Applied Critical Leadership: Centering Racial Justice and Decolonization in Professional Associations

Rachel E. Aho
University of Utah

Stephen John Quaye
Miami University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshesa
Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Applied Critical Leadership: Centering Racial Justice and Decolonization in Professional Associations

Cover Page Footnote
Rachel E. Aho is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership & Policy at the University of Utah and serves as the Associate Director for Administrative Services within Housing & Residential Education. Stephen John Quaye is a faculty member in the Student Affairs in Higher Education Program at Miami University. He is also the 2017-2018 President of ACPA: College Student Educators International and an Associate Editor of the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.

This article is available in Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs: https://ecommons.luc.edu/jcshea/vol3/iss3/2
Applied Critical Leadership: 
Centering Racial Justice and Decolonization in Professional Associations

By invoking an applied critical leadership framework among association leaders (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012), educators stand to oppose status-quo leadership within the field’s professional associations.

Institutions of higher education are sites of political and social contestation (Giroux & Giroux, 2004). With a history steeped in exclusion, segregation, political unrest, and glacial-paced progress, it is no surprise that educators within higher education continue to experience and illuminate issues, such as racism, colonization, and identity-based harm. The imperialistic “establishment of U.S. higher education is no surprise that educators within higher education continue to experience and illuminate issues, such as racism, colonization, and identity-based harm. The imperialistic “establishment of U.S. higher education is deeply rooted in racism/White supremacy, the vestiges of which remain palatable” (Patton-Davis, 2016, p. 317), particularly under the divisive realities of today’s presidential administration. The increasing familiarity of hate crimes, microaggressions, land acquisition, and identity-based violence on today’s college campuses reinforces the pervasive and persistent nature of racism and colonization in educational environments (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). These hegemonies and their systemic counterparts result in an abundance of deleterious effects for students, faculty/staff, and institutions alike (Carnvale & Strohl, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, S., Kelchen, R. & Houle, J., 2014; Hamer & Yang, 2015; Pollock, 2008; Shotton, Lowe, & Waterman, 2013; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Knowing this, leaders within higher education must prepare to meet these realities directly should they wish to succeed and serve the communities they lead.

Purpose
The purpose of this article is to explore what critical association leadership looks like using the authors’ own experience within ACPA-College Student Educators International, as we embarked on employing a Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization within the association beginning in 2016. As members of the association’s governing board and assembly leadership, both authors hold power and opportunity to employ critical leadership initiatives, each through their unique and varying social identities. As both a black, cisgender, straight, able-bodied man, and a white, cisgender, gay, able-bodied woman, our collective positionalities inform our employment as both a faculty member and practitioner, our understanding of critical association leadership.

Association Leadership and Priorities
To prepare students and staff for navigating diverse challenges, educators often rely on the direction, guidance, and thought leadership produced via professional associations. These associations serve as spaces for professional development, growth, and learning. They also shape the norms and practices within higher education by sponsoring seminal research, informing graduate preparation curricula (e.g., the use of the ACPA & NASPA professional competencies), and defining standards for successful practice (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015; Evans & Reason, 2001; Nuss, 1993). As such, those involved in professional associations play a crucial role in determining the priorities of higher education.

In the field of student affairs, these priorities have historically reflected a commitment to student learning, holistic student development, and student success. Fundamental, association-sponsored publications, including the The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937; American Council on Education, 1949), The Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1996), and Learning Reconsidered and Learning Reconsidered and Learning Reconsidered (Keeling, 2004; Keeling, 2006), enthusiastically support these pragmatic priorities and reinforce the consistent preparation and professionalization of student affairs professionals. While both important and necessary for informed and grounded practice, the priorities of higher education associations must broaden to address the present-day realities of racism and colonization.

Without a commitment to racial justice and decolonization, commitments to student learning, development, and success will only serve to perpetuate opportunity gaps and status quo learning environments within the academy.

