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What is Your Social Justice IQ: Leading Social Justice in Higher Education

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WHAT IS YOUR SOCIAL JUSTICE IQ: LEADING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Janice M. Garnett

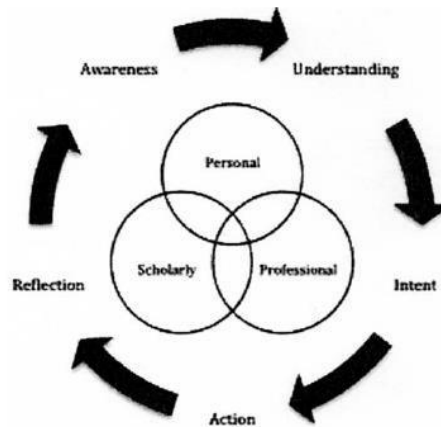
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Abstract: This article describes an experience originating in the College of Education to explore a process for the college's social justice efforts to lead and guide administration, faculty, and staff in their day-to-day decision-making. This educational process examined in the article was introduced through the College of Education's Diversity and Inclusion Committee to engage administration, faculty, and staff in using their various perspectives focused on social justice to help them shift the college's current paradigm from understanding to action. The authors incorporated a conceptual framework as the foundation to develop the collaborative process to engage education professionals in gaining a greater consciousness of their social justice role. It is important for higher education professionals to recognize that as representatives of many cultures and experiences, they influence the social, economic, political, and work environments (SAMHSA, 2001) on campus. It is their responsibility to be adaptable using their intelligence, emotional, and social justice quotient lenses to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

A Framework of Social Justice

Approximately three years ago, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee in the College of Education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) introduced a process to engage the college in a structured discussion addressing social justice through personal, professional, scholarly, and community lenses. The conversations would assist with enhancing the administration, faculty, and staff in their knowledge, awareness, and application for programs, instruction, curriculum, and cross-department collaboration. There is a fundamental need for administration, faculty, and staff to be critically aware of social justice and inclusion issues. This awareness includes an understanding, an intent, and a way to reflect on how these issues intersect with their personal, professional, and scholarly environments. It was equally important to establish a critical consciousness among the administration, faculty, and staff as a means of recognizing and analyzing inequities, and a commitment to address these when observed. In order to be conscientious, a social justice framework was viewed to assist with placing the onus of responsibility with the leadership, faculty, and staff, rather than only on the college. A framework shifts the focus to strategies in which people respond to diversity-related matters in a cohesive manner. It is a visual to facilitate the constructing of their narratives and guide the discussion to ask questions about experiences in various stages of their development. The conceptual framework also supports people's individual and collective reflection on the different spheres of their lives that shaped their Social Justice Intelligence (IQ).

The Synergistic model of personal, professional, and scholarly practice by Brooks & Tooms (2008) is the framework used by the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) College of Education's Diversity Committee as the foundation of their social justice framework. It illustrates the continuum of growth from awareness to reflection.



Synergistic model of personal, professional and scholarly practice by Brooks & Tooms (2008).

The UNO Diversity and Inclusion Committee utilized elements of the Brooks & Tooms (2008) Synergistic model to design stakeholders' social justice professional development to promote change and a different lens in which to view our educational environment. In addition, the framework creates an understanding of commitment and investment toward strategic initiatives and purposeful dialogue around this topic. It is important to develop socially conscious individuals and environments that are as free as possible from bias. This creates an authentic culture that permeates day-in and day-out and becomes the culture of the institution, moving the organization forward in preparing flexible systems that support diverse opinions and ideas to all requirements.

What is Your Social Justice IQ?

