Mission Statements - Adopting Intersectionality as a Framework in Higher Education

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As intersectionality becomes more commonplace, it is evident that although Crenshaw introduced it as a framework for Black women, many individuals experience ill-effects or marginalized treatment due to intersecting parts of their lives. Numerous colleges and universities underscore social justice in the documents used to direct their institutions. Further, social justice strongly emphasizes the need for an acute awareness of acts of oppression and marginalization. As such, institutions have an obligation to protect the rights of students who possess marginalized intersecting identities. They must provide an environment conducive for all students to learn, thrive, and become productive citizens.

Keywords: intersectionality, mission statements, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Many universities, when initiating a mission statement, include a declaration of their stance on social justice (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Social justice is a nebulous idea usually based on some moral, political or a combination that "originates in philosophical discourse" (Joist & Kay, 1998, p. 1122). However, it can take on an ambiguous meaning depending on the intent, focus, and ideology of the university (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Some mission statements are living documents that the institution values and are displayed not only in words but also, by actions and deeds (Kiley, 2011). Other universities may fall short in living out the meaning of their mission statements, not necessarily from a lack of caring, but because of lost focus or understanding by the students, staff, and faculty (Kiley, 2011). Whichever the case may be, universities that subscribe to a mission statement valuing social justice must meet the needs of all their students, especially those who are marginalized. One such area of marginalization is the effect that intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) plays in the lived experiences of many students at colleges and universities. Those colleges and universities that have social justice as an integral part of their mission statement must adopt intersectionality as a part of the framework for their institution.

HISTORY OF INTERSECTIONALITY

The intersectional perspective of one's race, gender and, at times, social class is often neglected when thinking in terms of being the recipient of oppressive and marginalized behaviors (Crenshaw, 1989). Although the conceptual lens of intersectionality was originally developed in legal studies to describe the oppressive treatment and disparity toward Black women in the court system (Crenshaw, 1989), racist and sexist treatment have also caused the same negative impact on Women students of Color inside and

outside of the classroom at predominantly White universities (PWIs). This double-edged sword of intersectionality that runs parallel can only occur when the combination of, for instance, sexism and racism causes a deeper form of marginalization or oppression (Shlasko, 2015).

Although Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term intersectionality in 1989, the reality of oppressive treatment toward Women of Color has been around since slavery as evidenced in the writings of Black women such as Sojourner Truth's speech Ain't *I a Woman* (National Park Service, n.d.). Her speech eloquently speaks of the inequitable treatment of Black women as opposed to that of White women. In her writings, bell hooks (1984) noted that the marginalization of Black women was more dominant than that of White women and that discrimination was not always equal, even when concerning oppressive treatment:

> There is much evidence substantiating that the reality of race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and lifestyle that takes precedence over the common experiences that women share – differences which are rarely transcended. The motives of materially privileged, educated, White women with a variety of career and lifestyle options available to them must be questioned when they insist that 'suffering cannot be measured.' …It is a statement that I have never heard a poor woman of any race make. (p. 4)

Hooks (1984) made it clear that the experiences of oppression were very different for Black women than for White women in the feminist movement's earlier phases, and this still holds true today. White women do not have to maneuver through college with the notion of being considered "less than" due to the intersection of their race and gender and in some instances do not have the added burden of a lower socioeconomic status.

Then there were women such as attorney Florynce "Flo" Kennedy, graduate of Columbia Law School, feminist, civil rights leader, and activist (Randolph, 2015). She was a founding member of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the founder of the Feminist Party under which Shirley Chisolm ran for president (Randolph, 2015). Kennedy was instrumental in overturning restrictive abortion laws, which led to the infamous *Roe V. Wade* Supreme Court case (Randolph, 2015). The history books are virtually silent about Kennedy's activism and accomplishments, partly because of her departure from NOW (Randolph, 2015). Kennedy parted with the group "due to disagreements about the national organization's failure to make ending racism and imperialism central to its battle against sexism" (Randolph, 2015, p. 140).

