

2016

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Recommended Citation

Brock, Sharia; Hambrick, Angelica; and Jun, Alexander (2016) "The Intersection of Christianity and Racial Justice Advocacy," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 15 : No. 15 , Article 4.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol15/iss15/4

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The Intersection of Christianity and Racial Justice Advocacy

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Abstract

Those working toward institutional social change and supporting students from diverse background are considered social justice allies (Edwards, 2006). Patton et al. (2007) describe these individuals as knowledgeable and aware of how their own racial identities influence their interactions with others, understanding of racism, as well as their decisions, policies, and interactions with students of diverse backgrounds. There are several studies that have examined the development of White college students as social justice allies, but the development of White administrators as social justice allies is under-studied (Broido, 2000; Eichstedt, 2001; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005). Additionally, there is limited research related to social justice advocacy and Christian higher education. Through examining the experiences of White administrators who are active in leading social justice efforts at their Christian institutions, our findings demonstrate the influence of the participants' Christian beliefs in the development of becoming social justice advocates.

Introduction

Christian higher education is often perceived by some in the broader higher education community as lagging behind in areas of social justice. Whether or not this is true, the negative perception of Christian higher education no doubt influences the decisions of prospective students, staff, and faculty. Ironically, Christians ought to be invested in the work of justice, as it is a biblical mandate that ushers in the Kingdom of God on earth as it will be in heaven. Therefore, a new narrative must emerge that closely ties together faith and social justice, especially as it concerns the unfinished work of racial and ethnic diversity, equity, and awareness. A new narrative ought to be one that is actualized and formed within the realm of Christian higher education. Social justice, broadly interpreted, covers a range of issues and concerns in society and might often be understood by evangelical Christians as morally relativistic or perhaps too trendy of a term in an ever-pluralistic culture. In this article, we intend to address the intersection of grace and race. While we use social and racial justice interchangeably, we define social justice as a focus on racial identity and justice as it relates to Christian faith. To that end, we examine the identities and consciousness of White administrators at Christian faith-based institutions who were identified as advocates for social justice on their campuses.

Review of Literature

In the United States, approximately 900 colleges and universities are described as religiously-affiliated according to the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU, 2015). These 900 institutions include Bible colleges, Catholic institutions, and those that assert faith at the center of their mission and values. Churches of various denominations founded many of the first colleges and universities in the United States in order to provide faith-based education for their youth (Lambeth, 2012). The mission, values, and identities of these institutions were shaped by the practices, traditions, and culture of their founding denominational churches. Some might ask how social justice became part of any given faith-based institution's mission. As stated previously, perhaps much depends on how social justice is defined and by whom, as epistemological differences among secular and faith-based scholars may influence the interpretation of the work of social justice.

Secular scholars Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007), for instance, writing to a general audience, described social justice as both a process and a goal. They defined social justice as:

full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision for society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (p. 1)

The ongoing process of achieving the goal of social justice includes dialogue, social responsibility, and agency for the role that all individuals play in perpetuating systems of injustice. Davis and Harrison (2013) asserted that higher education is an appropriate setting for exploring social justice despite that fact that colleges and universities intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate systems of injustice. Christian scholars might view the role of higher education as that of shepherding students not only to a greater understanding of their faith and relationship with God, but also to addressing issues of inequality, oppression, and injustice (Jun & De La Rosa, 2013; Nussbaum & Chang, 2013). However, there continues to be limited research addressing the relationship of faith, diversity, and social justice within Christian higher education (Jun & De La Rosa, 2013).

Nieves (2012) and Perez (2013) discussed the positive progress Christian higher education has made toward valuing diversity and living out social justice principles and values. Perez described this progress as the “belief that trying to make change in the area of diversity was a biblical mandate” (p. 32). Thus, social justice education and giving a voice to the voiceless are found in Scripture, two of the many guiding foundations and principles for Christian higher education. If social justice is a biblical mandate, it is important for Christian colleges and universities to utilize diversity and social justice frameworks that include recruiting, retaining, and supporting students, staff, and faculty from underrepresented populations. Additionally, these institutions should ensure that curriculum is updated with contributions from minorities and women and cultivate campus climates that are welcoming to all students. Employing this view of social justice as a mandate, the entire institution, and not merely a few individuals from underrepresented populations, ought to be responsible for working toward justice and systemic change.

