Centering social justice in the study of higher education: The challenges and possibilities for institutional change

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Centering Social Justice in the Study of Higher Education: The Challenges and Possibilities for Institutional Change

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In this article, we illustrate and grapple with the challenges of doing social justice work in a neoliberal academic environment. Specifically, we consider our experiences of creating a social justice concentration in a graduate program where higher education serves as the focus of study. In so doing, we draw on information from a number of sources to explore three key considerations: (1) the institutional context within which we developed the social justice concentration, (2) the forms of mobilization we engaged in leading to implementation, and (3) the challenges and opportunities we faced during this process. Although we suggest that the challenges match and in some cases far outweigh the opportunities, we argue that there is no acceptable alternative to not doing this work. We believe we must continue to strive to center subjugated knowledges in the academy, to honor different ways of knowing, and to work for progressive social change by engaging in projects that create an academy that is truly inclusive.

Since the late 1960s, ranges of opportunities have gradually emerged in US and Canadian postsecondary institutions for students to pursue the study of social justice. While some sociologists, anthropologists, economists, and other scholars have concerned themselves with issues of social and economic inequity dating back centuries, the creation of Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s marked the beginning of formalized academic programs focusing specifically on inquiry related to social justice (Boxer, 1998; Hu-DeHart, 1993; Miller, 2001; Nast & Pulido, 2000). Since that time, a number of academic programs placing emphasis on social justice have emerged. For example, at Arizona State University, the School of Social Transformation offers interdisciplinary degrees in Justice Studies focusing on justice and social...
inquiry; the University of Minnesota, School of Public Affairs, offers a graduate minor in Human Rights; and the Sociology Department at Brock University in Ontario, Canada offers a degree in Social Justice and Equity Studies. In the field of Education, program offerings include Cultural Studies in Education at Ohio University; Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the University of Toronto; Social Justice Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst; and Critical Pedagogy at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis.

As social and economic inequities persist, scholars who teach in these types of programs and the students with whom they work actively seek to study the conditions and the contexts that create and perpetuate social injustice, in an effort to work for social change. Social justice-focused academic explorations aim to respond to a range of issues of social inequity, including the growing economic gap between rich and poor, the rise in militarism, global migration due to inequitable trade policies, the persistence of human trafficking, and the transnational perseverance of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, and classism (Adams, Blumenfeld, Castañeda, Hackman, Peters, & Zúñiga, 2010; Alexander, 2005; Apple, 2004; Giroux, 2007; Gorski, 2008; Kaplan, Alarcon, & Moallem, 1999; Mohanty, 2003; Schweik, 2009; Torres, 2009). On an institutional level, those engaged with this type of work, which explicitly challenges hegemonic knowledge claims, also face a social justice struggle within the colleges and universities in which they are housed. Given the increasingly corporatized academy, which is contextualized in a neoliberal economic climate, what counts as knowledge and what is viewed as worthwhile scholarship are judgments that are increasingly shaped by profit-seeking, capitalistic values. Thus traditional, profit-generating research and scholarship in science, technology, engineering, and math is privileged, while the social sciences and the humanities in general, and any scholarship that is not viewed as income-generating specifically, is marginalized (Alexander, 2005; Caanan & Shumar, 2008; Hill, 2008; Mohanty, 2003; Nast & Pulido, 2000; Osei-Kofi, 2003; Readings, 1997; White, 2000). Moreover, to engage with social justice work in the academy, one must contend with biases—against women, people of color, people with disabilities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals—that are embedded in institutions, either because they are designed with the lives and perspectives of the privileged in mind and/or because their structure still reflects the subordination that formal legislation has outlawed (Young, 1990).