Social justice learning is relevant in order to create inclusive environments that allow for different perspectives on various issues to be investigated by leaders, faculty, staff, and students. The process of social justice involves an equitable distribution of resources, equal access to those resources, and participation from all members of society. The goal of social justice is the full and equal participation of all groups in a society shaped to meet their needs (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007). Social justice addresses fundamentally different questions, concerns, and issues in which leaders must ask themselves: what can we do to become a more inclusive community for students, faculty, and staff? Leaders must commit to taking a deeper look into these terms and ask questions to identify implicit biases and engage all stakeholders in endorsing the real change. An article from "Colleges need a language shift, but not the one you think" (essay) by Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart (2017) discusses the differences in the terms of inclusion, justice, and diversity. The following selected questions from the article may be used as a tool to direct conversations, review policies, practices, and guidelines, as well as to create and implement mitigating strategies on higher education campuses, specifically in the College of Education.

1. *Diversity asks, "Who's in the room?" Equity responds: "Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?"*

For the College of Education's work in this area, it is critically important for a leader to determine if everyone who should have a voice in the conversation has access to do so. The leader must be able to determine who the players are, their roles, and create a culture in which their voices are heard and respected.

2. *Inclusion asks, "Have everyone's ideas been heard?" Justice responds, "Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?"*

By focusing on moving from understanding to action in this process, the leadership in the college of education will need to address the issues of justice to ensure that those individuals who are not in the majority have the same consideration for input, feedback, and developing new ideas.

3. *Diversity asks, "How many more of [pick any minoritized identity] group do we have this year than last?" Equity responds, "What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?"*

In academic settings, leaders are instrumental in moving from functional activities to strategic initiatives to create structures to help with retention efforts. It is therefore imperative that programs, services, and tools

be developed for stakeholders from nontraditional backgrounds to participate and be successful on higher education campuses.

4. *Inclusion asks, “Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like he or she belongs?” Justice challenges, “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?”*

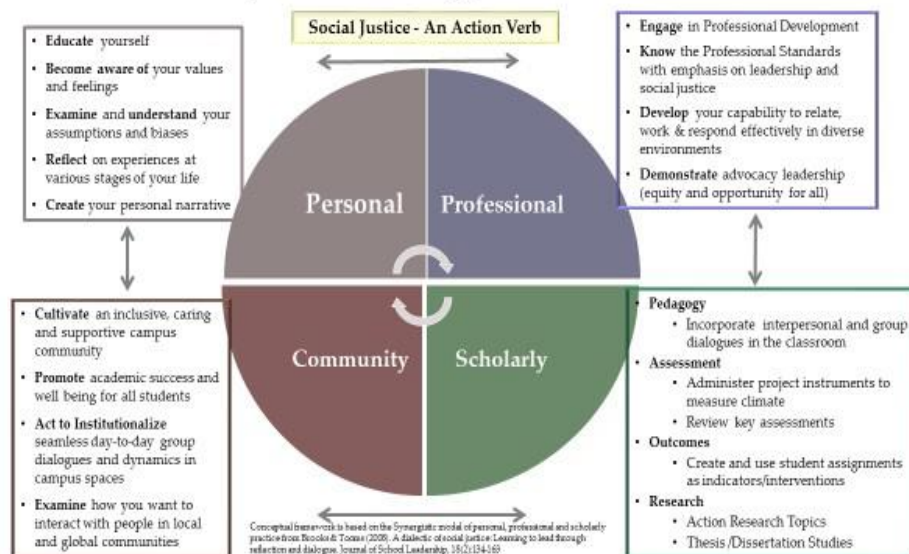
In today’s society, many young people feel threatened in educational institutions due to their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and many other factors. Education leaders will need to “create a safe but not comfortable space, engaging in critical discourse, and sharing experiences through readings, research, and expert-led professional development” (Sonia Nieto, 2009).

These questions were used in our college’s professional development activities to jump-start collaborative conversations among participants and provide a guide to begin a discussion responding to “What is your social justice IQ?” According to C. Margaret Hall (2012), increasing our social intelligence helps us to develop meaning and purpose in our lives. It is important to become more socially intelligent, creating freer and more independent thinking about major social influences. The framework supports self-reflection to assess our social intelligence, learning from the knowledge gained, and sharing this information with others. The following sections will review the process for the social justice conversations and plan of action for the UNO College of Education.