This work has not been realized within educational practice and scholarship. Veritably, recent scholarship has affirmed the ways in which educational research has actively ignored, subverted, or reinforced the effects of dominant and oppressive ideologies (Harper, 2012; Patel, 2016). It is time to reimagine our commitments within higher education. As educators and scholars seek to meet the needs of an ever-diversifying student body, facing an ever-increasing barrage of settler-logic (Patel, 2016) and racialized harm, it is time for professional associations and those involved in these organizations to adopt a new and critical lens through which to view, sponsor, and advance research, practice, and priorities.

Although few research exists on the role of educators and their involvement in professional associations extending beyond historical accounts or the value involvement plays in socialization and career advancement (Chernow, Cooper, & Winston, 2003; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Young, 1993), we believe such settings are prime locations from which to explore the experiences and potential for critical association leadership. By invoking an applied critical leadership framework among association leaders (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012), educators stand to oppose status-quo leadership within the field’s professional associations. Rather than maintain business-as-usual approaches, association leaders can pivot away from passe practices, and instead, boldly advance strategic priorities addressing the exigent and harmful realities racism and colonization impact within campuses.

Rachel E. Aho
University of Utah

Stephen J. Quaye
Miami University
and the ways in which we lead. Our commitment to ACPA spans over 25 combined-years of membership and affirms our belief in the potential of the association to enact social change and impact the field of higher education.

By centering racial justice, which we define as “reducing the oppression of communities of color at the intersections of their identities” (ACPAs, 2016, para. 1) and decolonization, that is, the “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 1), both authors attempt to shift organizational norms within association practices and employ strategies aligned with the emergent theory of critical applied leadership. We do so through broadening dialogues about racial healing and self-care, engaging the tensions surrounding education on whiteness, and unabashedly striving and self-care, engaging the tensions surrounding education on whiteness, and unabashedly striving to make use of these frameworks within their own association-based roles. We hope these conversations spur new ideas, thought leadership, and priorities within the field of higher education and its associations.

Overview of ACPA’s Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization

ACPAs: College Student Educators International is a professional organization that centers the needs of student affairs educators (I.e., those who work on college and university campuses in various co-curricular offices). The mission of ACPA is to center student learning through its programs, practices, and scholarship (ACPAs Mission, Vision, and Values, n.d.), its leadership structure is comprised of 12 Governing Board members and five Assembly members. The Board is comprised of a president (i.e., vice president, president, and past president), five Directors (i.e., equity and inclusion, external relations, membership, professional development, and student affairs), four member-at-large positions (i.e., faculty, entry-level, mid-level, senior-level), and the Executive Director (ACPA Governing Board, n.d.). The Governing Board provides direction for the association, correspondence to members on key policy and societal happenings, and assumes fiduciary responsibility for the association.

In November 2016, ACPAs Governing Board held a retreat in Washington, DC, to discuss key issues affecting the association and to build relationships among newly elected board members. With the help of an external facilitator, the Board identified and narrowed several core issues with which ACPA and its membership were grappling. Repeatedly, race and racism emerged. Many attendees expressed their beliefs that all people of color were hurting and fearful of their lives amid more visible police brutality directed toward black and brown bodies (e.g., Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Tamir Rice). These actions, combined with the rise of racist rhetoric and violence during the 2016 Presidential campaign, created an urgent need on our campuses and for our members. Student affairs educators and students needed immediate guidance and leadership to address these issues. Consequently, ACPAs Governing Board decided to center the experiences of people of color in the association and embarked on pursuing what we called the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice.

To ground this imperative and summarize its intent to members, ACPA and statement author, Dian Squire, released the below statement shortly after our retreat:

As educators and scholars seek to meet the needs of an ever-diversifying student body, facing ever-increasing harm, we can no longer view our professional participation through passive, ahistorical, career-serving, or environmentally neutral lenses.

ACPAs will direct resources, energy, and time toward addressing racial justice in student affairs and higher education around the world. Our lens is intersectional, intentional, and directed. The focus is on reducing the oppression of communities of color at the intersections of their identities, knowing that all oppressions are linked and that the work is ongoing. Our goal is to provide leading research and scholarship; tools for personal, professional, and career development; and innovative professional resources for members. We will actively inform and reshape higher education. We move toward this goal knowing that the roles and daily tasks of our jobs are important to the functioning of colleges and universities. We also know that racial justice and the tasks of our jobs do not sit as dichotomous poles. Racial justice is at our core; it underlies the work we each must do every day, in every way we can (ACPAs Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, 2016, para. 1).