One way in which Christian and secular higher education administrators are progressing toward justice is by encouraging White administrators to engage in social justice activities and initiatives that challenge inequality. Broido (2000) defined social justice allies as “members of dominant social groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals) who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership” (p. 3). To this end, White allies take personal responsibility for the changes needed in society, which are often ignored and left to others to handle. Kendall (2012) further described one of the most effective ways for Whites to levy their dominant identity status and privilege: “to become the ally of those on the other side of the privilege seesaw” (p. 172). Patton et al. (2007) submitted that White administrator allies ought to be individuals who are knowledgeable about and aware of how their own racial identities influence their interactions with others, their understanding of racism, as well as their decisions, policies, and interactions

with students of diverse backgrounds. All of these types of alliances require a great deal of self-examination and reflection, as well as a willingness to initiate change toward personal, institutional, and societal justice and equality (Kendall, 2012). We employ the literature cited above to frame a lens of identity for White Christian administrators who engage in advocacy with the intentionality of applying biblical truths to the work of justice and change.

Design and Methodology

By utilizing an eclectic qualitative methodology with narrative inquiry approaches, we explored the experiences of White administrators who choose to engage in social justice work at faith-based institutions. We defined social justice according to Thompson, Hardee, and Lane (2011), who stated that social justice intends “to move beyond mere appreciation or celebration into active efforts to examine and dismantle oppressive structures and policies and move toward a more equitable vision for the institution and its members” (p. 112). The present article resulted from several studies related to a research project on racial justice and advocacy for White evangelical administrators working in faith-based institutions. The research question that drove the study was as follows: “What are the experiences of White administrators from Christian institutions of higher education within the United States who choose to engage in social justice programs, activities, and initiatives?”

Members of the research team contacted various colleagues in higher education to solicit possible participants for the study through a letter of invitation. Borrowing from grounded theory research methodology, the researchers employed purposeful sampling techniques to identify an initial pool of potential participants, which included a sampling process that invited nominations from around the country via various faith-based higher education email lists. The selection criteria included the following: (a) participants must self-identify as White; (b) participants must have administrator roles at a Christian colleges or universities in the United States; (c) participants must have strong commitments to social justice and have played significant roles in creating or sustaining programs, activities, or initiatives with social justice foci; (d) participants must be nominated by a colleague; and (e) participants must have demonstrated strong commitments to social justice during initial screening of potential participants. The researchers did not specifically seek Diversity/Inclusion Officers, rather, they sought participants who were nominated based on having a strong commitment to social justice pedagogy, policy, and/or programming for the betterment of their campus communities. The research process often utilized gatekeepers as referees for potential participants whom the gatekeepers believed met the above criteria.

The research team explained to potential participants the purpose and importance of the study and invited them to participate in a 60- to 90-minute, semi-structured, open-ended interview at the location of his or her choice. Along with taking and assessing field notes, each interview was audio-recorded (with the participant's permission) and then later professionally transcribed verbatim.

Participants

All nine participants were White administrators from faith-based institutions of higher education within the United States who were nominated by gatekeepers for having demonstrated commitment to social justice and who choose to engage in social justice activities, programs, and initiatives. Of these nine administrators, four were male and five were female, with participants ranging from an administrative faculty member, to mid-level administrators, to upper or chief administrators. Eight of the participants were from West Coast institutions and one was from the South. The participants' colleges and universities were predominately White institutions that varied in faith orientation, such as mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Catholic.

The research team examined the transcripts to determine the common threads and emerging themes from the participants' stories. To ensure the accuracy and validity of the findings as well as to be able to saturate the findings, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with the participants by providing the preliminary findings and themes (member checking) and asking further clarifying and probing questions.

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Findings

The themes that developed through the analysis process allowed the team, as narrative investigators, to unfold the stories of White administrators doing social justice work at faith-based institutions. The following three themes emerged from the time with participants: the centrality of theology to issues of justice, the role of faith traditions that helped or hindered growth, and the role of Christian higher education as an institution to foster change.

Centrality of Social Justice to Theology and Ecclesiology

One of the most prevalent and overarching themes that emerged for these administrators was the centrality of social justice to their theological and ecclesiological beliefs. Participants cared deeply about the work of social justice because of their understanding of God, the universal church, and the consistency of living out one's Christian faith, which necessitated that they serve as advocates for justice in their current spheres of service. Specifically, these administrators' views on Scripture and the actions that should mark their lives as followers of Christ were central to their commitment to social justice.

Interpretation of Scripture. Many of the participants pointed toward their understanding of Scripture as an important influence in their calling to be caring about and working toward social justice. When they read the Bible, it was clear that God cares about social justice and called them to do the same. One participant described the influence of Scripture in terms of calling and personal mission:

I read the Scriptures, and when I read what Jesus said in Luke 4 about what his mission was, I want to be what Jesus was about. Because he talked about the widows, and the orphans, and the oppressed, and the prisoners, and that is what Jesus said He was about.