In the field of education, programs that explicitly focus on the role of education in social justice to date have primarily focused on K-12 education and the ways in which this segment of the educational system produces and reproduces social injustice. Conversely, this type of programmatic emphasis has not had a significant presence in the field of Higher Education. In comparison, as a relatively new field of study, it is only recently that Higher Education has become viewed as a major social institution worthy of study (Altbach, 2006). Originating in the 1930s and making significant inroads as a subfield in education during the unrest of the 1960s (Kezar, 2004), research in the field in the United States has historically focused on student development, inequity in higher education, and issues related to organizational structures (Clark, 1973). Additionally, academic programs in Higher Education prepare college and university administrators at all levels. Although Higher Education research has focused on inequity, the field has historically lacked in critical engagement of social realities. Examining this issue, Yvonna Lincoln (1991) found that a significant amount of literature in the Higher Education field is positivist, grounded in Western, male-dominated epistemologies, objectifies the “other,” and silences the voices of oppressed groups. According to Adrianna Kezar (2004), one of the main reasons for this lack of engagement within the field is a failure of Higher Education scholars to become involved
in ongoing discussions and debates about assumptions that frame social science scholarship, in part due to a lack of philosophical scholarship and coursework in the field. Consequently, while individual courses and scholars currently engage with the role and function of Higher Education in relation to social justice, there is an absence of programs in the study of higher education that offer a concentrated focus on social justice.

It is in this context that we, as part of a small group of faculty and students at Iowa State University, decided to create a Social Justice Concentration in our Ph.D. program in Higher Education. In this article, we seek to illustrate and grapple with some of the challenges and possibilities of engaging in such a project at this time in history. In addition to our own experiences as members of the concentration faculty, we draw on information from a number of sources, including program planning and development documents, grant proposals, and meeting minutes from our meetings and planning retreats, in order to explore the institutional context within which we developed the social justice concentration, the forms of mobilization we engaged in leading to implementation, and the challenges and opportunities we faced during this process. We also consider what lies ahead as we work to further develop the concentration, and, finally, we conclude with lessons learned and the implications we see for policy and practice.

SETTING THE CONTEXT

Institutional Context

The department in which we carried out our work is the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies (ELPS) at Iowa State University (ISU). ISU is a public, doctoral/research extensive, land-grant university located in Ames, Iowa. The Iowa legislature officially established the institution as Iowa Agricultural College and Model Farm in 1858. Throughout its history, ISU has gained a reputation as a leader in agriculture, engineering, veterinary medicine, consumer science, and for a commitment to university extension. Currently, the university is comprised of eight colleges, including the graduate college, and offers 96 bachelor’s degree programs, 115 master’s programs, 1 professional degree, and 83 Ph.D. programs. The university has approximately 26,000 students and is a predominantly white institution (PWI) where the majority of students come from within the state of Iowa. As is characteristic of PWIs, the majority of tenure-line faculty members are white and male (Office of Institutional Research, 2009).

ELPS is a graduate-only unit whose mission is to advance the quality and effectiveness of educational institutions and individuals engaged in education. The department is one of seven academic departments in the College of Human Sciences that, in addition to ELPS, houses: Kinesiology; Curriculum and Instruction; Teacher Education; Food Science and Human Nutrition; Human Development and Family Studies; and Apparel, Educational Studies & Hospitality Management. ELPS is comprised of three academic programs (Educational Administration, Research and Evaluation, and Higher Education) and one research institute (the Research Institute for Studies in Education). Looking at the demographics of ISU, ELPS is quite different from the majority of the university, representing the highest number of ethnically/racially diverse faculty. Currently, 39% of tenure-line faculty members are persons of color and 53% are female (Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 2009). Among graduate students, close to 20% are of color, which is considered the highest percentage of students of color in one department at ISU (Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 2009).
Leadership and Policy Studies, 2009). On the one hand, we were situated in a context where the make up of the institution would suggest a lack in capacity for institutional diversity and social justice (Smith, 2009). On the other hand, we were also located within a department that showed evidence of a greater capacity to address issues of social justice in practice. However, like many education departments around the country, and programs in higher education specifically, the department had not yet addressed social justice from the perspective of a structured curriculum or in relation to everyday institutional and departmental practices.