Broadening the Imperative

The release of this statement propelled our commitment forward. With excitement and trepidation, we boldly named this commitment to our members, stakeholders, and the greater public. Little did we know that by doing so, our priorities would give way to an important and critical shift in the very nature of the Imperative. As Governing Board members, we naively believed each of our members had a race, and thus, everyone should see their fit within this Imperative even if race was not a salient identity for some of our members (e.g., white people). Yet, shortly after unveiling this new direction, we received feedback from several Native ACPA members indicating that racial justice did not fully capture or reflect their identities and experiences as Native Peoples.

Given the ways in which Native and First-Peoples have been colonized, these identities more often reflect a more complex, politicized, and liminal space, one that is not necessarily racialized (Brayboy, 2005). As a result of this feedback, we expanded the Imperative to be more inclusive of Native, Aboriginal, and First-Peoples’ experiences, thus resulting in our more aptly named Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization. The goal of ACPAs Imperative is to dismantle systems of oppression that impact people of color and Native Peoples and move toward racial justice and decolonizing practices that reflect more collaboration, non-hierarchy, and respect of different voices, knowledge, and positionalities. This work requires reflectivity, compassion, and an understanding of our own capacity to learn and grow. These themes, indicative of our own voices and stories as association leaders are shared below through the form of story as a means to illustrate the type of self-work and shifts that took place during the formation and implementation of ACPAs Imperative.

The below vignettes capture snapshots of the authors’ personal reflections and open-source voices from January 2017 to January 2018. These written accounts, while composed for the purposes of this article, represent the most salient individual, summative stories resulting from numerous in-person conversations, emails, conference calls, and text messages regarding ACPAs Imperative and its implementation. To give voice to our reflections within this piece, each author took turns writing the stories below by journaling, forward-
Stephen’s Story as ACPA President, 2017-18

“How could I have not known? I mean, how could I have not known? I feel so stupid, embarrassed, and alone. I feel ashamed. These four sentences reflect my internal self-talk following a conversation I had with an ACPA member who identifies as Native American where this person shared why racial justice does not reflect his experiences and how the Imperative was silencing his identity and history as Native. In an effort to understand, I asked this person to share more about his experiences and immediately felt guilty over asking someone to provide this labor for me. This person painstakingly took time to explain the historic colonization and politization among Native Peoples and suggested a reading for me to learn more. I left this conversation so down trodden, I also felt defensive. “My intent was not to leave out the experiences of Native folks. I just didn’t know. Didn’t this person know ME? Didn’t he understand my intent—that I am genuine and care and am a good person?” I exhibited so many of the feelings I often get frustrated by from my white colleagues and friends. Here I was, President of this organization, knowledgeable about racial issues, a seen expert, and yet, I did not deserve to be a President if I made such a blunder. I am often my harshest critic, and this experience only fomented my shame and self-worth. I blamed myself, isolated myself. Then, I had a conversation with a good friend and with the vice president and past president on the Governing Board, and processing helped me begin to lessen being so hard on myself, pick myself up, and determine how to act and move forward. This process began with forgiving myself and extending myself grace, the same grace that I extend to so many others in my spheres. Next, I worked to not own all of the pain of this particular person. This did not mean I did not accept my role in furthering his pain. And, some of his pain is tied to a long history that also extends beyond him. (p. 7)

Racism and colonization have informed the experience of all of us in higher education.

Advocacy and social change require us to work to dismantle racism and colonization in higher education.

Our Operational Truths

Following the revision of the Strategic Imperative to be inclusive of decolonization, we determined the need to develop some assumptions to guide our work. Our goal was not to engage in arguments or debates with colleagues about whether racism and colonization were real, but instead, to take these as the normal, everyday experiences of people of color and Native Peoples. As such, ACPA (2016) developed the following Operational Truths:

1. All forms of oppression are linked. Racist and colonizing practices are real, present, enduring, intersecting, and systemic forms of oppression.
2. Racism and colonization have informed the experience of all of us in higher education.
3. Advocacy and social change require us to work to dismantle racism and colonization in higher education.
4. We believe in and have hope for our individual capacity, desire, and drive to grow, learn, and change.

