (Sedlacek, 1998; in press).

Working in concert, Dr. Sedlacek and OHRP/SILC's assessment and evaluation specialists form the SJCC project research partnership. Together they have developed a strategically benchmarked process organized around three parameters:

- (1) *Information or Knowledge-Building*;
- (2) *Attitudes or Skills Development*; and,
- (3) *Behaviors or Abilities to Practice*.

An array of qualitative and quantitative methods are being employed to measure growth with respect to each parameter in each phase of the project, as well as the project's overall success in fulfilling its stated purposes, and in reaching its goals and intended outcomes.

Phase IX: Dissemination of Findings

Crucial in the dissemination of findings on new knowledge is the creation of forums for participants to share their experiences and process their learning development. SJCC project staff facilitate this dissemination process within the University of Maryland, locally, and nationally in four primary ways:

- (1) through the creation and marketing of a project website, called *Theory to Action in Social Justice Education*;
- (2) by co-writing articles (like this one) about the project with the array of project partners and participants for newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and journals of relevance to local and national non-profit and higher education organizations;
- (3) by presenting about the project, again, with the array of project partners and participants at community-based and national conferences on diversity, multicultural, and social justice education as well as community-service, service learning, and civic engagement; and,
- (4) through the development and distribution (via hardcopy and online) of a student guide to progressive, community-based, non-profit organizations that offer internship opportunities (paid and unpaid).

Goals and Intended Outcomes

The goals of the SJCC project are to support the growth and development of:

- (1) faculty into scholar-activists, community justice advocates into activist-scholars, and, students into activist employees and, ultimately life-long democratically engaged citizens;
- (2) Students of Color into community-based social activists in majority-minority communities who promote organically (in-group) generated self-determination between and among disenfranchised People of Color;
- (3) White students into community-based social activists in majority-minority communities as facilitators—not “saviors” or “do-gooders”—of disenfranchised People of Color acting as agents in the determination of their own destinies; and,
- (4) *all* students into community-based social activists who support the liberation struggles of *all* disenfranchised peoples in manners that enable those peoples—whomever they are—to be the authors of their emancipation.

The intended outcomes of the SJCC project are to:

- (1) build a formal campus partnership between and among the myriad entities engaged in:
 - ◆ community service, service learning, and civic engagement;
 - ◆ multicultural curriculum transformation, instructional improvement, and research and scholarship;
 - ◆ equity, diversity, and social justice education; and

the above to support the project over its three-year course, and to build sustainability for it beyond those three years;

- (2) build a formal campus-community partnership between the project campus partners and the project community partners to seamlessly enable students to make the “social justice from classroom to community” connection;
- (3) create a project website to serve as a national clearinghouse for information on campus-community social action partnerships to facilitate reproduction of such partnerships across the country;

(4) create a resource guide for students interested in securing internships with progressive, community-based, private, non-profit organizations; and,

(5) create a compelling rationale for why social action internships must be paid internships that:

◆ emphasizes why progressive, internship host organizations must practice what they teach by recruiting a diverse intern pool; and,

◆ creates a blueprint for paid social action internships in which action toward the development of sustaining sources of support for such internships is engendered.

Conclusion

In listening to the voices of students who have taken a multitude of multicultural and social justice classes and participated in the full compliment of OHRP's SILC's diversity programs, it is clear that equity- and justice-oriented initiatives must connect multicultural and social justice education on campus to social action in the workplace and, subsequently, the wider community.

Partnerships between higher education institutions and social justice oriented non-profit organizations, like the SJCC

partnership, provide the ideal loci for actualization. It is toward these ends that the nine-phase SJCC project is organized and directed.

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