Similarly, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett dedicated her life to fighting for the civil rights of Blacks (The Mississippi Writer's Page, 2004). Wells-Barnett traveled the country, advocating and writing about civil rights issues, unfair laws, and crimes against Blacks (The Mississippi Writer's Page, 2004). Anna Julia Cooper, born to an enslaved mother and White father, started her activism early when she objected to the "preferential treatment" (The Anna Julia Cooper Program Mission, n.d., p.1) given to men to enter the ministry. Cooper was critical of Blacks praising progress for Black men when those same opportunities were not available to Black women (The Anna Julia Cooper Program Mission, n.d.). Equally as impressive was Septima Clark who was known as the "Mother of the Movement" (Foster, n.d., p. 5). Clark acquired this title from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for her work with organizing a tutoring program that helped Black men and women with math and other literacy skills (Lynch, 2016). These skills enable men and women to pass literacy tests that were required in order for People of Color to vote in some states (Lynch, 2016). Clark participated in a class-action lawsuit brought on by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) due to inequitable pay between Black and White teachers (Hall, Walker, Charron, & Cline, 2010). Because of this case, South Carolina passed a law prohibiting government workers from joining or belonging to civil rights organizations (Foster, n.d.). Although Clark was instrumental in winning the case, she was later fired from her teaching position because she would not resign from the NAACP (Hall, Walker, Charron, & Cline, 2010).

INTERSECTIONALITY AS A FRAMEWORK

Intersectionality as a framework is grounded in critical race theory and Black feminist thought (Carbado, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). Women of Color who attend PWIs are oppressed by the intersection of their gender, race, and in many cases, their socioeconomic standing (Crenshaw, 1989). Combs (2003) suggested that Black women, more so than any other racial group in academia, are marginalized, treated unfairly and victims of discrimination. Wilkins (2012) pointed out that when entering college, race becomes more prevalent to Black women. They have to learn how to function in a society that is "bound by the macrocosm (the larger popular culture) of American-White culture, but also racially identify with a specific subculture" (Hesse-Biber, Livingstone, Ramirez, Brooke, & Johnson, 2010, p. 697). Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) suggested that these multiple roles cause great conflict and can be difficult to maneuver when shifting from being an "insider" to an "outsider" role. Women of Color who attend PWIs may have to contend with feelings of being an outsider. These feelings may be brought on because of the lack of role models, e.g., faculty or staff who look like them and other Students of Color, differences in body images, and diverse cultural experiences (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010; Smith, 2004). Because of this outsider role, many Women of Color have to depend on family and friends in order to be successful in their academic role (Smith, 2004). Yet, many Black women are first-generation students and cannot depend on family members for advice because they are unfamiliar with the college experience (Chen, 2005). Not having a clear, dependable support system in place is detrimental to their success. However, most schools have resources and a student affairs office, but unfortunately, many are not equipped to meet the needs of Women of Color attending PWIs.

The quality of academics at any school should be, and probably is, one of the most important determinants of the enrollment and successful graduation rates of students (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). However, if students do not feel as if they fit into the culture of the institution because of their race, ethnicity, or socio-cultural background, no matter the quality of the academics, there can be a disconnect and increased rates of attrition (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012; Carver 2019). One of the messages sent to many Black women is that higher education is necessary to become successful (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Along with that line of thinking is the message that Blacks have to be two times better at whatever they do, then the average White person is, to receive any consideration (Terhune, 2008). Many Black women place undue pressure on themselves to achieve these goals, as well as erase negative stereotypical images that they have lived under for decades (Terhune, 2008). This need to attain perfection puts greater pressure on Women of Color to perform well and guard themselves against self-imposed thoughts of inferiority and self-deprecation (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003).