The Rationale, Philosophy, and Content of the Social Justice Concentration

Given the lack of formalized programs focusing on social justice in the study of higher education, the range of issues of injustice in which higher education is deeply implicated, and the shrinking space for social justice discourse in an increasingly conservative and corporatized academy (Alexander, 2005; Giroux, 2007; Mohanty, 2003; Nast & Pulido, 2000), it was imperative for us to create a social justice concentration as a space for a different discourse, taking seriously matters of social injustice and the possibility of a different future. While there are many ways in which social justice is conceptualized across programs, disciplines, and fields of study, our work was, and continues to be, informed by an understanding of social justice as a process and an objective of ending oppression and domination at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. We believe that ending oppression and domination means working toward equitable policies and practices that challenge the exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence experienced by marginalized groups (Young, 1990). Our focus on social justice in the study of higher education is based on seeking to provide students with an in-depth understanding of concepts and theories of social justice so that they may apply this to understanding macro-, meso-, and micro-level issues when studying institutions of higher education and their roles within the larger social structure. In our work, we strongly identify as part of a greater struggle for liberatory education that not only spans primary, secondary, and tertiary education but also is fueled by transnational material realities of social injustice, in which education is heavily implicated. As such, our work is influenced, and in many ways shaped by, broader social movements as we seek to bring subjugated knowledges to the fore and challenge narrow and dominant notions of what constitutes knowledge and knowledge construction within the academy and beyond. Concomitantly, as a group of faculty who belong to multiple minoritized groups, our work is in many ways motivated by our own experiences of unequal social and economic relations, whether concerning experiences of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, or xenophobia, inside and outside the academy.

So what do we mean when we talk about a Social Justice in Higher Education Concentration? No matter the area in which social justice is engaged, whether it is in the liberal arts, the social sciences, or the natural sciences, social justice as a process and objective is always examined, analyzed, and applied in relation to a particular context, situation, or place. In our case, we apply social justice to the study of a specific social institution, namely higher education, inclusive of all institutional types (i.e., community colleges, liberal arts colleges, minority serving institutions, research universities, etc.). In doing so, the types of questions that Lincoln (1991) suggests are required for a critical agenda in the study of higher education, feature prominently in our work:
What are the underlying structures—the processes and unexamined social arrangements—of institutions of higher education that act to reproduce larger social structures? Does the university’s role in knowledge production and transmission function in reifying certain worldviews and dismissing to marginality others? How do reconstructions of ways of knowing bring about and provide contradiction and conflict in academic organizations? (pp. 24–25)

Moving beyond foundational discourses in a field (Higher Education) that is too often grounded in developmental psychology, market economics, and structural-functionalism (Hutchinson & Lovell, 2004; Malaney, 2006; Milam, 1991), we continuously work to re-envision our curriculum by reinforcing the significance of historical context in understanding the world. We also make great effort to counter the idea that as part of the academy we are separate from the rest of society, and to make salient how the ways in which we ask questions is essential to what we can learn (Alexander, 2005). It is in this vein that the foundation for the concentration draws on scholarship from a range of areas, including women’s studies, ethnic studies, anti-colonial studies, curriculum studies, spirituality, political economy, critical sociology, queer studies, critical race studies, liberation psychology, and cultural studies. Students in the social justice concentration are exposed to a wide range of interdisciplinary works in order to develop analytical skills that allow them to critically understand the manner in which issues that, at first blush, may appear to be unrelated mutually shape one another in complex ways. This approach contributes to students’ abilities to understand interlocking systems of oppression, recognize the relationship of the global to the local, and develop the ability to differentiate and recognize the relations between structural and individual issues. We also place great emphasis on reflexivity in our coursework, with the acknowledgment that understanding how each of us is implicated in much of what we seek to change is paramount to developing a critical social justice praxis. Moreover, in our classrooms we strive to honor multiple ways of knowing, foreground subjugated knowledges, and develop students’ critical consciousness. Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire, we view social justice learning as, “a social construct reflecting a social, political, and pedagogical practice that ... take[s] place when people reach a deeper, richer, more contextualized, and more nuanced understanding of themselves and their world” (Torres, 2009, p. 92).