These operational truths, our guiding statement, and a unified commitment to advancing our Imperative pushed us forward and shifted our focus toward the enactment of these priorities. The work had only just begun.

Overview of Critical Leadership Perspectives

The above overview of ACPA’s Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization serves to contextualize and situate one example of what we will heretofore refer to as applied critical leadership. This work and the theoretical discussion that follows, is an imperfect, yet illustrative, example of the ways in which association leaders can make use of critical perspectives to realize their agency, question taken-for-granted practices, and lead in new ways in order to advance social change with professional associations.

At present, it is unlikely most leaders view their professional involvement through a critical perspective. And yet, the majority of educators pursue association involvement in some capacity throughout the course of their careers. As educators and scholars seek to meet the needs of an ever-diversifying student body, facing ever-increasing harm, we can no longer view our professional association participation through passive, ahistori cal, career-serving, or environmentally neutral lenses. Consequently, the below discussion offers a different perspective, pushing educators to view their involvement, leadership, and contributions to professional associations critically, and with an eye toward liberatory change.

An increasing number of frameworks exist from which to view leadership from a critical perspective (Dugan, 2017). A review of these frameworks is beyond the scope of this article, however, many characteristics within these frameworks, including those discussed in the forthcoming discussion. Indeed, our hope is that the below discussion, focused on applied critical leadership, offers readers new tools and considerations for practice. Readers are encouraged to use these concepts alongside presenting critical leadership theories, recognizing that the utilization of multiple frameworks is often most effective when instituting change (Dugan, 2017; Kezar, 2013).

Applied Critical Leadership

Applied critical leadership, as outlined by Santamaria and Santamaria (2012), is an emergent theoretical framework through which leaders can view their involvement and leadership in professional associations. The framework is built upon the theoretical foundations and principles found within transformational leadership and critical pedagogy as viewed through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and/or Tribal Critical Race Theory (Tribal Crit). The framework is defined by Santamaria and Santamaria (2012) as a “strengths-based model of leadership practice where educational leaders consider the social context of their educational communities and empower individual members of their communities to question the educational leaders’ identities as perceived through a CRT lens” (p. 5). Characteristics inherent in this framework include a leader’s willingness to engage in critical conversations, lead in unconventional or new ways, honor all members of their constituency, make empirical contributions and add authentic research-based information to academic discourse about underserved groups, and use consensus-building as a preferred strategy for decision-making (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). The theoretical frameworks (i.e., transformational leadership, critical pedagogy, CRT) informing applied critical leadership can be found below in Figure 1.1.

These frameworks, explored in greater detail below, guide and underlie the practice of critical applied leadership. The resulting outcome of adopting this perspective is described more fully by Santamaria and Santamaria (2012).

This conceptualization pushes educational leaders’ thinking about leadership for social justice toward thinking about leadership practice as viewed through the lens of critical race theory. This “thinking” about leadership practice will eventually result in applied critical leadership. Applied critical leadership is the emancipatory practice of choosing to address educational issues and challenges using a critical race perspective to enact context-specific adaptations. Applied critical leadership pushes educators to situate educational leadership practices within the larger context of historical, social, and political forces. Applied critical leadership is premised on applying critical race principles and critical pedagogical practice to influence our professional practice (Moll et al., 2006).

To begin our own “thinking” about critical applied leadership and extend these concepts within the
context of ACPA's Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, we start by reflecting on our experiences by means of exploring key principles of transformational leadership, critical pedagogy, and CRT/Tribal Crit.

Exploring Principles of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is driven by key principles relating to a leader’s ability to engage and empower people to go above and beyond within their organizations or institutions. This kind of leadership requires leaders to role model the behaviors they seek among their membership, maintain a focus on the redistribution of power, prioritize transparency in their leadership, and focus on educational change (Bass, 1985; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). This approach to leadership is inspiring, collaborative, and supportive. "To this end, transformational leadership has a moral imperative wherein leaders aim to destroy old ways of life to make ways for new ways of life, while articulating vision and values to keep empowered followers on a unified path" (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012, p. 3).