The "Obama Effect" (Wasafiri, 2010, p. 1), that is the belief by many that racism and other stereotypical behavior toward Blacks disappeared when Barack Obama became president is, unfortunately, a myth. Although many would like to think that they live in a post-racial society, this is hardly the case. During his campaign for president, then Senator Barack Obama's wife, Michele, was depicted on many occasions as being masculine, blunt, and overbearing (Kelley, 2008), in other words, what is typically known as the "angry Black Woman" (Walley-Jean, 2009, p. 68). Wally-Jean's (2009) study analyzed what some individuals stereotypically call the "angry Black woman" (p. 68). The author argued that the negativity surrounding this image has led to undesirable beliefs about Black women, causing oppressive behaviors in academic settings, partner or domestic violence, and the internalization of negative self-images (Walley-Jean, 2009). These categories of intersection, race, and sex are not discrete; they are "mutually constituted relations among social identities" (Shields, 2008, p. 301). If the public can harbor such racist thoughts about the First Lady, then the intersection of race, class, and gender becomes even more salient for young Black women, who have no power or privilege, when entering a PWI, especially in the South.

Besides issues of race and gender, Hesse-Biber et al. (2010) pointed out that many Women of Color have to unpack other social identity struggles such as socio-economic status, family issues and in some cases being considered "too White" (p. 697) by some of their Black peers and in others, not being "White enough" (p. 698) for their White peers. These oppressive behaviors, along with the perception of

"Whiteness as beauty" (p. 698) regarding body image, and other physical features such as hair texture and eye color, can greatly affect the well-being of African American women in colleges and universities (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Crocker and Wolfe (2001) pointed out that self-esteem is tied to one's identity or self-image. This self-image is formed from a lifetime of positive and negative experiences, images and norms that are validated by society (Hesse-Biber et al., 2010). Unfortunately, most of the positive images portrayed by the media are not of Black individuals (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). For example, in many cases the media depicts Black women in stereotypical ways such as over-sexed Jezebels, loud obnoxious and angry sapphires, or docile unintelligent nursemaid mammy images (Townsend, Thomas, Neilands, & Jackson, 2010).

As the framework of intersectionality is more readily employed in the 21st century, it is evident that not only Women of Color experience ill effects or marginalized treatment due to interconnecting parts of their lives. Carbado et al. (2013) state that "there is potentially always another set of concerns to which the theory can be directed, other places to which the theory might be moved, and other structures of power it can be deployed to examine" (p. 304). As such, students who may have intersecting identities such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, or nationality have widened the lens with regard to intersectionality (Carbado et al., 2013). Carbado et al. state that this "work in progress of understanding" (p. 305) the reach of intersectionality as a framework is far from complete.

MISSION STATEMENTS – INTEGRAL TO THE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

As interconnecting marginalized characteristics have an increasingly negative impact on the lives of many students, the framework if intersectionality must be considered in mission statements that portray social justice as important to their mission. Most every organization has one. They are fundamental and the foundation of the entity, lending guidance and putting into words the reason for being in existence (Bart, 1997). Mission statements, Bart (1997) reported are an important part of over 90% of all organizations. Many organizations rely on the mission statement for direction, to provide or enhance their identity, and to seek buy-in from stakeholders with regard to goals and objectives (Kiley, 2011). The well-crafted mission statement should inspire, motivate and guide the institution, in other words, it should be what is important to, and about the institution (Bart, 1997).

Mission statements can be as short as a few words or a sentence, to several pages of narrative (Kiley, 2011). Many experts say that mission statements should be short, memorable, and not contain jargon (Olsen, n.d.). Bart pointed out that the mission statement of some organizations was strictly about service to the client, while others included the well-being of all stakeholders (as cited in Kiley, 2011). In a university's case, stakeholders would include students, administrators, donors, alumni, and the community in which it resides. The mission statement should also lend guidance on how to allocate resources within the entity (Bart, 1997). As reported by Bart (1997), a mission statement should contain three important parts:

- Who is the target market, client, or customer?
- What product or service is provided to the client or customer?
- What is unique about the entity, product or service to give it an edge over its competitors? (p. 9)