Specifically, students in the concentration participate in a 2-credit pro-seminar during their first year in the concentration in order to become familiar with the program and also to build community. Social justice concentrators complete a minimum of 12 social justice credits beginning with a required introductory course, Social Justice Theory, Research, and Practice. From there students have the option to choose from a number of courses including: Pedagogies of Dissent: Radical Theories of Education, Social Justice, and Economic Democracy; A Pedagogy of Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation; Critical Issues in Interpretive Methodology; Critical Race Theory in Higher Education; Arts-Based Research Methods; and Sexual Orientation Issues in Higher Education. Additionally, students work closely with their respective advisors to build a program of study that meets the requirements for the Ph.D. as well as the social justice concentration, which includes the development of a social justice-focused capstone project and dissertation. Students in the concentration receive a 12-credit, social justice certificate while being a part of the social justice concentration. This graduate certificate is also open to current master’s and doctoral students across the university in addition to community members who are bachelor’s degree holders engaged in social justice work.
In many ways, our courses reflect the various areas of expertise among our faculty. At the same time, we view our required introductory course as the most critical. This course provides students with multidisciplinary theories and concepts grounded in social justice, from individual to structural perspectives. This course was not part of our original plans. We had wrongly assumed that as holders of master’s degrees, our students would come into the concentration with foundational knowledge of social justice theories and concepts. Instead, we soon found ourselves covering basic ideas around social justice and equity rather than engaging in the graduate level work we had intended to cover. Hence, we developed this introductory course. Among our courses, in Pedagogies of Dissent, a course in which pedagogy is engaged in the broadest sense possible, students develop a macro-level understanding of social justice and higher education. In contrast, College Student Development II engages the ways in which social identities are situated in a social justice and higher education context. Courses, such as Critical Issues in Interpretive Methodology and Critical Race Theory, develop student’s sense of how to engage with multiple knowledges in their own research, while the course, Social Justice and Social Change in American Higher Education, and a Field Experience course focus on what being part of a social movement means and what role students can play in mobilization for social justice inside and outside higher education institutions. Our hope is that graduates from the concentration and certificate programs will act as social justice advocates as they further pursue graduate studies (e.g., doctoral studies for master’s students), obtain faculty or administrative positions, or offer their expertise as policymakers in a variety of settings where social justice is paramount. We also anticipate that some of our graduates will engage in social justice education work outside formal educational institutions, working with non-profits and non-governmental organizations focused on progressive social change.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCENTRATION: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

Seizing an Opportunity and Initial Steps

The idea for a social justice concentration came into being at an ELPS faculty strategic planning retreat in August 2005. As a result of this meeting, a small working group was formed. This group was comprised of faculty interested in collaborating around social justice praxis, as well as finding ways to connect students to this work in a structured fashion. Through conversations, the idea of developing a social justice concentration within our Ph.D. program in Higher Education took hold. Rather than a final vision, we viewed this as a strategic entry point toward formalizing the work of social justice within our department. A concentration would not require going through the often lengthy and cumbersome approval processes necessary to institute a stand-alone university program. Furthermore, given the limited resources and support for a program such as this within an increasingly corporate institutional context, it would not initially require the range of resources that planning for a degree program would, nor would it require an extended length of time to implement. This strategic approach would allow us to take full advantage of the momentum and opportunity that resulted from among other things, the department recently having gone from having three faculty of color to seven faculty of color and a female of color department chair, thus bringing new perspectives, knowledges, and life experiences to the department.
Also, the university had recently completed a campus climate survey that called for increased attention to matters of social justice. The timing of this report, while not one of the most salient factors that made our work possible, aided us in putting forth a rationale for our initiative that was viewed as being well aligned with the work of the university. In 2003, the President’s Advisory Committee on Diversity at ISU had commissioned an assessment to determine the extent to which the campus climate supported equal access and equity for all students, faculty, and staff regardless of race, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or socioeconomic status. The final report revealed that “the current climate value[d] homogeneity and exhibit[ed] subtle and/or institutionalized discrimination of racial and ethnic minorities” (Office of the Provost, 2004, p. v). In a strategic plan that followed, the authors called for “the development of a curriculum that [would] guide students to think critically about social justice issues, and provide faculty with the tools to teach inclusively” (Office of the Provost, 2005, p. 5). In addition, the recommendations regarding research and scholarship advocated for the creation of “an academic environment that appreciates cultural/social differences through supporting and valuing research/scholarship that focuses on social justice/multicultural issues” (p. 5). Given these recommendations, we saw an opportunity not only to attain departmental support but also to garner some institutional support for our initiative.

Once the main idea was in place and the department faculty formally provided their support to move forward, three of us, two faculty members4 and a graduate student, began developing a proposal to present to the full faculty. In our proposal we sought to demonstrate the timeliness, viability, and future potential of a social justice concentration in the ELPS Ph.D. program in Higher Education. After a year of work, we presented our concentration proposal to our department faculty. The foundation for the concentration was based on a 9-credit social justice core to include two courses (6 credits) that already existed, alongside offering semester pro-seminars for students in the concentration. Students in the concentration also would be expected to complete course requirements for the Ph.D. program in Higher Education, where the concentration would be embedded into the research core, capstone project, and dissertation, emphasizing social justice theory and practice. If approved, current students who were already involved in this work would be grandparented into the program. Department faculty members were given an opportunity to review the completed proposal over a two-week time period prior to being put to a vote. When the vote was taken, the concentration received unanimous approval and the concentration was officially launched in Fall 2007.

