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

## **Cover Page Footnote**

We would like to thank our participants for sharing their stories with us. We would also like to thank Dr. Christa Porter for her unwavering support with this project and for our development as researchers.

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

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## Abstract

While diversity and social justice are espoused values of the field of student affairs, student affairs professionals are socialized to varying degrees in regard to the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to be social justice advocates. Through qualitative interviews with nine entry- and mid-level student affairs professionals, we explored the motivations and experiences of student affairs professionals who enact values of social justice in their praxis. Participants shared strategies to navigating the field and their advocacy, the influence of theirs and others' identities on their work, techniques for implementing intentional social justice praxis, challenges faced in their advocacy, and how they practice self-care.

## Keywords

navigate, social justice motivation, praxis, student affairs

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Creating inclusive communities; developing studies holistically; and seeking equity, diversity, and inclusion are elements of social justice and espoused values in the field of student affairs (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; ACPA & NASPA, 2015; NASPA, 1987). However, the student affairs field socializes professionals in varying regard to these expectations, and professionals have varying frameworks by which they practice. The inclusion of diversity course requirements is not universal across graduate preparation programs (Flowers, 2003). The existence of a diversity course also does not indicate effective instruction or strong competency outcomes. Additionally, not all student affairs practitioners are graduates of college student personnel programs. Among first-year professionals in student affairs, increased competency in multiculturalism was among the highest professional development concerns (Renn & Hodges, 2007). This study seeks to respond to the need for increased literature to understand how student affairs practitioners enact values of social justice in their practice.

We use a praxis framework to examine the ways in which student affairs practitioners conceptualize and reflect on their practice specifically in regard to social justice. Praxis is the intentional combination of critical reflection with action (Freire, 1970). Praxis explains the cyclical process by which critical reflection informs and follows action. The critical reflection component of praxis requires student affairs practitioners to examine the presence and operation of systems of power within higher education, including their participation in power dynamics. The action component of praxis involves student affairs practitioners integrating social justice into their everyday practice.

The researchers identified participants in this study as professionals who acted as social justice advocates. This study sought to understand the motivations and challenges of student affairs practitioners whose praxis

integrates social justice advocacy. Our own personal journeys of navigating social justice advocacy in the field of student affairs led them to explore the following questions:

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?

The term navigate is used throughout this paper to refer to student affairs professionals who are finding ways to thrive, succeed, and effectively serve as social justice advocates in the field.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

This section discusses the literature and frameworks we utilized to explore our research questions. The section is divided into five parts: (a) frameworks for understanding social justice, (b) ways the literature explores motivations for social justice advocacy, (c) competencies that discuss social justice advocacy, (d) identities that student affairs professionals may hold, and (e) challenges for enacting social justice in student affairs.

### Social Justice Framework

Approaches to the theory and practice of social justice education are rooted in the civil rights movements of oppressed and marginalized groups (Gorski, 1999). The establishment of women's colleges and historically Black colleges in the 1830s created an opportunity for White women and Black individuals to pursue higher education (Thelin, 2011). The civil rights movement of the 1960s and the women's movement of the 1970s increased access to higher education for more women and people of color. In the 1990s, new American immigration laws allowed access to higher education in the United States for international

students and English-language learners (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009). Increased access to higher education for historically marginalized and underrepresented student populations challenges colleges and universities to respond to students' needs and to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2011). The historical push for access and inclusion has prompted higher education to consider multicultural competence and social justice education.

The term social justice brings to mind other words such as diversity, multiculturalism, antioppression, and inclusion. The term is used differently by various disciplines and throughout the literature (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Hyttén and Bettez (2011) explained social justice by describing the philosophical and democratically grounded strands of social justice literature. Philosophical perspectives include characterizations of oppression and equality. The democratically grounded strand includes the notion of justice-oriented citizenship: "Justice oriented citizens look for the root causes of social problems and aim to disrupt privileging systems" (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011, p. 20).

Another framework for understanding social justice is Manning's (2009) seven perspectives regarding work on difference (i.e., work in regards to diversity). The antioppression and social justice perspectives share a philosophical root and are most relevant to the social justice motivation and practice we refer to in this study. Manning (2009) also referred to the issue of social justice becoming a generic phrase for all practices related to difference: "Without an understanding of oppression, action related to transformational change, and passion for equitable sharing of power, claims of social justice may be another perspective in

disguise" (p. 17).

As our final social justice framework, Owen (2009) described two common understandings of the word diversity in higher education. The first is "diversity of difference" where valuing diversity is understood only as valuing differences. The second sense is "diversity for equity" and is concerned about "the differences that differences make" or inequalities that arise from salient differences (Owen, 2009, p. 187). This second sense relates most to student affairs professionals with a social justice motivation and praxis.

A review of the literature led us to a synthesized definition of social justice that will be utilized throughout this paper: 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.

### Motivations

Developing social justice allies<sup>1</sup> is essential to creating social change (Edwards, 2006). Therefore, acquiring an understanding of the motivations to become social justice allies is important to effectively promote and create social change at the individual and institutional level.