This individual observed that the person of Jesus described in the Bible is one who cared deeply for people on the fringes of society—people who are facing oppression or injustice—and cared deeply to see these wrongs righted. One female participant described her understanding, from Scripture, of the Kingdom of God as one of equity and equality:

It's about being, about giving everybody opportunities to succeed, recognizing that we're all created in the image of God and that's how we should live in the Kingdom. And so for me, social justice is as much a Kingdom principle as it is a political or social issue.

Each participant's understanding of Scripture affirmed that God's heart leans toward social justice and a personal calling for Christians to take up this work. One participant pointed out that even the Old Testament often reserved the strongest condemnation for people who ignored the needs of the poor and turned a "deaf ear to those in need." For White administrators in the present study, their understanding and interpretation of Scripture was a crucial foundation that compelled them to a life committed to social justice and intricately tied to daily Christian living.

Active life of justice. Another common theme among participants was about the Christian mandate of a commitment to action toward social justice. This belief went beyond acknowledging social justice as simply another component of being a Christian, but rather elevated social justice as a core belief and central practice of Christianity in and through their lives. One participant described the centrality of social justice to Christianity as a consistent state of action:

I don't know how you call yourself Christian if you're not actively serving those around you and serving the least of these and looking

out for... the orphans and the widows and that whole concept... So all of that to say, we absolutely need to be able to be leading the way and I hate that we're not.

It is clear that, for the participants, social justice is at the center of living out the Christian life, and calling oneself a Christian necessitates a commitment to working toward social justice.

An important part of the idea of social justice being a fundamental part of the participants' Christian beliefs was acknowledging the "blessings" that they had received and returning blessing to others. One participant described the need to actively respond by saying, "We are so blessed... and we need to use that blessing to bless others and to, as best we can, recognize that we are stewards and we have a responsibility as Christians..." The participants believed that their efforts toward social justice were not simply another aspect of their faith, but instead was the natural response to what God had done for them. Another participant concurred, relating the work in familial terms:

We are supposed to take care of those who are on the outside and to bring them in, to treat them as family, as Christ did for us. He treats us as family. He treats us as children, when we're anything but that, you know? We are of Creation and we're flawed, but He has been so inclusive.

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Several of the participants shared the perspective of inclusivity, expressing a sentiment that God had included them in His Kingdom and had called them to be inclusive of others in return. They emphasized the importance of God inviting all people to take part in the Kingdom and the need for work to be done to ensure that all people are included in this invitation.

Impact of Faith Traditions

It is interesting to note the significant impact that faith traditions or specific denominations had on the participants' development toward valuing social justice. Exposure to traditions which emphasized the work of social justice encouraged individuals to value social justice. One participant described the growth that he experienced because of his wife's faith tradition as a Quaker:

My wife was raised from a Quaker tradition and through her, since I got to meet a bunch of Quakers, I started to learn about things that Quakers had done in terms of social justice over the years...everything from the Abolitionist Movement, to ministries, to testimony work that they've done, and I think it's through those interactions that I probably

developed the largest part of my sensibility around what does it mean to be a society for social justice.

Another participant, who grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition, described the importance of receiving education emphasizing social justice directly tied to the Gospel. This participant described some essential theological tenets of the Catholic faith:

The Catholic faith has a wonderful tradition of social justice from the Gospel and from the life of Jesus. Um, so care for people who are more vulnerable than you, care for the Earth, care for all of God's creation, um, issues of austerity, issues of really being caring and compassionate for people who don't have a voice....So, how I define social justice would be really being a voice for people to have a voice, being aware of your privilege, specifically mine as a white male, and making decisions that help promote the teachings of Jesus.

The participants consistently described the impact of faith traditions and the people walking alongside them in their faith traditions along with the importance of participating in a community that values social justice and works together to encourage it in the world around them.

The Role of Christian Higher Education

The final theme that emerged in the study was a common perspective on Christian higher education among the participants. Most participants described a hope and aspiration for Christian higher education to lead the way on issues of social justice. As described above, the participants firmly believed that promoting social justice and educating students to be agents of change were central to the Christian mission of their institutions. There was a real sense that Christian higher education has the potential to lead the way on issues of social justice and that it was central to the purpose of these institutions. One participant best described this belief, saying:

Well, for me, the reason why I'm in Christ-centered higher education is because that's where my heart and my passion is and the whole faith learning and integration is huge, and from my perspective...if there's anybody who should care about things that matter from a social justice perspective it's believers, and we should leave things better than we find them...and our students should leave things better than they find them, wherever they are and whatever field that they go into.