The Challenges and Possibilities of Resources

In initiating the social justice concentration, we did not have access to sufficient resources, which resulted in the largest struggle for the concentration. Although the increase in faculty of color within the department created momentum, out of seven individuals that are or were involved with the project, only two are tenured and of the two faculty who worked on the proposal, only one is tenured. Hence, much like earlier struggles for new knowledge movements, such as Ethnic Studies, the majority of our team consisted of junior scholars (faculty and post-doctoral fellows) and doctoral students, making the stakes for this type of involvement high (Arthur, 2009). In essence, our human resources were, and continue to be, limited. Both the development and ongoing work of the social justice concentration is facilitated by a group of faculty (who also have
other departmental and program commitments), as well as deeply committed graduate students. From a teaching perspective, maintaining such a commitment is a challenge, particularly for us as faculty with full course loads in other departmental programs. As a result, many of our social justice courses are taught over the summer, which allows our students the opportunity to fulfill their academic requirements in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, however, in addition to the requirements placed on our time as faculty, this also presents a financial disadvantage for our graduate students with 9-month appointments, as they must fund their own summer tuition. Furthermore, classes must be large enough (currently the university has instituted a policy of recommending that a class must have at least eight students in order to be offered, however individual departments can set their own policies and the trend is to set the minimum above eight), in order to make summer salary available to faculty. Moreover, in light of the fact that our work with the social justice concentration is not formally compensated or rewarded in any way, the commitment not only to teach but also to engage in program planning and development represents a significant time commitment for those of us working toward tenure.

As a group, we have worked collectively to generate creative ideas to secure financial resources and to sustain our initiative. For example, we applied for three institutional diversity grants and received two. We used the first diversity grant ($5,000) to bring consultants with expertise in social justice in higher education to campus to assist us with strategic planning, and the second diversity grant ($5,000) for a social justice speaker series. Using these latter funds, we invited two speakers to address social justice topics with our campus community. Through this effort we were able to strengthen our presence on campus as well as build relationships with the speakers we hosted and the communities within which they work across the nation. This effort was particularly successful, as we were able to solicit and attain co-sponsorships from other departments, student organizations, and equity-related administrative offices on campus, which helped us further stretch our limited resources.

Despite limited financial and human resources, we have been fortunate when it comes to the wealth of expertise represented by our faculty, particularly in the range of courses we are able to offer. Moreover, support from our department chair has benefited the development of the program. The chair has been instrumental in providing support for the concentration through providing a temporary, half-time, post-doctoral research associate to work on the administration of the concentration, teaching a course that meets social justice requirements, and advocating for the concentration to entities beyond the department.

Additionally, the students who have expressed interest in the concentration are a great resource. We have been fortunate to draw upon support from students who belong to underrepresented communities across the university, which has demonstrated a broad appeal for the concentration. Yet, even when the interest is strong, students outside of ELPS are often challenged to fit our courses into their programs of study, given the requirements and expectations of their home departments.

The Challenges and Possibilities of Organizational Structure

Within our concentration, we have always strived to be collectivist and share leadership, but this goal has been fragmented through institutional structures and constraints. For instance, power relations between faculty and students and among faculty are inherent in the institutional
structure we operate within, which confers privileges, security, resources, and decision-making power in accordance with where one is located within the academic hierarchy. Additionally, faculty commitments to other programs do not allow for much time to work collectively and therefore further hamper democratic decision-making. As a consequence, we have spent a fair amount of time thinking about how we might address issues of multiple commitments, given our varied institutional locations. In a recent program retreat, tensions were apparent among us. While we share a philosophical commitment to the work, we struggle with the ways in which we might collectively translate this into shared action. As we reflect, we surmise that these tensions may be emotional responses to the structure of the institution that places us in contradictory roles (Ahmed, 2004). In today’s environment, as academics we must contend with the reality that we occupy “a contradictory social position . . . in a highly stratified system that affirms competition and difference over solidarity and unity” (Osei-Kofi, 2010, p. 25).