**Self-interest.** In her study of what motivates members from privileged groups to become involved in social justice work, Goodman (2000) identified three main motivations: empathy, moral and spiritual values, and self-interest. Goodman (2000) broadly described self-interest on a continuum that ranges from a "very narrow, selfish perspective to a more inclusive, interdependent perspective" (p. 1072). For members of the dominant group, cultivating interdependent self-interest results

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that the words ally and advocate do not hold the same meaning, but we will use these two terms interchangeably due to how they appear in the literature. We use the term advocate to indicate an individual working toward social change, and an ally to indicate an individual from a dominant social group identity working towards creating social change in partnership with members of a targeted social group.

from understanding how systemic oppression harms not only marginalized groups but also the dominant group (Edwards, 2006; Goodman, 2000). Additionally, members of the dominant group seek to break free from the harm that their oppression creates and work towards their own liberation in becoming a better ally (Edwards, 2006).

**Aspiring ally identity development.** Edwards (2006) created a developmental model for aspiring social justice allies utilizing Helms' White racial identity development model. His model is a tool to understand the continuous process of ally development and to develop more effective allies. Edwards (2006) identified three types of allies: aspiring allies for self-interest, altruism, and social justice. Aspiring allies for self-interest are motivated to "protect those they care about from being hurt" (Edwards, 2006, p. 46). They intervene on specific acts of overt discrimination. However, they do not recognize that they are also contributing to and perpetuating the system of oppression on marginalized groups despite their good intentions.

With a growing awareness of privilege, guilt motivates aspiring allies for altruism. To manage (and minimize) their guilt, they see themselves as exceptional members of the dominant group and see other members of the dominant group as the "real perpetrators" of oppression (Edwards, 2006, p. 49). Because they view marginalized groups as victims of oppression, aspiring allies for altruism become paternalistic, which is counterproductive to allyship because they unconsciously "feed [their] own sense of power and privilege" (Edwards, 2006, p. 50). Additionally, they do not see how oppression also harms members of the dominant group.

Allies for social justice are motivated to work with members of marginalized groups to dismantle and end systems of oppression because they understand how oppression harms

both marginalized and dominant groups. Unlike allies for self-interest who are only allies to specific individuals, allies for social justice are allies to issues of oppression and see the interconnectedness of those oppressions. Similar to Goodman's interdependent self-interest perspective, these allies actively seek out critique to become better allies and to "illuminate their own oppressive socialization and privilege" (Edwards, 2006, p. 52) in the process of liberating themselves from their own internalized socialization. In conclusion, allies for social justice seek to bring justice in the interest of all.

### Competencies

Student affairs practitioners' knowledge, awareness, skills, and competencies inform their praxis. The ability to be critically reflective and to practice within a social justice framework requires multicultural competencies and continued opportunities to develop these competencies. Professional organizations within the field of student affairs set standards for multicultural competencies among their competency guidelines for the profession. The ACPA and NASPA Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards developed a competency guideline detailing "knowledge, skills, and in some cases, attitudes expected of student affairs practitioners" (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 3). In 2015, ACPA and NASPA revisited professional competencies of student affairs educators and reconceptualized the "equity, diversity, and inclusion" competency as "social justice and inclusion" (p. 4). This reconceptualization emphasizes the nature of social justice as goal and process oriented. Although the term diversity can tokenize nondominant groups and norm dominant ones, by adopting "social justice and inclusion" as the competency, ACPA and NASPA seek to disrupt this trend. The competency area highlights practitioners' recognition of their own agency and social responsibility. This reconceptualization orients intermediate and

advanced competency levels as demonstrating advocacy interconnected with leadership (ACPA & NASPA, 2015).

Pope and Reynolds (1997) created a framework for multicultural competency among student affairs practitioners by adopting an already existing model from counseling psychology. The authors predicted the field would become more competency-based and advocated for graduate preparation programs to develop multicultural competencies (Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Results of various studies based on Pope and Reynolds's model indicate that individuals perceive their level of competency as different based on their gender and racial/ethnic identity (Castellanos, Gloria, Mayorga, & Salas, 2007; King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Mueller & Pope, 2001). For example, participants of color reported higher levels of racial salience than White participants (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2003). These studies suggest multicultural competencies and praxis will vary based on student affairs educators' identities.

#### **Development of critical consciousness.**

Critical consciousness describes the process by which individuals' develop awareness of systems of power resulting from reflection and move towards social justice action (Freire, 1970). In a study on the development of university educators' critical consciousness, Landreman, Rasmussen, King, and Jiang (2007) suggested that advocacy occurs after awareness building, which describes the processes by which individuals' come to gain a greater familiarity with and knowledge of information. Phase I consists of exposure to diversity, experiencing a critical incident related to differences among people, self-reflection on the incident, and an "aha moment" that results from reflection (Landreman et al., 2007, p. 281). In Phase II, individuals continue to experience the processes in Phase I, engage in social justice action and coalition building, and establish intergroup relationships.

Student affairs practitioners' ability to adopt and act upon a social justice framework and praxis requires a particular level of competency. In fact, awareness competencies may instigate willingness to participate in social change. The competencies and praxis of student affairs professionals will vary based on their particular job functions, student populations they work with, and other factors.

