

Justice, Social Justice

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Diversity is a common goal in higher education and is incorporated into many institutions' mission statements. As student affairs professionals, we need to understand what our role in the goal of diversity is and the steps we need to take to help foster diversity. Diversity on college campuses provides several benefits for students, the college and university, and the greater society (Chang, Eds). For this article, think about the individual and institutional benefits.

Individual Benefits

- Improved racial and cultural awareness
- Enhanced openness to diversity and challenge
- Greater commitment to increasing racial understanding
- More occupational and residential desegregation later in life
- Enhanced critical thinking ability
- Greater satisfaction with the college experience
- Perceptions of a more supportive campus racial climate
- Increased wages for men who graduate from higher “quality” institutions

Institutional Benefits

- Cultivation of workforce with greater levels of cross-cultural competence
- Attraction of best available talent pool
- Enhanced marketing efforts
- Higher levels of creativity and innovation
- Better problem-solving abilities
- Greater organizational flexibility
- More student-centered approaches to teaching and learning
- More diverse curricular offerings
- More research focused on issues of race/ethnicity and gender
- More women and faculty of color involved in community and volunteer service

(Chang, Eds.)

While striving for diversity is admirable, it is not enough. There must be an environment that welcomes and supports the wide range of individuals, cultures, and backgrounds that create diversity at the institution. This environment is created by institutional policy, norms, and how we, as professionals, react to what happens in the world. To develop a welcoming and supportive environment for the diverse students, faculty, and staff an institution has, those working at the institution need to have an understanding of social justice.

Understanding the benefits of diversity, institutions recruit students from diverse backgrounds. It is important to know the environment minority students enter when starting college. Students of color come to college not only with the responsibilities of being a student, but also potentially feeling the responsibility to help educate other students of color about being a student of color at a predominantly white institution (Smith, 1994). It can only be assumed that students of other minoritized backgrounds feel the same pressures. It is our job as professionals (regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity/expression, or sexual orientation) to relieve this pressure from our students and start taking on the responsibility of educating and supporting students of oppressed identities.

This responsibility is known as social justice. Social justice is understanding that society is not equitable to all groups of people (Sensoy, 2012). Understanding this and how it impacts student affairs professionals, as both individuals and professionals, and how it impacts our students is critical. Knowing every student does not experience the same institution in the same way is important; it is the only way student affairs professionals can provide individualized support to our students. Additionally, working with men, women, historically Black Greek-letter organizations, and culturally-based groups makes it important for us as fraternity and sorority advisors to understand the different backgrounds and identities our students hold and how they show up in our work with them and on campus. Additionally, advisors need to note how our different councils work together and show up in similar spaces differently.

Fraternities and sororities have a unique history of providing support to students the educational system was not benefiting and supporting. Brotherhood and sisterhood was meant to provide students with a sense of family while away from home. This type of organization provides close bonds that allow for deep conversation and students to challenge each other to think critically and become the best individuals they can be. When speaking about social justice it is important for advisors to capitalize on the existing structures and have meaningful dialogue with members.

To best understand the process in order to address our student groups in creating dialogue, Zuniga (Saunders, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 2001; Zuniga & Nagda, 2001) compiled work to create "The Four-Stage Design of Intergroup Dialogue (Saunders, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 2001; Zuniga & Nagda, 2001)." Stage one, titled "Group Beginnings: Forming and Building Relationships" (Zuniga, et al., 2007, pg. 26) encourages the development of a foundation for honest and vulnerable conversations in order to establish trust in the group. Stage two, "Exploring Differences and Commonalities of Experience" (Zuniga, et al., pg. 26), delves into sharing the common and different identities present in the group. Stage three, "Exploring and Dialoguing about Hot Topics" (Zuniga, et al., 2007, pg. 29) starts to integrate controversial conversations that may create friction between students who identify with different social groups. Stage four, the final stage, "Action Planning and Alliance Building" (Zuniga, et al., 2007, pg. 30) serves as a comprehensive compilation of the previous stages into actual work. Think about where the fraternity and sorority community you advise is in the stages Zuniga discusses. Once you have identified what conversations the community is ready for, work with student leaders to begin the conversation and build it appropriately.

Student affairs professionals need to personally engage in social justice work in order to engage students appropriately. Social justice is a complex topic and those engaging in the conversation must be prepared to explore who they are as an individual completely. As individuals work through helping others explore their identities, it is important for self-care to take place. Modeling these behaviors and being able to practice them with our students helps create a culture of social justice within fraternity and sorority communities. If you are not already active in social justice work, take it upon yourself to seek out the offices on your campus or the people you know doing working in diversity, equity, or social justice to further educate yourself. If you are active in social justice work, make yourself available as a resource and continue doing social justice work.

References

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