Some of the emergent challenges we face regarding a progressively corporate organizational structure include collectively working toward social justice and the institutional constraints that inhibit cross-collaborative efforts beyond the scope of our department. For example, in seeking endorsements for our social justice certificate from other faculty members across the university, we were challenged by operating within an institutional “resource management model” that is antagonistic to collaboration and that placed us in competition with other units that share our interests. These challenges have resulted in us creating informal networks and alliances with colleagues across the university to build a community of activist scholars, whereby we hope to garner support for one another and the work in which we engage.

Given that we are involved with a social justice program, we find ourselves wondering whether there is a way to cooperate effectively with other programs while not competing for students with other resource-poor fields of study. As it is reasonable to assume that students in areas such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, and social justice studies, share similar interests, we are concerned from the perspective of a larger social justice agenda, about small programs such as ours negatively impacting other small programs or vice versa when students make choices to move among our programs and courses. In economic times such as these, where the academy and the nation is in fiscal crisis, this could mean the end of smaller programs, particularly those in the humanities and the social sciences (Canaan & Shumar, 2008) and foreclose the possibility for cooperation with these programs in the future.

The Challenges and Possibilities of Centering Subjugated Knowledges

In the social justice concentration, our goal has been to work toward validating, legitimizing, and centering subjugated knowledges. Through the courses we offer, we have introduced new paradigms of thought into the classroom by centering interdisciplinary scholarship that includes women’s studies, ethnic studies, sustainable agriculture, media studies and so on, that move beyond drawing from mainstream disciplines, such as economics, statistics, and political science. We are struggling to challenge the fundamental “organizational forms of the university,” by including perspectives that go beyond the focus on “rational, impersonal, non-emotive, and non-experiential learning” (Arthur, 2009, p. 82). To this end, we have introduced elements, such as art-based inquiry and contemplative practices, as part of our assignments in a number of courses. These strategies have helped us to value and center diverse perspectives that challenge
the status quo and nurture a dialogue about what constitutes valid knowledge in higher education. While it is not unusual for many students, even those who view themselves as committed to social justice work, to initially engage in resistance to different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, we have found many possibilities to do liberatory work in the teaching arena (Haddad & Lieberman, 2002; Watt, 2009). In contrast, engaging and centering subjugated knowledges has been more of a challenge in our scholarship. This restriction is tied to the tenure process, grant-funding mechanisms, and mainstream scholarly publishing that prevent us from centering subjugated knowledges, as dominant and hegemonic forms of knowledge are valued over others within these spaces (Giroux, 2007; Mohanty, 2003; Shahjahan, 2005). Naturally, this has meant that we have also experienced resistance from some in the university community to social justice as a legitimate area of study. To attempt to change institutions of higher education is never an easy task, and it is even more difficult during tough economic times when institutional values are tested, often resulting in decreased emphasis on anything perceived as outside the “mainstream,” such as already marginalized programs and bodies of knowledge.

The Challenges and Possibilities of Impact

The successes of the social justice concentration have been plentiful, and we have created a space for critical engagement. Students are interested in studying with us; however, our continued efforts are not without significant challenges. One of the key challenges in this type of initiative is to continuously ensure that the manner in which social justice is engaged values diverse perspectives. Embracing a social justice agenda requires the ability and willingness to engage issues of inequity and diversity through multiple lenses that may not always align perfectly but at their core endeavor to disrupt inequities rather than reproduce them. This work also necessitates that the examination occur at both micro and macro levels. Moreover, central to social justice work is an awareness that praxis is not solely about the work but also about the outcome of that work. “Social action or social advocacy is not an end unto itself. The action and the actors must have some goal beyond the action itself” (Speight & Vera, 2004, p. 110).

To this end, a challenge of considerable import involves addressing a semblance of disconnects between what occurs in our social justice classrooms vis-à-vis the overall climate in the department, college, and university as a whole. Despite the university’s wide appeals to equity and diversity in its earlier policy reports, currently, there is no systematic, organizational effort in place to implement transformative changes of a social justice nature in our department, college, or university. As a result, the social justice concentration and certificate are positioned as two programs among others with little influence on structure and culture beyond our classrooms and community of students and faculty. Hence, part of what lies ahead for us is to engage in intentional dialogues regarding what a “socially just” academic department, college, and university looks like. To remain credible, as faculty who teach students about social justice and transformative change, we must act as advocates of socially just principles and practices in our own academic units (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Clearly, the success of our concentration is not simply about what occurs on the micro level (i.e., in the classroom or program level) but also the changes that we hope to see at the department, college, and institutional level.