**Tempered radicals.** The notion of tempered radicals is a tool for enacting organizational change (Meyerson, 2001). 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). Tempered radicals "want to rock the boat, and they want to stay in it" (Meyerson, 2001, p. xi). This framework may be one that is utilized by student affairs professionals with social justice motivations in enacting change and navigating their institutions and the field of student affairs.

#### **Student Affairs Professionals' Identities**

The shifting demographic of the student population has prompted student affairs professionals to create a campus climate that is more inclusive and accessible for marginalized student groups (Howard-Hamilton, 2000). ACPA and NASPA (1997) emphasized the importance of supportive and inclusive communities as a core principle for good practice in student affairs. Consequently, all student affairs professionals must be equipped and prepared to effectively address diversity issues (Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Pope & Reynolds, 1997). Fortunately, models exist to encourage and strengthen one's multicultural competencies (Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Howard-Ham-

ilton, Richardson, & Shuford, 1998; Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Watt, 2007). One such model is the privileged identity exploration (PIE) model. From her experience teaching homogenous groups of students with dominant identities, Watt (2007) created the PIE model as a tool to help student affairs practitioners “anticipate defensive behaviors and devise a strategy to prevent productive dialogue from being derailed” (p. 118). The model identifies eight defensive reactions that occur when people experience cognitive dissonance in regards to their privileged identities. People exhibit these modes, which are motivated by fear and entitlement, when recognizing, contemplating, or addressing their privileged identities.

Mueller and Pope (2001) conducted a study among White student affairs practitioners to examine the relationship between White racial consciousness and multicultural competence. Results of this study revealed a positive relationship between White racial consciousness and multicultural competence.

### Challenges for Enacting Social Justice in Student Affairs

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). The efficacy of such efforts has 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. For example,

in D'Andrea and Daniels's (2007) case study, the authors received complaints from other faculty and staff stating “displeasure about the ways” (p. 175) the authors addressed social justice issues.

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. As one example, Dr. Andrea Dre Domingue's blog post for the ACPA Commission for Social Justice Educators (2014) discussed navigating student affairs career pathways 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 in particular “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). Research exploring the career choices of students of color in student affairs programs also describes how 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).

## Methodology

We investigated how student affairs professionals with a social justice motivation navigated the field of student affairs using responses from interviews conducted with six entry- and midlevel student affairs practitioners.

### Sampling Procedures

Convenience sampling procedures were utilized as participants were identified by the researchers among colleagues and supervisors from previous institutions. Purposeful

sampling allowed researchers to ensure participants had social justice motivations and praxis. Some of the participants were professionals who had helped the researchers conceptualize their own social justice motivations and develop their own praxis. The trust and understanding embedded in prior relationships between researchers and participants were crucial to fostering earnest discussion of sensitive and personal content within the interviews. Additionally, researchers employed a purposeful sample of people from diverse personal and professional backgrounds (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

**Participants**

The table below provides a breakdown of

self-identified participant demographics and roles within student affairs, using pseudonyms to identify participants. Of our six participants, five of the participants identified as women and one identified as masculine. There were two White participants, one South Asian participant, one Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA), one Black participant, and one bicultural participant. Additionally, a variety of institutional types was represented: public research universities, private religious colleges, and mid-sized comprehensive institutions. Participants worked in functional areas such as orientation, residence life, union programming, career services, and cultural centers (Table 1).

Table 1  
*Participant Information*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Salient Identities</b>	<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Functional Area</b>	<b>Gender Pronouns</b>
Virginia	Queer, cisgender woman, White, agnostic	Public research	Orientation	she/her/hers
Deepika	South Asian, cisgender, femme woman	Private Jesuit	Residence life	she/her/hers
Allie	White, woman, mother	Public research	Multicultural union programming	she/her/hers
Mabel	Bicultural, heterosexual, cisgender, woman	Mid-sized comprehensive	Career services	she/her/hers
Glen	APIA genderqueer male, 2nd generation APIA, young professional, masculine, agnostic atheist essentialist, person of color	Public research	Cultural center	they/them/theirs
Regena	Black woman, person of religion, mentor, wife, mother, sister, student affairs and multicultural affairs professional	Public research	Cultural center	she/her/hers

### Data Collection

Interviews were approximately one-hour long and took place via phone, Skype, or Google Hangouts. Six semistructured interviews were used to understand why and how student affairs professionals act as social justice advocates in the field, as well as to understand barriers and challenges to doing so. Interviews contained 15 questions that were open-ended to allow participants to share detailed responses that reflected their understanding of their social justice motivations and praxis. Participants were also given an opportunity to share any salient information they felt was not covered in the interview.

### Data Analysis

We utilized a grounded theory approach to analyze the interview data. Grounded theory analysis provides “a way into understanding meaning in your data” and allows for exploring an area where little research has been conducted (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 395). “Inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories that emerge” (Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009, p. 1269). For this analysis process, we utilized three different types of coding: open, axial, and categorical. Analysis began with a close reading of the interview data and a line-by-line analysis to create open codes that “assign[ed] words to segments of text” (Hesse-Biber, 2013, p. 395). Axial codes were generated that sorted open codes in a new way and then categories were generated, which condensed the data. Researchers discussed each set of codes after each type of code was generated. To qualify as a category, at least three of the participants had to include the concept in their responses and all three researchers had to identify the concept in their analysis. These categories were then grouped into nine themes.

### Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small sample size. Although representing several different social identities, geographic regions, and functional areas, the study participants are not representative of the diversity of experiences present in the student affairs field. Additionally, five of the six participants identified as women, and although not specifically a limitation, gendered perspectives may have influenced the data. Using convenient and purposeful sampling for our participant population may also present a limitation, although it also helped the researchers establish trust and rapport with the participants, allowing for richer data collection. Furthermore, the sample size and qualitative nature of the research 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.

## Results

We begin this section with a discussion of participants’ definitions of social justice in order to frame the following analysis. We then include participants’ motivations for social justice advocacy. Finally, the major themes we identified that relate to our second research question were (a) continual learning and educating for themselves and others; (b) intentional praxis; (c) challenges faced in their advocacy; (d) relationships; and (e) self-care.

### Defining Social Justice

Participants were first asked to define social justice to understand their conceptualization of the term. In response to this question and throughout the interviews, participants identified definitions of social justice as a lens, a process, genuine equality, and inclusivity. Social justice goals included equitable outcomes,

equitable access, justice for marginalized individuals, and antioppression. Virginia explained that striving for equitable outcomes requires “creating an environment where everyone has equal opportunities, even if that means offering certain groups more support.” Glen distinguished between equity and equality: equity includes equality of opportunity and of outcome. Participants also identified equitable access for all people, regardless of their social identities, as a goal of social justice. They continued to define social justice as justice within society for marginalized individuals and those who do not have the same social and cultural capital as privileged individuals. Social justice is working toward equity in ways that are antioppressive 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. As Deepika described, social justice is a “lens through which I am constantly analyzing what is equitable for a situation or for a student.” Participants, such as Deepika, also described social justice as a process of “unlearn[ing] dominant culture” 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. Allie emphasized the ongoing nature of the process of social justice: although students who attend some educational programs may be seen as “the choir” who is already knowledgeable about issues of equity and inclusion, “the choir needs practicing.”

Regena explained that the value of social justice work is about quality, not quantity, and should be evaluated by “the connections we’re making, who we’re touching, and how we’re changing the conversation within communities.” Multiple participants identified allyship as an important aspect of social justice and

went on to stress that there was no perfect ally or advocate. Finally, participants included relationships in their understanding of social justice, particularly that social justice work is about helping students find community and feel affirmed in their identities.

### Social Justice Advocacy Motivations

There were four major categories regarding participants’ motivations for social justice advocacy: (a) privilege, (b) involvement and exposure to social justice concepts, (c) a desire for change, and (d) values.

**Privilege.** Participants identified privilege, specifically their own privilege, the lack of privilege others have, and the lack of privilege they have, as motivations for their social justice advocacy. Allie discussed her White son and the privileges he is granted in society; she does not want him to grow up ignorant of these privileges. Allie’s identity as a mom and the privilege she and her family have as White people motivates her to be a social justice advocate within the field of student affairs. White participants also emphasized that they are motivated to be social justice advocates because people, including students of color, challenge them on their privilege. Several participants mentioned they were motivated by the lack of privilege other people in their life had and the disparities they witness on a daily basis. A personal lack of privilege also motivated participants to act as social justice advocates. Glen explained the influence of not seeing themselves represented in the media when they were growing up and the racism they witnessed in the media in becoming a social justice advocate; the “personal buy-in” is an important motivator.

**Involvement and exposure.** Participants’ social justice motivations originated from their involvement in and exposure to social justice driven organizations and values. These experiences motivated participants’ desire “to be an

active participant” (Deepika) in social justice advocacy. During their undergraduate careers, these opportunities included LGBTQ student organizations, work as a resident assistant, participation in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP), and a woman of color leadership group. Exposure to issues regarding oppression, identities, and discrimination in college was common among the participants and often unintentional. As Virginia expressed, many participants “fell into” social justice work. In her postcollegiate experiences, Regena first worked in human resources, and her work helped her realize that she wanted to provide people access to information.

Graduate programs had an influence on participants’ motivations. Mabel mentioned her graduate assistantship in the Gay Lesbian Transgender Bisexual and Ally Resource Center at her institution as a primary motivator for continuing social justice advocacy in her student affairs career. Faculty in Allie’s graduate program were engaged in work around White privilege and White identity within student development theory, which motivated her to gain a greater understanding of privilege.

**Desire for change.** A desire for social change motivated participants’ social justice advocacy within student affairs. Participants explained that they wanted to improve the student climate and student experience at their institutions, continue education and advocacy around social justice issues, and develop systems of change. Multiple participants expressed the sentiment that no one else would do social justice work if they did not, which is a primary motivation to continue their efforts. Participants’ desires for change were also rooted in their values and philosophical beliefs.

**Values and philosophical beliefs.** Finally, participants highlighted the importance of their personal values and philosophical beliefs as motivators for their social justice advocacy. Glen explained, “It helps to have theoretical

underpinnings for why I’m doing this work.” Regena framed her work as an important aspect of her authenticity to herself and her values. Deepika attended a Jesuit university where social justice is a part of the values of the institution. She sees social justice as a key aspect of her spiritual beliefs, explaining that

God has put you on earth to share your gifts and talents and give back to the world . . . I have certain gifts and talents to be able to understand social justice and create spaces where folks can grow . . . and advocate for those that can’t.

### Learning and Educating

Participants discussed the importance of educating themselves, stakeholders, and students to encourage continuous learning and to become better social justice advocates. Lack of education can be a challenge to social justice advocacy. Virginia expressed that student affairs is a field that wants to be social justice minded but sometimes falters because of the lack of education and the people within it. Deepika shared that individuals often respond in reaction to incidents while lacking the knowledge and skills necessary.

**Self-educating.** Participants expressed that to keep social justice at the forefront of their work, educating oneself should become a regular practice. Deepika and Virginia suggested attending conferences and other professional development opportunities to re-energize and refocus the work they do, as well as challenge them to become better student affairs professionals. During her first year as a full-time professional, Deepika attended the Social Justice Training Institute, a multiday learning experience for diversity trainers and practitioners to develop and strengthen their multicultural competencies (Social Justice Training Institute, 2016). She continues to connect and share stories with the people she met there. Glen, Virginia, and Mabel take a proactive approach to their work and are actively educating themselves by keeping abreast of current issues

and the literature. Glen stated, understanding rhetoric and how things are framed [is crucial] to effectively communicate your message and adapt it to different audiences and their values to find common ground and opportunities to bring folks into the fold.

In the process of learning, Allie believes that people are going to make mistakes. However, owning those mistakes and learning from them enables one to move forward. All participants stated that continued self-awareness, self-education, and advocacy are how professionals become better social justice advocates.

**Educating stakeholders.** Student affairs professionals are educating their colleagues and stakeholders about social inequities students are facing. Mabel found ways to educate employers and recruiters about students attending career fairs and interviews without wearing professional dress. Virginia discovered that people were not intentionally anti-social justice, but rather, people were just not educated about social justice work and, consequently, its effect on students. Virginia suggested helping people learn in a noncondescending way.

**Educating students.** All participants agreed that students should be educated about social justice. Educating students about social justice begins with students learning about their social identities and the power they have as students. Mabel stressed the importance of understanding why student affairs professionals need to educate students on how to “work through systems to be successful to gain access to good employment after graduation” as well as how to access some of these systems. Allie discussed engaging students in different ways, such as taking student learning outside the classroom, to encourage students to discuss and reflect on these issues in a variety of settings. For Glen, as an undergraduate resident advisor, their training was infused with social justice training by the Office of Multicultural

Education. Glen challenges students “to consider all the gaps in what we don’t know [and] the student populations we aren’t serving.”

**Student identities.** Training students to do social justice work begins with providing opportunities to learn about their identities and the power dynamics associated with those identities. Virginia emphasized the importance of acknowledging students—who they are and where they are in their learning—to determine where to begin in educational conversations with students on social justice issues. Allie works at a predominantly White institution and assists students from privileged backgrounds to understand their identities. Allie has found it helpful to have students on her staff who have a multitude of identities, more specifically, students who sometimes look like the majority, to affect change. Participants found ways to prepare students for what they will face by providing a balance of challenge and support in understanding their identities.

**Student power.** Glen and Regena highlighted how powerful a role students can have in creating change. Unfortunately, Glen believes students are not always aware of how much power they hold, including their voice and the change they could affect in student government. Regena discussed the importance of preparing students to understand the power they have and to support them in implementing change. She believes that educating students and advocating for them are inseparable. Glen suggested teaching students organizing tactics and encouraging students to challenge the status quo. Additionally, understanding one’s positional role as a student affairs professional is important to understanding the power dynamic between professionals and students.

### Praxis

Categories identified regarding participants’ social justice praxis include disseminating information; programming; recruiting, hiring,

and training; multicultural competence; self-perception; and self-reflection.

**Disseminating information.** Multiple participants emphasized communicating social justice concepts as an important component to their praxis. Participants shared strategies on giving presentations, communicating with coworkers, and developing messages. When presenting career workshops for students, Mabel is mindful of the information she is presenting, tweaks it accordingly, and deliberately chooses images for PowerPoint presentations that indicate structural diversity<sup>2</sup>. Allie shared that as a professional in charge of coordinating and presenting diversity trainings, she is often seen as an “expert” and that equity and social justice work is not also a part of others’ jobs. She responds by asking questions that tie social justice to issues not explicitly related to social justice or diversity. She also often verbally questions and challenges the process of who is and is not at the decision-making table.

**Programming.** Participants discussed integrating social justice praxis into their programming models. Virginia, who works in Orientation, discussed developing an equitable orientation program. As an auxiliary unit, her institution charges students an orientation fee. To create a financially equitable orientation, their program waives fees for undocumented students and provides transportation for low-income students who qualify for Pell Grants. Virginia also emphasized collaborative programming to create inclusive programs: she worked with her institution’s Gender Equity Center to make orientation more trans inclusive. This collaboration resulted in mixed-gender housing for the orientation overnight stay in the residence halls. Deepika noted that programming is in her locus of control. As a hall director, she sets expectations for programming in the halls and models programs that contain social justice education. Allie

discussed scaling social justice programming to create some entry-level diversity programs and other more in-depth dialogue and discussion-based programs. Allie described how “fun” entry-level programs with food, dance, or crafts can engage students who otherwise would not attend an event while teaching them about culture and encouraging them to become more involved.

**Recruiting, hiring, and training.** Three participants reflected on their hiring and employment practices. Virginia noted the importance of representing the structural diversity of her institution through hiring so that orientation participants “can see someone who is similar and has a similar background when they are sitting in the audience.” Allie shared that when hiring students, she looks for those with dominant and subordinated identities who can speak both to privilege and to marginalization when educating their peers. Deepika shared the importance of including social justice as an integral part of undergraduate and graduate student employee training. Allie added a suggestion of making required diversity trainings very explicitly tied to the employees’ work and keeping trainings updated and relevant.

**Multicultural competence.** Participants noted that maintaining awareness and knowledge about social justice issues are important to their praxis. Virginia emphasized the importance of using professional development opportunities, such as attending conferences, to develop knowledge of social justice issues and not always knowledge of her functional area. Mabel shared the importance of getting involved on campus to maintain awareness of social justice as important, especially as new professionals try to navigate new jobs, new identities of professionalism, and new coworkers.

The participants also noted the importance

<sup>2</sup> Structural diversity refers to the representation of different racial/ethnic groups (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen, 1998). Mabel uses PowerPoint images that reflect the variety of social identities of the students she works with.

of skills in their praxis. Deepika described the difficulty of being a new professional and not having all the tools at the table. She also emphasized the importance of using data and assessment to justify her work and that practitioners who do not have data and assessment tools need to develop them. Glen highlighted the importance of developing and using facilitation skills. Multiple participants discussed the importance of navigating politics. Virginia expressed the experiential nature of developing political skills, noting that developing the skill of navigating politics comes from observation and personal experience. Mabel shared her own personal difficulty in navigating politics and sometimes feeling “icky” about the process even as the outcome created a better but not ideal situation. Multiple participants emphasized the need to be strategic with their goals by being politically savvy and through relationships with others.

**Self-perception and self-expression.** Through the interviews, participants shared how self-expression and self-perception underline their praxis. Glen emphasized the need to be conscious of their identity while interacting with others. Allie examined how as a White woman, White people are often more willing to engage with her on topics of race than they would be with people of color. Deepika came to the realization that social justice advocates “can’t ask for permission to do social justice work.”

Allie and Mabel both emphasized the importance of recognizing that advocates are always going to make mistakes. Mabel noted that people need to separate their mistakes from their self-worth. She shared that the guilt people feel after making a mistake is often a useless emotion, although not invalid. Guilt does not propel change, rather it recenters attention away from the victim and deflects responsibility for participation in oppressive systems. Instead, she suggested that it is important to learn from mistakes and acknowledge responsibility for acting in ways that are racist, sexist,

and heterosexist.

**Reflection.** Allie shared the importance of reflecting on when she was triggered or triggered others in her praxis. Allie used the word trigger to describe an intense and often unexpected emotional response to an action or comment that may include anger, fear, pain, or sadness (Obear, 2007). She ties reflection to accountability and uses it to hold herself accountable for future action. Other participants also used reflection as a tool to continually improve their practice and consider the competencies and knowledge they needed to gain.

### Challenges

Participants described many challenges to their social justice advocacy. These challenges include power dynamics and institutional systems, engaging students, an “aesthetic” of social justice, funding and quantifying initiatives, and perceptions of others.

#### Power dynamics and institutional systems.

Glen discussed the challenge of navigating power dynamics, especially in regards to positional power, and the lack of discussion around power dynamics. Furthermore, at predominantly White institutions that want to incorporate social justice and inclusion work, a challenge is the dominant framework of White, liberal multiculturalism. Glen explained that this framework “treats different social identities as incidental parts of a student’s identity [and is] completely divorced from power analysis.” A power analysis of identity helps students understand how their identities, both dominant and subordinate, enable them to have access to power and resources (or lack thereof). As a result, creating truly meaningful change is difficult when people are uncomfortable discussing power dynamics, as Glen mentioned.

Mabel shared that the biggest challenge she experiences is the larger institutional systems

that are set up not to provide equitable access. These institutional systems have policies that make the process of creating change difficult. She provided an example regarding recruiting and hiring processes: the dearth of diverse applicants is not because of a lack of possible candidates but is due to the method of advertising for recruitment.

**Engaging students.** A challenge of this work is attracting more students to do social justice work. For Allie, when the same students continue to show up at programs, there is sometimes the false belief by students or professionals that they are too advanced to have these conversations. However, especially around social justice work, even those who engage frequently in social justice dialogues benefit from continued reflection and discussion.

**“Aesthetic” of social justice.** Deepika shared a challenge with the norms of social justice educator behavior, which she specifically named as the “aesthetic” of social justice. She discussed in-group language and other norms among social justice educators, which can seem elitist and alienate others. She emphasized that the norms that comprise this social justice “aesthetic” are not effective in the long term for changing the institutional climate or advancing goals.

**Funding and quantifying social justice.** Virginia and Glen emphasized the importance of funding, which is tied to the importance of and difficulty quantifying the purpose and outcomes of social justice initiatives to senior leadership, which Regena described. Glen found that multicultural offices at institutions are systematically underfunded. Virginia noted that the structure of her office being an auxiliary made funding a challenge. As an auxiliary, creating financially equitable programs becomes more difficult because the program must meet a bottom line to run the program.

**Perceptions of others.** One of the greatest shared challenges among participants regarded

the perceptions of others. Allie experienced the challenge of coworkers believing that because she is a “diversity person,” social justice is not a part of their work. Glen expressed the challenge of being pigeonholed as “the race guy” and the difficulty of advocating for hiring people of color when they were the only person of color on the search committee. Allie and Mabel both experienced the challenge of others perceiving them as the “political correctness police” and being unreceptive to their feedback. However, both Allie and Mabel recognize that when having conversations with White people about race, White people are more likely to hear them because they are White and, therefore, their voices are perceived as louder.

Deepika stated that she reflects constantly about what it means for her, with multiple marginalized identities, to be doing social justice work: she feels that it is often seen as her advocating on behalf of herself. She believes that identities are not barriers but that they do influence how people show up to social justice work and their capacities for doing the work. In addition, she explained, “There’s a way in which sometimes your identities and very existence is what’s questioned.” These examples emphasized the importance of student affairs professionals understanding their own identities and how their identities impact how they are perceived in their social justice advocacy.

## Relationships

There were two main relationships discussed by participants: support networks and colleagues.

**Support networks.** Participants’ support networks included classmates from graduate school, friends in the field of student affairs, and community members outside of the university. Both Allie and Glen shared the importance of forming relationships with people who challenge them so they can continue to learn

and not just feel comfortable with people of similar backgrounds. A support network also keeps participants accountable. Mabel shared moments when she screwed up with “people who are both part of [her] social justice circle” who held her accountable, rather than make herself feel better. Mabel stressed the importance of learning from those moments rather than feeling guilty.

Trust was an important element of participants’ support networks. Regena values people who are not in higher education but who have a social justice lens: “They get it. They understand the work and how hard it is.” Having a support community outside of student affairs was important to participants. Finding support networks with like-minded people and being surrounded by people who care about similar issues provided support for participants. Multiple participants joined groups that discussed current trends through articles, held book club meetings, or founded women of color reading groups.

**Relationships with colleagues.** Many participants emphasized the importance of establishing relationships with colleagues at their institution in order to be effective in their work. Virginia explained, “Once you have relationships with colleagues, you can push back on things.” She also described the need “to be able to come around a table and disagree in a productive way.” Although Allie is strategic in forming relationships, she still forms genuine relationships with colleagues. Glen explained that collaborating “with other offices in order to make programming more appealing to folks with intersecting identities” is another motivation for forming strong relationships with colleagues.

### Self-Care

Self-care techniques identified in interviews include “guard[ing] time seriously” (Deepika), setting aside time for yourself, engaging in

therapy, taking breaks, and using humor. Relationships were also a source of self-care: Allie has a partner and child who support her, Regena puts her family first to stay grounded, and Glen spends time with friends and communities of color. Many participants emphasized finding things that make them happy outside of work, such as hobbies, sports, exercise, or volunteering in the community. Virginia plays rugby and schedules practices so she has to leave work at 5:00 p.m., which promotes balance in her life. Avoiding burnout by creating boundaries is an important self-care technique, as identified by Virginia and Deepika.

Mabel explained the importance of focusing on the small changes that professionals can make in their sphere of influences rather than solely focusing on the barriers and challenges to larger change. Although Mabel and Allie mentioned disconnecting from social justice advocacy as a coping mechanism, Mabel explained the importance of not disconnecting completely as to not become apathetic. Self-advocacy was an important self-care technique identified by participants. New professionals have the challenge of figuring out how to make their voice heard without a great deal of resources and power.

## Discussion and Implications

### Definition of Social Justice

The definitions of social justice given by the student affairs professionals in the study align with the literature, primarily in the way their definitions 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, antioppression, and dismantling systems at multiple levels, which aligned with Hytten and Bettez’s (2011) description of justice-oriented citizens and Owen’s (2009) understanding of “diversity for equity.” The student affairs

professionals in the study all had a definition of social justice that worked for transformational change on a systemic level.

### Motivations

The experiences of the participants highlight that social justice motivations cannot necessarily be taught, but that exposure to issues and concepts underlying inequity and injustice are important for developing social justice motivations. Participants discussed the student organizations, leadership experiences, affinity spaces, graduate coursework, and professional work experiences that exposed them to issues of oppression and discrimination that ultimately led to their 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' explanations of their motivations for advocacy align with the social justice allyship frameworks of Goodman (2000) and Edwards (2006). Goodman describes self-interest, which includes selfish perspectives and interdependent perspectives, as a primary motivator for members from privileged groups to be involved with social justice work. Similarly, participants identified the privilege they held, the lack of privilege of others in their life, and the lack of privilege they possessed as motivating factors for their advocacy. When speaking of their definition of social justice and motivations for advocacy, 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.

### Advocacy and Identities

Although she understood the privilege associated with this statement, Allie explained how many White students felt "safe" engaging

in conversations about racial privilege and oppression with her because of her Whiteness. The privilege identity exploration model (Watt, 2007) can be a tool for professionals of color, as well as White professionals, to engage students in social justice dialogues and be prepared for potential defense reactions that may occur among dominant students.

Deepika continually reflects on what it means for her as an individual with multiple minoritized identities to be engaging in social justice advocacy. She often feels that her advocacy is interpreted as advocating on behalf of herself: as a woman of color, when Deepika fights against sexism or racism, some people view that advocacy as self-serving.

Participants had conflicting thoughts about the notion of "turning off" their social justice lenses. Regena described her social justice motivations as "all encompassing" and that they do not turn off when she leaves work. In contrast, Allie explained that "turning off" her social justice lens is an important aspect of her self-care. As a woman of color, Regena may not have the option of turning off her social justice lens.

### Graduate Education

Multiple participants discussed the lack of knowledge of and skills to disrupt social justice issues in the field of student affairs as a challenge to their social justice advocacy. Professionals also stated the importance of their graduate preparatory programs in learning about issues of oppression and privilege. In a study by Flowers (2003), only 74% of student affairs graduate programs included a diversity course. Although some graduate programs are including social justice issues in their curriculum, these courses may not necessarily be guided by specific, attainable learning outcomes or involve effective facilitation. Additionally, diversity courses may not directly correlate to increased knowledge, awareness, and skills to be a social justice advocate. To

counteract this issue, Flowers advocates for integrating issues of privilege and oppression into all student affairs curriculum. Faculty can engage students in research around social justice issues, as faculty in Allie's graduate program conducted research around White privilege and identity, which motivated her to learn more about her privilege and be a social justice advocate. Additionally, learning about different types of critical pedagogies such as Black and cultural/ethnic studies, women's studies, queer theory, and critical race theory (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011; Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007), is important to develop a social justice perspective.

### Praxis

Seeking effective praxis in navigating student affairs as a social justice advocate was a challenge shared among participants. Mabel shared the importance of getting involved on campus (having a physical presence) to maintain awareness of social justice as important, especially as new professionals try to navigate new jobs, new identities of professionalism, and new coworkers. The participants also noted the importance of skills in their praxis, which is one of the components of multicultural competence (Mueller and Pope, 2001). Deepika described the difficulty of being a new professional and not having all the tools at the table. Skills include educating students (e.g., how to be successful in their future careers while honoring their backgrounds and identities, how to be mindful of the delivery of the content as well as the content itself) and facilitating difficult conversations. Entry-level professionals interested in social justice may need to find volunteer opportunities to develop their skills including practicing facilitation skills because many positions will not have these opportunities as a formal job duty.

Entry-level student affairs professionals need to develop an awareness of social justice from their preparatory graduate programs to

prepare them to navigate their future work environments. Although not all student affairs professionals attend graduate programs in the field of higher education, there are other ways of engaging in praxis, including reading books and articles and attending conferences. Student affairs practitioners will need to continue their learning beyond their graduate programs and seek opportunities to develop skills in order to increase the effectiveness of their praxis.

### Tempered Radicals

Although none of our participants explicitly used the term tempered radical, our participants exhibited actions and perspectives that aligned with the tempered radical framework. 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 because those students will continue those conversations with their peers. In this way, small actions can influence larger change. Finally, Glen expressed learning how to "test, push, play, and perhaps break [the] rules, but in ways that won't lead to termination of job." Glen described purposeful negotiation of systemic rules while maintaining one's legitimacy within the institution. Because no one provided examples of other explicit strategies that align with 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. These strategies, as well as the overall framework of creating incremental change from within a system, are necessary for student affairs practitioners seeking to address institutional systems of power.

### Self-Care

All participants highlighted the need to practice self-care and to educate other social justice

advocates about self-care. Self-care is important because it prevents burnout and apathy. Unfortunately, Allie stated that student affairs professionals are not good about self-care; therefore, burnout is very typical. Participants shared the importance of physical distance and learning to establish boundaries as important in self-care. 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. However, Mabel cautioned not to detach completely to the point of apathy.

Self-care is also a way to heal. Regena and Deepika shared their experiences with therapy, which can be seen as a taboo in some communities. Regena believes that "those who are healers and givers also need to be healed and be given to," and people should not be ashamed. In new-employee orientations, student affairs divisions may consider providing resources listing counselors who accept employee health insurance. These different techniques reveal how social justice advocates seek self-care, how self-care varies among individuals with different identities, and how vital self-care is to sustaining social justice advocacy.

### 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; she learned about it when she witnessed politicking in her current job. 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 devel-

op relationships outside of their department and with mid- or high-level administrators whether through formal mentoring programs, committee work, or attending campus functions. Professional preparation programs should openly discuss the political climate of postsecondary education and how it affects entry- and midlevel student affairs professionals.

One participant shared that some colleagues in the field are neither politically savvy nor strategic. Therefore, they become ineffective in what they are doing and do not improve the climate for anyone, which can be challenging. Providing education, training, and dialogue about identity development and the intersections of those identities is a good start.

## Conclusion and Areas of Future Research

This study sought to examine the motivations of entry- and midlevel 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 professionals' 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 the 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 into the field of student affairs on the motivations of and strategies employed by student affairs professionals in their social justice advocacy.

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