Universities establish mission statements for various reasons. Mission statements are foundational and voice the institution's reason for existence, the school's purpose and what the school wants to achieve (Trybou, Gemmel, Desmidt, & Annemans, 2017). The mission statement echoes the beliefs and actions of the university. For instance, if a university's mission statement reflects that they are strong proponents of a diverse student body, then this must be reflected in the school's actions (Feldner, 2006). While the mission statement is not the only document lending guidance to the vision and reason for the school's existence, it is the most visible, permanent and esteemed (Meacham & Gaff, 2005). Meacham and Gaff (2005) state that the mission statement "will be the one that will be turned to for guidance both when resources are plentiful, and new initiatives can be envisioned as well as when resources become scarce

and difficult choices must be made" (p. 7). As such, this document should have total buy-in from all its stakeholders. Leaders at the top of the organization must support the document:

> Without a statement that reflects widespread agreement and the shared understanding of central priorities among the president, board of trustees, and other constituencies, it is difficult to understand how a lived mission can emerge in practice. The mission statement is the necessary condition for many different individuals to pull together through a myriad of activities to achieve central shared purposes. (Meacham & Gaff, 2005, pp. 6-7)

Therefore, the university must be fully cognizant and sensitive to the learning community, and what the school values as important to fulfilling its goals.

Although many universities follow the advice of experts by keeping them short, concise, and to the point, civic-driven, social-minded, and non-secular based institutions tend to include social justice along with other ideas of discourse in their mission statements (Feldner, 2006; Torres-Harding et al., 2015). Many of these institutions report the importance of this connection or commitment to their constituents. Torres-Harding et at. (2015) reported that the stronger the "psychological sense of community," (p. 89) the apter that students bought into the idea of the university's mission of social justice. Living the mission through actively providing classes and opportunities further increases the commitment to the social justice mission (Torres-Harding et al., 2015).

THE ETHICAL PRESENCE OF THE UNIVERSITY

Thomas Jefferson used the phrase "knowledge is power," (The Jefferson Monticello, n.d., para. 1) when referring to the University of Virginia in his writings. Jefferson understood the type of power that universities carried when it came to swaying decisions, dispensing knowledge, and influencing the economic and well-being of a student's life (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). Barr (1993) pointed out that because of the great power of knowledge that they possessed, universities also hold a great deal of ethical and moral responsibility. hooks (1984) proposed that in the Western world, capitalistic practices inform ethical behavior and people are more concerned with individual good rather than what is best for society. Therefore, meaningful policies and practices are not changed when individual lives, especially those in power, have not benefitted from social and ethical reform (hooks, 1984).

Peter Drucker (2013) stated that the character of leadership sets the ethical tone of the organization:

> For it is character through which leadership is exercised; it is character that sets the example and is imitated. Character is not something one can fool people about. The people with whom a person works, and especially subordinates, know in a few weeks whether he or she has integrity or not. They may forgive a person for a great deal: They may forgive a person for a great deal: incompetence, ignorance, insecurity, or bad manners. But they will not forgive a lack of integrity in that person. Nor will they forgive higher management for choosing him. (p. 3)

Students are unequal to and at the mercy of faculty and administration to uphold the integrity of the relationship by maintaining professional and ethical behavior (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). Students in many cases will live up to their ethical behavior by observing those whom they perceive as holding some sense of power (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992).

Ethics should not become an issue only when a dilemma is faced, as the well-being of the institution is a "daily occurrence manifested in the decision making on all levels of the college or university" (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992, p. 2). For instance, if there is an expectation that the curriculum of the school possesses, at its core, the virtue of ethics or morality, then the institution's policies, practices, mission, and resources should support that practice (Meacham & Gaff, 2005). Most universities who have a diverse student body with varied backgrounds should not be at a loss or need to grapple with ways in

which to deal with issues of poor ethical behavior, when and if they occur. Plans and procedures should be in place (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). This practice is especially warranted if the mission of the school has a strong propensity toward social justice.

Students face a plethora of ethical dilemmas, some that they may not have the experience or developmental tools to cope with, when arriving at their university (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). The college years may be the first time a student is confronted with issues of their intersection of race, sex and social class, or sexual identity. Even if students are aware of social and cultural differences, they have had their parents to help them deal with those issues. Students may be unable to handle issues surrounding oppressive and marginalized behaviors on their own. Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) point out that "the distinctive nature of the institutional ethos affects the values and interests manifested in the campus climate and the overall effect of the college experience on the student" (p.3). Therefore, the way in which the university assists students in maneuvering through and coping with issues of oppression and marginalization could have long lasting positive or negative effects.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice is a concept that came to prominence in the mid-1800s by the Catholic Church as a way to describe a new virtue, as families began to move away from rural areas in which farming was the main source of support (Novak, 2006). During the mid-1800s, many families were no longer living on farms growing their food and were becoming more dependent on wages, while working in different parts of the city (Novak, 2006). This new way of living caused hardship, which led to families being taken advantage of by shopkeepers and other distributors, who bought food inexpensively from farmers and sold it at inflated prices to the city dwellers (Novak, 2006). The Catholic Church began its social justice efforts to gain equality for those who lived in urban areas at this time (Novak, 2006).

Presently, the term and concept of social justice has been appropriated by "secular progressive thinkers" (Novak, 2006, p. 1) and stretched to take on many meanings. It could be thought of as fair and equitable distribution of advantages and disadvantages to all members of a community (Novak, 2006). Joist and Kay (1998) more specifically describe social justice social as:

- benefits and burdens in society are dispersed in accordance with some allocation principle (or set of principles);
- procedures, norms, and rules that govern political and other forms of decisions making preserve the basic rights, liberties, and entitlements of individuals and groups; and
- human beings (and) other perhaps other species) are treated with dignity and respect not only by authorities but also by other relevant social actors including fellow citizens. (p. 1122)

In essence, social justice has no singular meaning, and while this is not problematic, the term can run the risk of becoming watered down and losing some of its essence or purpose (Hahn Tapper, 2013). Institutions should define their meaning of social justice and live it out in their mission and their actions.

Novak (2006) argued that "social justice is the capacity to organize with others to accomplish ends that benefit the whole community" (p. 1). With this in thought in mind, during the 20th century, marginalized and oppressed groups such as women and Blacks began to conduct social justice protests and movements because of the United States' lack of equality and the "persistence of institutional racism" (Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 91). Even after laws were passed correcting these wrongs and giving rights to marginalized individuals, systematic oppression continued (Collins, 1990). Fraser acknowledged that:

> Injustice can stem not just from one's unfair exclusion from the macro-level political and economic order but also from the denial of one's lived experience, identity, and culture. Justice, then, is not simply the redistribution of material resources but also the recognition and acceptance of diverse perspectives and experiences (as cited in Grant & Gibson, 2013, p. 93).

With the idea that individuals are the culprits that develop systems of oppression and inequality, many may have to unpack their biases, fears, and privilege and "reevaluate the dominant value system that operates within the American culture" (Watt, 2007, p. 115). However, the idea of giving up power is incomprehensible to many individuals and institutions who are privileged; therefore, they also have the responsibility of developing a critical awareness of their biases and privileged status (Watt, 2007). When one develops a "critical consciousness," (Watt, 2007, p. 115) they can assess their biases and privileges, and then fight against social, political and economic functions that cause oppressive behaviors against marginalized groups. Watt (2007) pointed to six assumptions in her privileged identity exploration (PIE) model with regard to the idea of maintaining a critical consciousness:

- The exploration of privileged identity is an on-going socialization process.
- There is no ultimate level of consciousness that can be reached regarding one's privileged identity.
- Engaging in difficult dialogue is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression (i.e., racism, sexism/heterosexism/homophobia, and ableism).
- Defense modes are normal human reactions to the uncertainty that one feels when exploring their privileged identities in more depth.
- Defense modes are expressed in identifiable behaviors.
- Expressions of defense modes may vary by situation. (p. 119)

The PIE model is a tool or mechanism used to assist individuals who are conducting the difficult task of unpacking prejudice, biases, and anti-social justice behaviors (Watt, 2007).