As a young program, we are still in the early stages of development for stability and growth. Given the work required, the question of whether we desire to institutionalize our efforts in order to
see changes we hope for at the departmental, college, and institutional level remains a contentious issue. We ultimately seek to consciously guard against any form of institutionalization that will move us away from our original goals—to work for social change in relation to higher education. Hence, we are aware that in the current political climate of corporatization and conservatism in the academy, to become fully incorporated into the university would lead to a de-politicization of our work as a result of the sacrifices required to become a central part of the institution (Arthur, 2009). The question we grapple with and may never be able to fully answer is whether it is possible to be centered at the margins. In other words, is it possible to maintain a radical edge while achieving sufficient stability within the institution to reach a wide range of students who will be part of shaping the future of our higher education system as faculty, administrators, and community members? What we do know is that the stakes are too high not to engage in this work. To fail to challenge the ways in which our higher education system is implicated in social and economic inequity is to hand over higher education to the interests of the powerful at the expense of the many. We believe we must do what is possible in our own context to work for change.

IMPLICATIONS

When we officially launched our concentration three years ago, we started with five students. Today we have 12 students in the concentration and close to 30 students in the certificate program. An assistant professor coordinates the concentration and certificate program, assisted by a half-time, post-doctoral, research associate. A total of six faculty members teach in the program. When we look back at where we have been, the process of developing the concentration speaks clearly to the ways in which what should be institutional agendas are in reality more often championed and carried forward by small groups of individuals with deep personal commitments to institutional and social change work, rather than institutional actors with formal responsibilities for creating change. This process is in line with Elizabeth Armstrong and Mary Bernstein’s (2008) argument that “change is often initiated by those who are simultaneously insiders and outsiders” (p. 85). We are “insiders” of the institution in that we hold formal positions in the university structure but also are “outsiders” in that we are members of underrepresented groups in the academy (Arthur, 2009). Concomitantly, the ease of the work in which we engaged within our department highlights the significance of having a champion in a position of power when seeking to advance new initiatives. We believe it is reasonable to assume that the development and advancement of our work on the concentration was politically aided by having a chair who was very supportive and invested in seeing the plans for the concentration go forward as a way of positioning ELPS nationally as possessing expertise in social justice in higher education work. Our process of developing the concentration indicates that the strategies of change we employed are a result of the “logics of the institution” (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008, p. 76). In other words, we are not suggesting a story of heroism on the part of a group of faculty and students. Instead, our personal reflections suggest that the logics of the institution and its material structures in many ways shaped and constituted our critical agency to advance a social justice agenda in the university context. In short, there was a mutual interdependence among the structure, the logic of the institution, and our critical agency (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Canaan & Shumar, 2008).

A matter of concern to which we must respond now and into the future is the commoditization of equity and social justice in higher education. Social justice as a phrase remains a challenge
as we continuously attempt to keep it relevant rather than seeing the work become depoliticized and minimized to a buzzword that is manipulated in ways that benefit the status quo. Our hope is to see our social justice initiatives as venues toward positive changes that produce equitable experiences for all. However, our hopes are easily threatened by micro and macro level forces that use “social justice” to capitalize or exploit its true intent. Suzette Speight and Elizabeth Vera (2004) refer to this as “jumping on the justice bandwagon without adequately examining what social justice and social advocacy really mean for our research, practice, and training” (p. 111). Hence, we remain mindful that any substantive changes that we hope to accomplish will require critical examination, assessment, and reflection on the meaning of social justice as it relates to our concentration, certificate, and outreach. In doing so we strive to stay dedicated to reminding ourselves that our commitment to diverse others should be focused, intentional, interdependent, collective, and courageous.

