



2017


## Navigating a Social Justice Motivation and Praxis as Student Affairs Professionals

Nadeeka D. Karunaratne  
*University of California Irvine*

Lauren M. Koppel  
*Metropolitan State University of Denver*

chee ia yang  
*University of Michigan*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Karunaratne, N. D., Koppel, L. M., & yang, c. i. (2016). Navigating a social justice motivation and praxis as student affairs professionals. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 3(1), 45-50.

This Research-in-Brief is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals and Magazines at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).

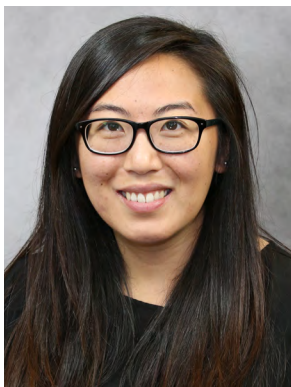


This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

# Navigating a Social Justice Motivation and Praxis as Student Affairs Professionals



Nadeeka Karunaratne is the Student Development Coordinator in the Cross-Cultural Center at the University of California, Irvine. She has a bachelor's degree in Chemistry from the University of California, Berkeley and a master's degree in Student Affairs Administration from Michigan State University. Nadeeka's research interests include the experiences of Women of Color in higher education, intersectional violence prevention education and services, and the experiences of underrepresented students in STEM.



chee ia yang is the Program Manager in the Office of Multi-Ethnic Student Affairs at the University of Michigan. She attended the University of North Carolina at Charlotte with double majors in Marketing and Sociology, and Michigan State University with a master's degree in Student Affairs Administration. chee ia is interested in critical pedagogy, the experiences of students of color in higher education, and racial identity and leadership identity development. In her spare time she enjoys traveling and exploring new eateries.



Lauren Koppel is the Coordinator of Scholar Success and Leadership at Metropolitan State University of Denver in the office of Student Persistence. She earned a bachelor's degree in Women's & Ethnic Studies from the University of Northern Colorado and a master's degree in Student Affairs Administration from Michigan State University. Lauren's research interests include professional socialization in student affairs, student leadership identity development, and student advocacy and ally identity development.

# NAVIGATING A SOCIAL JUSTICE MOTIVATION AND PRAXIS AS STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Nadeeka Karunaratne  
Lauren Koppel  
chee ia yang



- 1) What are the motivations for student affairs professionals to be social justice advocates in the field of student affairs?
- 2) How do student affairs professionals who act as social justice advocates navigate\* social justice issues within the field of student affairs?

\*"Navigate" refers to student affairs professionals who thrive, succeed, and effectively serve as social justice advocates in the field

## METHODOLOGY



**Convenient and purposeful sampling**



**Grounded theory analysis**



**Semi-structured interviews**

Small sample size, convenient sampling, and qualitative nature does not necessarily allow for generalizability. However, in understanding how individuals navigate social justice issues, qualitative methods allowed us to closely examine the complexity and nuances of individuals' identities, systems of power, and institutional influences through storytelling.

## PARTICIPANTS

pseudonyms, salient identities, functional area @ institution type

VIRGINIA	Queer, cisgender, woman, White, Agnostic	Orientation @ Public Research
DEEPIKA	South Asian, cisgender, femme woman	Residence Life @ Private Jesuit
ALLIE	White, woman, mother	Multicultural Affairs @ Public Research
MABEL	Bi-cultural, heterosexual, cisgender, woman	Career Services @ Comprehensive
GLEN	APIA genderqueer, male, 2nd generation, young professional, masculine, Agnostic, Atheist Essentialist, Person of Color	Cultural Center @ Public Research
REGENA	Black woman, person of religion, mentor, wife, mother, sister, Student Affairs & Multicultural Affairs professional	Cultural Center @ Public Research



# SOCIAL JUSTICE DEFINITIONS & MOTIVATIONS

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**DEFINITIONS:** The term "social justice" is used differently throughout the literature. "Justice oriented citizens look for the root causes of social problems and aim to disrupt privileging systems" (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011, p. 20). Manning's (2009) seven perspectives regarding work on difference include anti-oppression and social-justice perspectives. Owen (2009) describes "diversity for equity" as being concerned about "the differences that differences make" (p. 187).

**MOTIVATIONS:** Self-interest that ranges from narrow perspectives to an "interdependent perspective," where individuals understand how systemic oppression harms dominant groups as well as marginalized ones (Goodman, 2000, p. 1072). Allies for social justice (Edwards, 2006) are allies to issues of oppression and seek to bring justice in the interest of all.

**Our definition: a social justice motivation and praxis consists of the awareness of, understanding of, and skills for disrupting the systems of oppression that cause inequity in society.**

## RESULTS

### DEFINITIONS



Social justice goals included equitable outcomes, equitable access, justice for marginalized individuals, and anti-oppression.

Social justice is working toward equity in ways that are anti-oppressive and against oppressive systems at institutional, interpersonal, and personal levels.