The below dialogue explores principles of transformational leadership within the context of ACPA’s early adoption of the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization:

ACPA connections (Rachel). After the Governing Board decided to adopt the Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, I was left with many questions about what came next. What did racial justice and decolonization look like in ACPA? Did we have resources to support this work? What types of work should be prioritized? How should we share this with our members? And most importantly, where did we start? I felt energized and inspired by what I believed to be a necessary change within our association and at the same time unsure of the steps to come. I knew that as an association, we had a monumental task ahead of us. We were centering something new and different, making a commitment to our mission, vision, and values. The nuances of communicating ACPA’s Imperative, nonetheless, modeling this work would be complicated and would doubt require time, effort, and patience.

If we expected our members and entity groups to work towards racial justice and decolonization, I knew it was critical for us to model the way. Yet, as a young, white, gay, cis-gender woman serving this association, I felt almost at a loss about how to begin. I just knew I had to do something. “Doing something” became my mantra of sorts as we moved into the first few months of implementing this imperative. I volunteered to craft timelines, joined reading groups, and facilitated focus-groups at our annual convention. I tried to say yes to as much as I could. I knew I couldn’t sit back. I had to do something.

Little did I know this would also become my mantra when working with ACPA members, particularly white members, as they struggled with similar questions about what to do? The Imperative urged members to act, and yet, many white members didn’t know (and still don’t know) where to start. They wanted a checklist, a roadmap, a guide, and expectations. I’ll admit, I wanted these, too; yet I knew they didn’t exist. If they did, we would have solved racism and colonization a long time ago (or at least I hope so).

As a board, we began to name this tension, remaining transparent in our thinking, communications, and conversations. We needed to be unified and remain clear about our intentions. While a step-by-step guide to racial justice and decolonization didn’t exist, we believed action and progress were possible. The Imperative, as written, called us to act, urged us to act, and will to us act. We simply needed to start by doing something. Naming race. Talking about it. Reading about decolonization. Show up for a webinar. Something.

ACPA connections (Stephen). As vice president and then president of ACPA as we moved this Imperative forward, I felt an immense pressure to get it right. I knew that given my blackness, folks would be looking at me for the answers. And I felt this immense pressure to not mess up, knowing that the stakes were high. If I messed up, it would give the resisters evidence to prove that this Imperative was flawed from the beginning. As a communique and messaging matter, I poured over every word, making sure the message was clear, error-free, and perfect. I felt scared, sometimes immobile, and unsure of what moving forward meant. And yet, I knew we had to do something, like Rachel suggested. For me, doing something meant sharing vulnerably and embracing the messiness and messing up. It meant owning my mistakes, modeling the way, and still engaging even in the face of uncertainty. It also meant being transparent with members that we are working to figure out the Imperative, don’t have all the answers, and yet, invite them to engage within their own circles and spheres. It also meant being honest about missteps and working to engage and do differently the next time.

ACPA connections (Rachel). This process is messy, and there is no infallible path forward. I agree. To push past ambiguity, fear, and anxiety requires vulnerably stepping forward not always knowing what lies ahead. In doing so, our boldness and actions resist the status quo. While demanding and taxing, particularly for our members of color and Native members, I appreciate how often I see myself and others come back to the table to re-engage, reimagine, and reinforce our original commitments.

Each time one of our members calls to question a process, shares a new resource, or thinks differently about how to carry out an annual task under the Imperative, I find myself encouraged and empowered to take another step. Modeling the way and ushering forward change are not static events within critical association leadership, rather they are ongoing and require time, energy, and risk-taking. Creating something new and reimagining new ways of doing are collective tasks that necessitate individual engagement from the broadest cross-sections of our communities. Thus, to lead in transformational ways, we cannot go at this alone. We all must do something.