To further expound on these challenges, we are conscious that when we speak truth to power, such a stance is not without significant repercussions, namely resistance from students, staff, and colleagues. Heidi Nast and Laura Pulido (2000) draw attention to the idea of corporate multiculturalism, which suggests that diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice remain untroubled frontiers in institutions of higher education. In essence these terms have been invoked for market purposes to benefit institutions and to remain largely at a surface level. Thus, students can comfortably progress through college without ever having participated in any critical discourse around social justice issues, while institutions can continue to treat social justice as a commodity. As a result, those of us who teach courses that bring forth oppositional frameworks for analyzing diversity and social justice are subject to significant backlash in institutional environments. Thus, we are aware that we are negotiating social justice initiatives in potentially antagonistic spaces (Nast & Pulido, 2000). For instance, given the economic climate, there have been recent suggestions made of expanding the social justice concentration to a virtual space, where courses could be delivered online in order to generate revenue and expand the program. While these suggestions may seem neutral and helpful, we are cognizant that these suggestions may be ideologically informed by the dominant discourse of neoliberalism prevalent in higher education. Jonathan Church (2008) argues:

> From the mid- to late 1990s the imagined potential of new information technology had many administrators of higher education Internet dreaming of the virtual university. Without the infrastructural costs associated with brick and mortar, a geographically limitless market of potential students, the possibility of reducing labor costs by making courses modular with adjunct faculty operating as facilitators… the bottom-line potential was impossible to ignore. (pp. 34–35)

This online initiative may lead to the further treatment of social justice knowledge as a saleable commodity, which would depoliticize the power of this knowledge by reducing it into package form, for sale on the growing online educational market.

As we address each of these challenges, we are mindful of the need to contextualize each situation, yet we acknowledge that while each is unique, these challenges are not isolated; they have an inextricably intertwined nature wherein our efforts to address one challenge may ultimately affect the approach or outcome to one or several of the other challenges. For instance, while we could incorporate distance learning in the social justice concentration to improve accessibility, increase tuition revenue, and our stability, we can only speculate about how our delivery may change the intellectual environment in our courses, the amount of work that this
new format may place on faculty, or whether we will be able to guard against commodification. While the challenges we have identified are contextualized within our own program, from a larger institutional perspective, what we grapple with in this article is in no way unique in the current political, cultural, and economic climate. Hence, it is our hope that our work will prove relevant to like-minded colleagues who are either engaged in or seek to engage in similar initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The creation of the social justice concentration is a project that was carried out by individual faculty and students within a particular logic of an institution. As such, it is at great risk in the absence of broader institutional support. Clearly, the challenges match, and in some cases far outweigh, the opportunities. However, as we have noted earlier, there is no acceptable alternative to not doing this work. We must continue to work to center subjugated knowledges in the academy, to honor different ways of knowing, and to work for progressive social change by engaging in projects that create an academy that is truly inclusive. For those considering similar projects, we have outlined key considerations that significantly impact the realities of this work. The institutional context and organizational structure will reveal how and whether the space for a social justice program within Higher Education (and other subfields) can be carved out. Moreover, establishing a social justice concentration must be grounded in a rationale that is not simply about having the conversation but also about empowering and educating those involved to enact change in higher education. Human and financial resources also mediate the challenges and possibilities. What this process reinforced is that resources for this type of work are severely lacking. Thus, implementing strategic use of resources is necessary to ensure the growth of an effort. The use and management of resources is particularly important, given increased accountability for spending, limiting budget structures, and the impact of the larger economic climate. Challenges and possibilities also must be understood within the context of subjugated knowledges. This is especially relevant in institutional contexts, like Iowa State University, where “hard” scientific knowledges are valued in ways that the humanities and social sciences are not. It is critical to acknowledge that the push to center subjugated knowledges in the end occurs in the midst of academic discourses designed to further marginalize liberatory perspectives. The direction and future of any social justice program in higher education should be continuously approached with vigilance, particularly in relation to institutionalization and the extent to which it continues to be grounded in its mission and purpose.

NOTES

1. Neoliberalism rests on an ideology that advances “free” markets, government deregulation, privatization of public services, economic globalization, and individual responsibility in place of the public good, believing that a “self-regulating” market facilitates wealth-distribution and assures human progress (Robbins, 2004).
2. Higher Education is capitalized to refer to the field of study while differentiating it from the social institution of higher education.
3. We have chosen to identify authors by first and last name when initially used in our text as a practice of gender-sensitive language. We believe the continued reliance on last names only in accordance with APA guidelines, privileges deeply ingrained dominant assumptions of scholars as generally being male.
4. The two faculty members involved in writing the proposal were the first author of this article and a colleague.

REFERENCES


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