Our approach: Creating the dialogue and plan of action for the University of Nebraska, Omaha (UNO) College of Education

The UNO College of Education’s Diversity and Inclusion Committee facilitates the efforts for diversity and social justice work at all levels within the college. Membership consists of staff and faculty unit representatives, who have established professional development opportunities and resources to create a welcoming and inclusive environment within the college. Approximately three years ago, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee organized the first social justice forum for leaders, faculty, and staff. In order to guide the work, a conceptual framework was created by adapting the Brooks and Tooms (2008) framework. This framework included an additional domain of “community.” Each area was defined as it related to awareness, knowledge, and skills that support personal reflection on people’s social justice journey or IQ, to learn, grow and gain knowledge about self and others.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IQ FRAMEWORK



Social Justice IQ Framework (Garnett & Huber, 2017)

Over a three-year period, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee established pathways for social justice discussions and activities for the College of Education. The committee grappled with an essential question as they began the planning phase of the process, “What are practical ways in which the College of Education can address the issues and challenges facing students, staff, and faculty to create a more welcoming and inclusive campus environment for all?” The Diversity and Inclusion Committee’s inherent role was to have, as an underlying focus for this structured dialogue, the notion that an understanding of social justice, civil discourse, empathy, historical context, and civic engagement is at the heart of preventing and resolving instances of egregious hatred and bigotry. In addition, the committee realized that their work would be imperative to bring an intentional focus on confronting and disrupting the practices that impact marginalized groups and diverse situations that may occur on campus. The process for the intentional dialogue consists of four segments that will be shared in the following sections.

Year One: The Social Justice Forum

Prior to the Forum

It was agreed that the intent of the approach would ensure that all participants felt safe and secure in engaging in open dialogue at the forum. Prior to the forum, each department was provided with pre-session work and conversation starters to familiarize their staff and faculty with topics and issues that would be discussed at the college-wide activity. The following suggested questions were provided to begin the pre-session dialogue in departments:

- What do we as a department recognize and describe as “social justice/social justice advocacy”?
- Why do our students/graduates need to become advocates for social justice?
- What are we doing to equip students to shift social justice advocacy into action?

Furthermore, it was recommended that each department be prepared to share current social justice instruction and activities, discuss areas for growth and depth of projects, and build on ideas shared during the pre-session. This preparation enabled everyone to fully participate and to feel comfortable and confident at the forum. The forum was structured in four segments and for the duration of 2 hours. The following is a detailed description of each of the forum segment activities.

Part 1: The Foundation Exercise (45 minutes) – small blended groups

The day of the forum, the College of Education administrators, staff, and faculty initially met in a large group. The Dean addressed the group, emphasizing the importance of the social justice work and her support of the college’s efforts. This was followed by an overview of the event’s activities and instructions for the small blended groups facilitated by committee members. The purpose of this exercise was to set a positive tone at the beginning of the session. Within the small groups, representatives from each department were asked to share their department’s emphasis and work on social justice. This was an extension of the pre-work conducted prior to the forum. The facilitators were provided a list of essential questions to reference as needed to begin and/or continue the group’s conversation. The essential questions included:

- What are the social justice advocacy projects and activities that have been implemented in each department?
- What are we proud of in our work to assist our students in becoming social justice advocates?
- What could we, as College of Education leaders, faculty, and staff, do more of in the area of *Social Justice Advocacy to Action*?
- In what ways can College of Education leadership support the faculty, staff, and students in the area of social justice advocacy activities in the future?

Throughout the conversations, the facilitators recorded, on large chart paper, a list of statements, themes, and/or insights that were generated during the small group dialogues.

