

# Social Justice Support on Campus

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I should start by saying that I identify as a white, cisgender woman in a heterosexual relationship. I grew up in the Midwest, in a predominantly white community, and later moved to south Florida. In south Florida I worked at a university that was considered a minority majority in a community that is one of the most diverse in the United States. I offer this information so it is understood that my perspective on this topic will be from one of privilege, though I have been lucky enough to learn from some incredible people. I also actively search out information to better understand how diversity and social justice affect higher education.

I work in the Clubs and Activities Office in Student Affairs at a rural, medium-sized university in the West. We support over 180 student groups and organize various campus programming, such as homecoming, Safer Halloween, open mic nights and collaborations with other campus departments and clubs. The past couple of years have been tumultuous for our students at our institution. They have lost trust with the administration and the institution as a whole. They see that many of the staff, faculty, and administration do not reflect the changing student demographics and that the institution is not effectively supporting students from underrepresented communities. In 2011, 49 percent of our first year students identified as white, compared to 36.1% of our first year students in 2016. Much of my work is building trust with our students and helping them to maneuver through the bureaucracy of a public

institution. I attempt to offer a space where they feel safe to share their experiences and to be a person they can go to for support. Of course there is only so much I can do, especially coming from a place of privilege.

There are a lot of things that my department and I need to improve on to meet student needs. We need to figure out how to make the work we do more accessible to all students. We have to constantly question our processes and activities, and work to understand how someone not familiar with our office would maneuver through our requirements. Too often we assume that our policies, procedures, and processes are common sense, especially since we post the information to a wide variety of platforms. Unfortunately, folks still struggle with knowing which forms to complete and which processes to follow.

One of our biggest struggles is figuring out how we can best support our students. Within my area, that means how to make sure we are meeting the needs of the institution (i.e: risk management) without causing too many roadblocks for our students. Students who may be first generation college students do not necessarily understand the bureaucracy of a public institution, so how can we help them figure out the process? Within our institution, the majority of programs for our students are being created by our students. How can we expect that to continue if we make the process to get an event approved so difficult?

When we want to improve our processes with club activation and event approval, surveys and open forums can only help us identify what we are already doing wrong, so we need to figure out

what our students need before they tell us they need it. For example, other institutions have had academic resource centers (e.g., University of Southern California's Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs started in 1977) similar to our new Centers for Academic Excellence; why are we just now implementing them at our institution? Within our campus community, the purpose of the Centers for Academic Excellence is to support underrepresented communities (African American/ Black, Latino/Latina/ LatinX, Native American/Indigenous, and Multicultural communities) in their academic success and affinity to the university. It should be noted, we do not currently have any Centers for Academic Excellence for students who identify as Asian, Desi, Pacific islander, Women, Arab, or LGBTQIA, and these communities need support and advocacy too. We often rely exclusively on our students' feedback or student initiatives, when we should be benchmarking and identifying best practices that are successful at other institutions and adapting them to our community. Instead, we wait for the students' voices to be loud enough to demand change until we implement any meaningful programs. When we are reactive instead of being proactive, our students become frustrated and lose trust with us. Many students will decide to leave for some place they believe will be better, or worse, they may leave higher education all together. And it's not that these students are not prepared for the "academic rigor," it is that they are tired of fighting for an equitable opportunity to be successful.

Unfortunately, we, as staff, have to scrape by doing only what we NEED to do because we feel we all have so much on our plates. It is hard to start new initiatives if people are unwilling or unable to provide the support needed to make the programs a success. For example, I participate in a committee whose purpose is to gather professional staff from around campus who support student leaders. We are supposed to come together to help develop leadership curriculum and share ideas of leadership

programming to ensure our students are developing professionally within their student positions. Unfortunately, not a single person around the table has time to spare to help develop these programs or curriculum, and then it falls back on the committee chair and/or each of our departments doing our own thing. By no means do any of these folks not want to participate, they just do not have the time available to contribute what is needed for cross campus leadership development. We have so many expectations within our daily work that we often do not have time to focus on the greater good for the university. We need to be proactive, rather than reactive, in establishing programming that can better develop groundwork for student success across the institution. There is also a fine line when figuring out how to best support the students while still having work/life balance. I wish we put more emphasis on being progressive and socially conscious in our work, especially at a school that is progressive in so many other regards (e.g., environmental justice, bystander intervention, etc). It should be noted that by no means is my university unique in its struggles, but there is no reason why we cannot be a trend-setting institution in regards to creating an equitable community too.

In order to help stay on top of the changes in higher education, and to ensure I am "in the know" of what our students may be experiencing, I try to make a daily intentional effort. I do not want to solely rely on the students I work with to keep me informed, although I do make sure to listen when they are expressing their frustrations. Instead, I follow blogs about student affairs, especially by people of color, and I follow social justice activist and groups on Facebook, such as Shaun King, Tim Wise, Standing Up for Racial Justice, the Story of Stuff, Virgie Tovar, Van Jones and Everyday Feminism. I also stay abreast of articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and read the *ACPA: College Student Educators international journal*. I read social justice books by people of color and incorporate that into programming, such as assigning Ta-Nehisi

Coates' "Between the World and Me" for a staff summer reading. I have found the best way for me to stay in the know is not from peer reviewed articles, but by reading about people's everyday experiences. Blogs, although they may not be verifiable news sources, often give me the most real perspective on things that are happening in society and how they are affecting our students. It is also the best way to get answers to things I am confused about or want more information on, such as, white privilege. I have had to work hard to unlearn a lot of my privilege, and I still have a long way to go. I do not like to call myself an ally because it is not my right to self-identify as an ally, only someone from an oppressed community can do that. I do try to incorporate anti-racism into the everyday work I do. It is not easy, but Googling topics to find incredible articles and blogs has really helped in giving me ideas for how I can better do that. So instead of asking one of my friends or colleagues of color how I can do something better, I Google the topic and there is usually a blog or article written on it somewhere.

So is my university keeping up to the changing times and demographics? No, although I think we are trying. I think there are diversity and justice-related programs that we do that are successful, but I feel like we are behind many other schools in our university system. We are at the disadvantage of being a remote campus, but that is all the more reason we need to have strong support programs for our underrepresented students, most of whom come from other parts of the state. I think our annual campus conference on race is a great program, but not enough staff or faculty attend the sessions. I am lucky because I have a supervisor who encourages us to attend social justice and inclusivity programs, but many of my colleagues do not have that same access. For many staff on campus, if they attend one of these programs, it has to be on their own time. My hope is that programming around inclusive support of our students will not be optional, or seen as an outside activity, but will become an

expectation that supervisors actively encourage in their staff.

The second goal in our campus strategic plan is to "foster meaningful relationships across differences, including diverse cultural communities, identities, and competencies." If we really want to put an emphasis on this goal, we have to get out of the mindset that the creation of the Centers for Academic Excellence will exclusively support our students. We need all staff and faculty to have a better understanding of our diverse student experiences and identify ways they can better support our students. A great start is not invalidating our students' experiences by trying to explain them away, and hearing the experiences as our students' truth. Every staff person on campus needs to realize the impact their work has on the students, no matter how little interaction they may have directly with the students. Within trainings and staff meetings, we need to be discussing how we can have a positive impact on students, especially in regards to supporting students from underrepresented communities. It may be something as simple as doing an activity with your staff such as "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which has articles and facilitation guides easily accessible on the internet. We may be designated as a "Hispanic Serving Institution," where the undergraduate full-time enrollment is at least 25% Hispanic/Latinx-identified students, but can we really say we are adequately serving our Latinx students? We need to identify ways in which we can better serve our students by ensuring that we create an equitable opportunity for all students to feel a sense of affinity, and to succeed. And when I say "all students," I mean our wonderful, intersectional students, of every shape, size, color, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, religion, veteran status and/or parental status. We have a long way to go to correct all the intersectional oppression our historically white institution has ingrained deep within our systems and processes, and I know we have people who are ready to help make that change!

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***Molly Kresl** works at a mid-size public institution where she helps student clubs navigate through an array of policies and procedures to bring student initiated programming to the campus. Within her role, she assesses the value that student organizations and student facilitated events bring to her campus community. This data is then used to prove the value of "extracurricular activities" in regards to the student experience and ultimately retention. She has been involved in student club support services for over six years.*

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