Exploring Practices of Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is set upon the belief that education can be liberatory and emancipatory. These concepts, reflective of Paulo Freire’s (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed, support the idea that education can give rise to a critical consciousness and disrupt structures of domination. Within educational settings, Giroux noted: “critical pedagogy is concerned with restructurings traditional relationships in learning com-

To push past ambiguity, fear, and anxiety requires vulnerably stepping forward not always knowing what lies ahead. In doing so, our boldness and actions resist the status quo.

munities to a point where new knowledge, grounded in collective experiences of teaching and learning community members, is produced through meaningful dialogue” (as cited in Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012, p. 4). Both critical pedagogy and transformational leadership attend to the value of collaborative relationships, social context, and the redistribution of power.

The below dialogue explores practices of critical pedagogy within the context of ACPA’s Governing Board Retreat in November 2016 (during which the Imperative was initially created) and ACPA’s July 2017 Leadership Meeting (during which the Imperative was shared with all ACPA entity leaders):

ACPA connections (Stephen). We began this dialogue at the aforementioned November 2016 retreat. In this space, we engaged fully, authentically, and even sometimes cautiously. We had not built trust with each other yet, and so we stumbled, were silent, and unsure of what to say at times. Some people left the space full of emotion and needing to reflect on their thoughts, and yet we continued in the messiness. Dialogue was such a central component of our process. We had to resist the urge to be right and view others as wrong. We needed to seek new understanding about this Imperative and embrace new language. It was risky to announce this new Imperative to members, for fear of immediate critiques or getting it wrong. And yet, we needed to think differently about...
how we related to each other and model that. We were concerned with fundamentally reshaping society to be more inclusive of people of color and Native Peoples. As such, we needed to engage with each other first and build that trust.

ACPA connections (Rachel). After our November re-treat, I knew that our conversations had only just begun. Before all other things, we engaged in dialogue. Rather than create point action plans, talk about assessing our success, or ruminating about whether or not this was the "right" moment would be an understatement. If we didn’t even take the time to dedicate our focus and situating our understanding of the work to come. We believed in the endemic nature of racism and colonization, its harmful impact on higher education, and our capacity to enact change.

It was not until later that I realized these truths so closely reflected principles within CRT and Tribal Crit. Despite my naivete at the time, I'm glad they did. This further grounded my understanding, gave credence to the collective understanding of our organization, and alerted me to the tools available to me as I shifted from "doing something," to determining what “something” could matter most.

As a white educator, I have a choice about whether or not to adopt a CRT and Tribal Crit lens. And yet, my involvement in ACPA has reminded me of the necessity of making this choice. As such, I know it is critical for me to revisit, reflect, and uplift the stories, voices, and truths reflective of these theories. To do otherwise, is to relinquish my agency and accept the status quo. I would rather align myself with change.

ACPA connections (Stephen). Stories, stories, so many stories. Stories of pain, of hurt, of violence, of vulnerability. Stories of living in bodies viewed as dangerous, as hypervisible, and even as invisible. Rachel mentioned hearing stories — so many stories. How could I not hear stories of my own stories? I needed to hear stories of those with whom I am less familiar — in this case, stories from our Native members. Tribal Crit and CRT are not just theories. Stories are theoretical and vice versa. These theories developed out of a need to hear stories that are often not heard in our white, supremacist, patriarchal, colonialist culture.

As a black person, I, too, have a choice about whether or
not to adopt a Tribal Crit lens. I can choose to center only my blackness and not see my other dominant identities as a cisgender, straight, educated, able-bodied person. The times I have done that, though, I have fallen short of what a decolonizing, intersectional lens means. And so, I push myself to move beyond my lack of knowledge and learn. I move from my awareness to action. In the hearing of stories and doing something with those stories, I honor the labor of the storytellers.