Part 2: Prioritization Exercise: Dot-ocracy (Approximately 20 minutes) – small blended groups

This small group exercise provided an opportunity to discuss the statements, themes, and/or insights that were generated during the Part 1 segment. Each individual in the small group was given sticky dots to prioritize themes they most strongly agreed with. Subsequently, when all individuals had completed the prioritization exercise, a discussion ensued regarding the small group’s first, second, and third rankings. The facilitators guided the discussion to gain further insights, comments, and/or justifications for the group’s top priorities to share with the full College of Education staff and faculty.

Part 3: Large Group Debriefing - (Approximately 30 minutes)

Participants reconvened as a large group for this portion of the forum. The facilitator from each small group presented one of the themes prioritized in their small group session. Facilitators were given 2 -3 minutes to share the theme, rationale, and recommendations. At the conclusion of the small group presentations, all participants were invited to interact through a gallery walk to review the themes from each small group and to engage in more conversation during the exploration.

Part 4: Department planning Session (Approximately 60 minutes)

Developing an Action Plan. The final step of the forum was geared toward departments to develop a 90-day action plan to implement priorities focused on the social justice initial conversations. It was suggested that the department plan include: (1) statement of recommended action; (2) requisite implementation procedure which may include departmental approval or approval at the program level; (3) the issue/challenge to be addressed by the recommendation; and (4) details of the expected payoff/primary benefit of the recommendation. It was recommended that each department submit their ninety (90) day action plan to the Dean of the College of Education for review and feedback.

The forum created a synergy of interest as more than 70 participants engaged in the activities and the conversations. The feedback from the exit tickets indicated a need for this type of dialogue and initial action, which engages administrators, faculty, and staff in what it means to be an educational center that provides opportunities and promotes learning from one another. It was apparent that the College of Education faculty and staff members departed the forum with a new energy and charge for leading with a social justice lens.

Continuing the Conversation

Year Two: Project Implicit

In order to learn more about self and the gap between actions and intentions, self-reflection is crucial. The College of Education continued the dialogue in year two to dive deeper into further personal awareness, knowledge, and skills to enhance their social justice intelligence. To prepare for the second forum, The Diversity and Inclusion Committee invited all staff and faculty to take specific tests at Project Implicit – <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. This is a phenomenal exercise that increases leadership, faculty, and staff understanding of microaggressions and their impact on the college campus. According to the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, the implicit association tests measure the relative strength of associations between pairs of concepts and help us to understand our implicit and explicit biases. Also, being aware and intentional about how we reflect on our own identity can help us to be better champions for justice and equity. The Project Implicit tests are now being administered in various courses at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels. Participants met again as a large group to view a video focused on Micro-Aggressions and then divide into smaller groups to discuss their reactions to the video and their results from the Project Implicit IAT tests.

Year Three: Social Justice and Inclusion Brown Bag Series

Most recently, year three of the ongoing work, the Diversity Inclusion Committee has planned the “Social Justice and Inclusion Brown Bag Series” for the college. On a monthly basis, this event is hosted by a different College of Education department. The purpose of the Brown Bag series is to continue to facilitate conversations, engagement and determine actionable steps around a wide variety of topics related to social justice, inclusion, and diversity. In the near future, students will be included in the forums, conversations, and brown bag series. The goal has been, and continues to be, to move beyond a one-time conversation about inclusion, diversity, and social justice toward a seamless integration of thought and awareness of those issues on campus impacting students, faculty, and staff.

Final Thoughts

The College of Education's work to promote social justice awareness and education aligns soundly with the adapted Synergistic model of personal, professional and scholarly practice by Brooks & Tooms (2008). With that being noted, it was clear that the collaboration across departments, division, and levels created an environment that enabled others to achieve shared purposes, motivated and supported activities within the college, and enabled the work for change to occur. The administrators, faculty, and staff increased their social justice intelligence and can apply their knowledge in various aspects of their personal, professional, scholarly, and community contexts. The fundamental hope is that a climate was created that facilitates a transparent dialogue leading to action that promotes, sustains, and commits to a social justice educational agenda for the College of Education.

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Project Implicit Website: <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>