Most of the participants described a similar belief regarding those involved in Christian higher education, that they should be leaders in social justice movements across the country and that they were uniquely positioned to do so because of the centrality of faith at their institutions.

The participants were inspired by the possibility of Christian higher education leading the way in social justice; however, the participants expressed frustration with the reality that their institutions, colleagues, as well as they themselves were not doing enough to fulfill this calling. Much more prevalent among them was a sense of apathy about social justice on their campuses. Even though the participants understood social justice to be central to their institutions' purpose, they felt that it was difficult to build momentum and see these issues become central to their campuses. One participant's frustration was best captured in the following:

Why aren't Christians out there being the change and being out there bringing change and service and giving care with what we have? I mean, I think there's no better calling, and it's Scripture, it's all right there.

While participants expressed hope and aspiration, many felt a sense of frustration that Christian higher education was simply not doing enough to emphasize social justice. These administrators wanted a deeper institutional commitment to the work of social justice, but the change that they sought never seemed to fully materialize.

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Discussion

Limited research exists regarding the development of Christian White administrators as social justice allies. Christians engaged in social justice and advocacy work and scholarship have been under studied, with some considering it an irrelevant academic category (Kellogg, 2012). Furthermore, they are criticized for hypocrisy for purporting social justice while being part of an institution that has historically oppressed others and acted in homophobia. The findings from the current study offer implications for (a) helping students, staff, and faculty understand that one's faith and social justice are strongly connected; (b) creating opportunities for social justice advocates to influence and change campus cultures; and (c) leading by example to help conceptualize long-held assumptions about the role of religiously-affiliated institutions.

According to Edwards (2012), "...social justice is a mandate of the Christian faith" (p. 12). This is evident in the Bible, Christian theology, and through the teachings of Christ (Edwards, 2012). The Bible is clear regarding the expectation of taking action as believers instead of simply discussing justice:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possession and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be that person? I John 3:16-17. (Edwards, 2012, p. 12)

Furthermore, equity is an important aspect of the Christian faith and is validated in Paul's epistle to the Corinthian church:

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. That is equality. (2 Corinthians 8:13-14)

Understanding that social justice principles form the foundation of the Christian faith, students and practitioners would benefit from further exploring this connection, "as they consider their faith as an added dimension of their own worldview" and how their worldview informs their personal interaction and professional practices (Edwards, 2012, p. 15).

The participants discussed the history of and commitment to social justice and equity as defined in institutional missions, Scripture, and faith traditions. However, many of the participants felt isolated in their efforts toward infusing social justice work, which felt countercultural on their respective campuses. Many expressed a sense of disconnect between institutional beliefs and broader social justice issues. Christian higher education, according to one participant, is "miserably behind and we should be the leaders" in cultivating a community that discusses, educates, and advocates for the equity of all.

Overall, the Christian faith, which is the foundation for Christian higher education, is "based in the history of and commitment to social justice as evidence through the Bible" (Edward, 2012, p. 10). Conversations about social justice may not always be easy and may even be messy at times, yet they are important for the growth of the institution as well as for the many stakeholders. It is imperative for administrators at faith-based institutions to cultivate and support those engaged in social justice education and initiatives as well as to have a personal commitment to creating change.

Limitations and Further Research

A limitation of the current study was that the participants were located predominantly on the West Coast of the United States. Expanding the study to include more participants from the South, Midwest, and East Coast could reveal differences in how faith-based institutional missions, values, and faith explore issues of social justice and equity.

Future research should examine the impact of specific denominational or faith tradition backgrounds on commitment to and perspectives of the work of social justice. Do certain faith traditions tend to create members that care deeply about social justice? How does this development occur? Future research should also study students who are leading efforts toward social justice on their campus. Understanding what has fostered the passion and drive to affect change at the participants' institutions could help to encourage the same interest in other students. Finally, it would be interesting to understand the resistance to social justice on religiously-affiliated campuses, which many of the participants described. A better understanding of such resistance could lead to alleviating the fears and frustrations that often limit institutional growth in these areas.

Conclusion

Concerns of ongoing and unfinished racial divisions in society, in churches, and certainly within faith-based colleges, have motivated the researchers' pursuit of white identity awareness and anti-racist engagement among evangelical administrators. We submit that most of the findings among participants cannot merely remain within a silo of white identity, but ought to return to the larger pressing issues of dismantling systems of oppression and privilege in Christian educational spheres. The findings underscore the importance of understanding one's own individual positions within social and educational systems, as well as a need for a heightened sense of critical consciousness which is so necessary to continue the task of intentional and meaningful change. 

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