Collins (1990) emphasized that empowerment is one of the essential keys to achieving social justice. However, Collins stated that without a clear understanding of what oppression is and the oppressive behaviors that need changing, social justice cannot be achieved.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine in what ways colleges and universities that have social justice as an integral part of their mission must adopt intersectionality as a framework for their institution. Social justice strongly emphasizes the need for acute awareness of acts of oppression so that negative cycles can be halted. Colleges and universities, which emphasize social justice in the very documents that direct the school, have an ethical obligation to protect the rights of students. These institutions also must provide an environment that is conducive for critical thinkers to learn, grow and become productive citizens in their community.

Universities develop mission statements with the mindset of producing a document that will lead the school in a forward direction, setting the tone for its faculty, staff, and students. If in fact, the institution feels that social justice is a part of that direction, they are bound by that agreement. Although the term intersectionality as a theoretical framework may be first introduced in the classroom, students with marginalized intersecting identities experience this reality in the classroom, residence halls, dining areas and other places across college campuses (Collins & Bilge, 2016). If the concept of intersectionality means little or nothing to those in administrative positions, and especially those who assist in drafting the mission and implement policies, then they have failed in their responsibilities to uphold their social justice mission.

Intersectionality as a theory continues to expand, growing with the vast number of ways that intersections can cause marginalized treatment of students at colleges and universities (Carbado et al., 2013). For instance, for centuries Women of Color have been, and continue today, to be adversely affected by the intersections of race, gender, and possibly their social class. Similarly, students at the intersection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer identities with marginalized racial and social class identities face hardships on college campuses. The same is true for international Students of Color or for those who do not have English as their first language. These students and more, enter into colleges and universities with the expectation of being academically challenged, acquiring and enhancing critical

thinking skills, and maturing into productive human beings. Along with those hopes and dreams comes an expectation that a university with social justice in their mission statement would recognize the importance, and address the many issues that come with serving a diverse population. The unfortunate reality is that, because of the ill-treatment these individuals have suffered through for so long, there is sometimes acceptance when words on a document, or in this case, a mission statement is not lived out and hold no great meaning.

With this in mind, academia has to move away from a one size fits all approach. Harper stated that it would be noble if those who have privilege, influence and authority use it to "more powerfully, more responsibly and more loudly advocated for racial justice on behalf of those who don't have the resources that they deserve" (as cited in Seltzer, 2017, para. 1). While Harper (2017) focused his speech on Black students, his ideals are relevant to all marginalized students. Universities that use a social justice lens in their mission statements must:

- Confront their historical and present day biases.
- Hire and maintain faculty and staff who will not sustain or endorse racial, classist, homophobic or misogynistic inequities.
- Graduate students who think through an inclusive lens.
- Offer a curriculum that represents the historical and present-day lives of the students in which they serve. (Harper, 2017, para. 8)

If a university accepts these principles, then they will have lived up to their social justice mission and obligation to its students.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to examine in what ways colleges and universities that have social justice as an integral part of their mission must adopt intersectionality as a framework for their institution. Universities seem to do a tremendous job of recruiting a diverse population of students with the idea of multiculturalism and inclusion, luring them in with the offer of scholarships and promises of a great experience. Students should be in an environment where they can feel confident, valued and desired. Universities can do their part by offering an environment that nurtures the mind, body, and spirit of its students as documented in their mission statements. Further, the recruitment of students with marginalized intersecting identities should occur with a well-planned process that takes into account the whole person. And, universities must honor all intersections facing a student, including race, gender, class, religion, and nationality, among other identities, recognizing the fact that they are not, and can never be, separate.

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