Multiple participants defined social justice as a lens through which to analyze situations. This lens shapes how they analyze situations, challenges, issues, and contexts. They described social justice as a process of "unlearn[ing] dominant culture" (Deepika) and bringing awareness of issues of equity and inclusion. Participants connected the ideas of lens and process by stating that social justice is a process where advocates apply their lenses to situations.



### MOTIVATIONS

Desire for social change

Privilege  
-their own privilege  
-the lack of privilege others have  
-the lack of privilege they have

Involvement and exposure to social justice issues  
-in college  
-in graduate school  
-in their early career

Personal values and philosophical beliefs



"[Social justice is a] lens through which I am constantly analyzing what is equitable for a situation or for a student." - Deepika

## DISCUSSION

**DEFINITIONS:** The definitions of social justice given by the student affairs professionals in the study move beyond the "diversity of difference" perspective that solely defines diversity as valuing difference (Owen, 2009). Participants described social justice work as striving for equitable access and outcomes, anti-oppression, and dismantling systems at multiple levels, which aligned with Hyttén and Bettez's (2011) description of justice oriented citizens and Owen's (2009) understanding of "diversity for equity." Their definition of social justice that worked for transformational change on a systemic level.

**MOTIVATIONS:** Social justice motivations cannot necessarily be taught, but exposure to issues and concepts underlying inequity and injustice are important for developing these motivations. Student organizations, leadership experiences, affinity spaces, graduate coursework, and professional work experiences ultimately led to participants' continued social justice advocacy. This reveals the importance of exposing undergraduate and graduate students to multiple programs, internships, and courses that address social justice issues. Participants expressed the importance of working for equity for all and transformational change; thus, they can be understood as allies for social justice (Edwards, 2006) who work to end oppression and see the interconnectedness of oppressions.





# PRAXIS

Praxis: Intentional combination of critical reflection with action (Freire, 1970)

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Social Justice & Inclusion Professional Competency (ACPA & NASPA, 2015)**

Social justice as goal and process-oriented  
Practitioner's recognition of their own agency and social responsibility

**Multicultural Competency (Pope & Reynolds, 1997)**

Levels of self-perceived competence differing by gender and racial/ethnic identities

**Development of Critical Consciousness (Landreman, Ramussen, King & Jiang, 2007)**

Advocacy occurs after awareness building

**Tempered Radicals (Meyerson, 2001)**

Seek congruence between personal values, identities, and their organizations through small-scale efforts

**Privileged Identity Exploration (Watt, 2007)**

Tool to help student affairs practitioners anticipate defensive reactions individuals exhibit after they experience cognitive dissonance in regards to their privileged identities

## RESULTS

**Disseminating Information**  
Strategized on communication methods and reception, question decision making processes

**Multicultural Competence**  
Identified the necessity of having knowledge of social justice issues and skills for inacting a praxis

**Recruiting, Hiring, and Training**  
Representing structural diversity of an institution, training inclusive of social identities and systems of inequality, tying training explicitly to employees' work

**Self-perception and Self-Expression**  
Maintaining conscious of social identities and dynamics when interacting with others, necessity of separating mistakes from self-worth

**Programming**  
Strive to increase inclusivity, role model expectations, scaling social justice programs for entry-level to more complex conversations

**Reflection**  
Necessary for increased personal accountability and development of skills

## DISCUSSION

### Advocacy and Identities

Student affairs professionals advocacy can be interpreted as them advocating on behalf of their own identities and as self-serving. One participant found "turning off" her social justice as self-care, while another talked about the impossibility of this. Depending on social identities- "turning off" a social justice lens might not be an option.

### Graduate Education

Graduate preparation in social justice awareness and multicultural competence is not uniform. In a 2003 study only 74% of student affairs graduate programs require a diversity course (Flowers). It is necessary to learn critical pedagogues including feminist theories, critical race theory, and queer theory to develop a social justice perspective. Graduate preparation may not include these.

### Praxis

Participants identified specific skills which are necessary to having an effective social justice praxis. These skills include educating students and facilitating difficult conversations. Student affairs practitioners need to identify opportunities to develop these skills- especially if there are limited opportunities within their job duties. Additionally, they need to identify opportunities for continued learning like reading or conference attendance.



# CHALLENGES

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Multicultural issues have affected conversations about curriculum, admission, attrition and retention, tenure, programs and services, and personnel issues. Student affairs professionals have played a role in addressing some of these issues, particularly in the creation of cultural centers, women's centers, and diversity workshops (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). However, such efforts have been undermined by institutionalized forms of racism such as culturally-biased standardized tests in admissions, culturally-biased curriculum, and underrepresentation of people of color in administration and faculty (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2007). Additionally, the manner in which student affairs professionals address social justice issues can often be policed, sometimes contributing to and maintaining institutionalized systems of oppression.

Due to the lack of depth of formal research on navigating student affairs as a social justice advocate, we turned to other sources of information. Dr. Andrea Dre Domingue's blog post for the ACPA Commission for Social Justice Educators (2014) discussed navigating student affairs as a social justice educator. Domingue described the conversations she has had with undergraduates, graduate students, and new professionals who are struggling to navigate a pathway of social justice education in student affairs. One student "was told his only option was to pursue careers working in multicultural affairs while he is interested in supporting a variety of marginalized student populations, fostering cross-identity work and institutional change" (Domingue, 2014). Furthermore, college access work may not be considered "traditional student affairs work" to some people, highlighting the difficulty in navigating a pathway of social justice advocacy in student affairs (Linder & Simmons, 2015).

## RESULTS

### Power Dynamics

Creating truly meaningful change is difficult when there is a lack of discussion around power dynamics.

### Engaging Students

A challenge is how to attract more students to do social justice work and how to keep them engaged.

### An "Aesthetic"

The norms of social justice educator behavior (i.e., using in-group language which can seem elitist and alienate others) are ineffective for advancing goals.

### Funding & Quantifying Initiatives

Multicultural offices are systematically underfunded. Funding is tied to the importance and difficulty of quantifying the purpose and outcomes of social justice initiatives to senior leadership.

### Perceptions of Others

Being pigeonholed as the "diversity person" or the "the race guy", and being labeled as the "political correctness police" makes it difficult for people to receive feedback.

## Tempered Radicals

Tempered radicals are individuals who seek congruence between their personal values and identities and their organizations through small-scale efforts. These strategies include resisting quietly and staying true to one's self, turning threats into opportunities, broadening impact through negotiation, leveraging small wins, and organizing collective action (Meyerson, 2001).

Several participants discussed small measures of change as examples of their praxis. These included influencing those in a professionals' sphere of influence and intentionally having social justice conversations with students as those students will continue those conversations with their peers. In this way, small actions can influence larger change.

Although no one provided explicit strategies of the tempered radical framework (negotiation, turning threats into opportunities, or organizing collective action), we believe this may be an underutilized framework and tool by student affairs practitioners for enacting social change.

## DISCUSSION

Learn how to "test, push, play, and perhaps break [the] rules, but in ways that won't lead to termination of your job."  
- Glen

## Politics

Participants expressed the difficulty of navigating power relationships and the necessity to learn how to do so. Virginia stated that navigating politics comes from experience and watching others do it. One of Allie's strategies is to intentionally form relationships with higher-level administrators.

Student affairs practitioners new to an institution should seek opportunities to develop relationships outside of their department and with mid- or high-level administrators. Professional preparation programs should openly discuss the political climate of post-secondary education and how it affects entry- and mid-level student affairs professionals. Providing education, training, and dialogue about identity development and the intersections of those identities is a good start.



## SELF-CARE



Form and cultivate relationships

Engage in therapy



Use humor

Take breaks



Advocate for yourself

### RESULTS

Find things that make you happy outside of work



Set aside time for yourself



Create boundaries



Focus on the changes that professionals can make in their sphere of influences, rather than solely focusing on the barriers and challenges to larger change

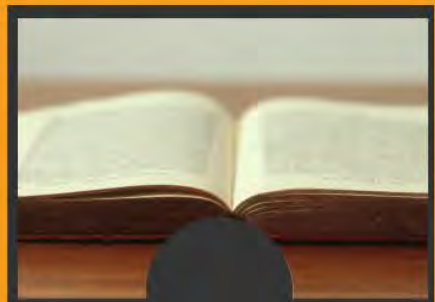
## DISCUSSION

Self-care is important because it prevents burnout and apathy. Depending on entry-level professionals previous work histories, developing and maintaining professional boundaries may be a new experience for them. Graduate assistant and internship supervisors can assist new professionals in developing these skills through reflection, discussion, and role modeling. Waiting or disconnecting, even for a bit, is sometimes the best type of self-care.

Self-care is also a way to heal. Regena believes that "those who are healers and givers also need to be healed and be given to" and people should not be ashamed to seek counseling, while it may be seen as taboo in some communities. In new-employee orientations, student affairs divisions may consider providing resources on counselors who accept employee health insurance. Self-care varies among individuals with different identities, and it is vital to sustaining social justice advocacy.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sought to examine the motivations of entry-level and mid-level student affairs' practitioners for engaging in social justice work and how they navigate their social justice advocacy. Participants shared strategies for how aspiring and current professionals can integrate social justice advocacy into their praxis, and how to simultaneously take care of themselves. This study gives supervisors of entry-level employees and faculty in graduate-preparation programs insight into new professional's motivation for pursuing student affairs. Although briefly explored through participants' stories, future research should expand on specific strategies for social justice advocacy. Additionally, future research that explores how student affairs' practitioners navigate their advocacy in context of their identities will further illuminate praxis in relation to power dynamics, including interpersonal, campus environment, and political dynamics.



This study provides important insight on the motivations of and strategies employed by student affairs professionals in their social justice advocacy.