ACPAs connections (Rachel). What do I do with the stories that others so graciously and bravely shared? Much like Stephen, I also asked myself what I needed to do in order to honor these stories and the unpaid labor that so often accompanied them? Surely, it would be easier to simply listen, nod my head, and then move on, but moving on in this circumstance moving back to the way things always had been done and reinforcing the oppressive forces I sought to resist. As an aspiring critical leader within our association I committed myself to leading differently, speaking differently, behaving differently, and engaging differently in my role. I wanted to employ an applied critical leadership lens to my work and choose change. So instead of simply nodding and smiling, I chose instead to raise questions, read outside my white-washed bookshelf, investigate new topics within my doctoral research, put forward new policies within my professional practice, and make way for ACPAs Strategic Imperative to take up space within my day to day life. Alongside the work of many others in ACPA, I aim to address what has long been pushed aside in the history of our scholarship and practice. Instead, I aim to center racial justice and decolonization, as a way to advance social justice, equity, and new possibilities for practice. To those of you reading...I ask you to join me. I ask you to join us.

Putting it All Together

The above dialogue offers a deconstructive demonstration of applied critical leaderships three underlying frameworks (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012). While separated in text for ease of understanding and alignment with the applied critical leadership model, the interplay among transformative leadership principles and critical pedagogy practices as viewed through a CRT/Tribal Crit lens were very much interwoven throughout each of these experiences. As authors, we could have explored any of our stories through all three frameworks, and our hope is that through our conversational progression, readers can also identify the intentionally blurred, co-constructed nature of these pieces. The resulting outcome, as seen through our examples, re-emphasize the key characteristics of applied critical leadership, including a willingness to engage in critical conversations, lead in innovative new ways, honor members of their constituency, make empirical contributions, and lead by example through the strengths of our social identities and positionalities (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2012).

Critiques of Applied Critical Leadership

Adopting an applied critical leadership framework necessitates that people maximize opportunities for change and take risks to advance principles of social justice. In addition to the characteristics highlighted above, Santamaria and Santamaria (2012) also encourage leaders to build trust with resistant constituents, engage in interest convergence through consensus-building, and remain conscious of fulfilling identity-based stereotypes. Such recommendations, while not without their merit in particular situations, may lean too heavily on satisfying white constituents and unfairly imply that the impetus for change rests more squarely on the labor and efforts of people of color and Native Peoples. Although Santamaria and Santamaria address this concern by stating that leadership efforts should be shared, perhaps the call for white professionals to enact critical leadership within their work is not strong enough. Thus, our assumption is that such efforts for critical applied leadership be enacted, in full, by all professional association leaders. We provide implications and recommendations for practice for doing so below.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

As noted within this article, it is impossible to compile a step-by-step guide that wholly captures the work of racial justice and decolonization in professional associations, and yet, this work is needed now more than ever. The effects of racism and colonization continue to persist and their harmful impacts are impressed upon students, faculty, and staff members. ACPAs Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization represents a powerful call to reframe and recognize the centrality of racism and settler colonialism in higher education, and to work toward restorative and transformative justice in its academic, and educational profession (Poon, 2018, p. 18). As leaders in higher education, and involved members of higher education associations, we must prepare to address these realities and demonstrate applied critical leadership.

The work of racial justice and decolonization is broad, ongoing, multifaceted, and situated amid the overlapping spheres of our sociopolitical contexts and identities. While numerous opportunities exist for future educators and engaged leaders to enact their association involvement differently.

Our professional associations are sites of opportunity whereby possibility exists to alter human probabilities (Katznelson, 2017, p. 184). Whether involvement takes place as a conference attendee, committee member, fundraiser, volunteer, presenter, discussant, or board member, each role affords professionals with some agency for change. The unique and diverse ways in which association involvement takes place allows for leaders to advance racial justice and decolonization through a variety of pathways, to alter probabilities, and advance justice. While power and dominance undoubtedly show up in professional association work, we assert the belief that each person has power to recognize their agency via applied critical leadership in some way. Whether done by choosing to engage in critical dialogue, name racism and colonization when it appears in association practices, revisit conference keynotes to lift up new voices, submit a program that views practice through a CRT/Tribal Crit lens, secure funding to sponsor scholarship around racial justice and decolonization, or advance board level conversations to center racial justice and decolonization at the association-wide level, we urge professionals to choose something. Do something that matters, do something that disrupts the status quo, do something that reals the priorities of our field with the realities of our world, and that gives way to new and more just practices. Do that kind of something.

*References: Can be found at the end of this special issue.

Suggested Citation: