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## Learning from Student Affairs Professionals: Applying Lessons of Social Justice, Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education Administration

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## **Learning from Student Affairs Professionals: Applying Lessons of Social Justice, Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education Administration.**

Jeff Bukowski, Ed.D.

I began my career in academic book publishing. As an English major, I was told I could do anything, and yet all those possibilities seemed overwhelming. I chose publishing because it seemed like the right thing to do at the time, and it was a path that was logical. After a year of working in marketing for a University Press, I knew that if I wanted to take on more leadership roles in this profession, I needed an advanced degree, and so I began the task of studying for the GRE's and eventually applying to English Master's programs throughout the United States and even the UK. When it came down to it, I had a few choices, but based on the recommendation of a former professor, I chose UVM and that's when my life changed.

When I arrived in Burlington in August of 2006, I was a naïve 24 year old determined to get my degree and go back into publishing. I got involved, joined the Graduate Student Senate, learned about this Higher Education and Student Affairs program and got to know some of the students in it and even some student affairs professionals at UVM. By the time I was ready to graduate in 2008, I knew I wanted to work in higher education and with students.

I applied to what seemed like thousands of jobs – Residential Life, International Education, Admissions – all somewhat related to my experiences as a student worker when I was an undergraduate. I had interviews and some opportunities, but then I applied for a position at UVM – to be the Administrator for the Staff Council – a governance body for staff employees that seeks out and responds to staff ideas and concerns, represents them to the University administration, and keeps staff informed of University initiatives. It sounded interesting and felt like a position I could really make my own. When I got the call to interview, I was excited. When I was offered the position, I was overjoyed. When I accepted, I knew I had a lot to learn. My job was to support and guide this volunteer organization of 60 or more staff at UVM and make them an efficient and effective group. It was a daunting task.

Here I was now in the field of higher education, but rather than working with stu-

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dents, I was advocating for staff in an administrative role. Yet, I had this connection to student affairs that was impacting me in both my personal and professional life.

At the time, I knew enough about HESA and the roles of student affairs professionals at UVM to recognize that working toward social justice, equity, and inclusion was central to their studies and jobs. I knew enough about social justice, equity, and inclusion to realize I had a great deal of self-work to do as a white, cisgender, gay, currently able-bodied, middle class man (I'm not sure I could have even listed these identities to describe myself back then), and I took on understanding this slowly, but steadily.

I began to take courses in the Doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at UVM while I worked and was then accepted officially into the program. I began to volunteer as an English language tutor with a husband and wife who are Kurdish Turks and had been refugees in Serbia but now worked as custodians at the University. I took the Cultural Pluralism course in the HESA program and got anxious every week before we talked about another identity. I went to the Next Step Social Justice Retreat as a Grad Student participant and cried when I told my own story and heard the stories of others, which surprised me.

At work, I listened to stories from staff who were scared about job security, who felt disrespected or misunderstood by their supervisor or the University administration, who said faculty saw staff as less than, who mistrusted others, disliked change and used terms like “those people” to generalize about someone’s identity so often that if I had received a dollar for each time I heard it, I probably could have taken a pretty amazing vacation.

And it was through these experiences and stories, that I began to recognize a disconnect between the work being done in student affairs and the administrative side of the University when it came to social justice education and professional development. I began to truly see that UVM was a predominantly White institution - where diversity and multiculturalism were celebrated at the University and where it was not. Within student affairs, there were open dialogues, trainings, affinity spaces, and diverse staff engaging in these difficult conversations around power and privilege, but someone working as an administrative assistant, an accountant, a bus driver, a lab tech, business manager, director, and even senior leaders where this kind of engagement was not built into their work – how did these individuals gain access and begin their own journey of understanding?

When I reflected about what staff were concerned about, it all seemed to be grounded in misunderstanding, lack of communication, and an inability for others to listen to their stories and really hear them which brought me back again and again to the need for social justice education and professional development for all

members of UVM or any higher education institution. It also troubled me that I would hear members of our community say that UVM was “the social justice university” as if we had done the work, achieved success, and could move on to something else. If we were all working toward social justice, equity, and inclusion, why did it feel that only some individuals were engaging in efforts to do that and not the whole University?

I began vocalizing my observations about this disconnect and the rest of my thoughts to staff colleagues – how I saw social justice education for our whole community – students, staff, faculty, senior leaders – as a way to resolve the long standing issues at the University, especially those around respect and equity I heard daily. Everyone needed to do some self-reflection and learn about how their identities impacted their view of the world and others. Everyone needed to know that this work didn’t have an end point, and that it was always ongoing. Many inevitably rolled their eyes at me, told me there were more important things to talk about, or called me an officer of the politically correct police. What could I have expected? I know at one time, I did the exact same thing. And with each of these deflections, scoffs, and brush-offs, it further solidified my resolve that social justice education and professional development was critical to making a difference not only for staff but UVM as a whole.

I realized that if I was to get anywhere, I needed to lead by example and plant the seeds, find allies, and make little changes that provided opportunities for dialogue and change an approach but wouldn’t rock the boat too much. We added a line on all Staff Council forms for pronouns. Many staff would fill out this line on the form with “Mr.” “Miss” “Mrs.” Rarely did I see he, she, they, or zie used, but I would get questions about it, and it was an opportunity to talk about gender identity, the work UVM had done to be inclusive in this area, and talk about gender neutral bathrooms. We started using “University address” and “University phone” as well to remind staff that not everyone worked “on campus” and those who worked at UVM throughout the state of Vermont and elsewhere were members of our community too. When we held our annual Holiday Bazaar, we incorporated a service component with a Food Drive – “It’s not always about us,” I said – and reminded folks that Christmas, Santa, red and green did not equate to what the holidays meant to all those who made up our community and that being inclusive was more than adding Hanukkah or Kwanzaa too. When we held a bake sale and everyone signed up to bring peanut butter or chocolate goodies with butter and eggs, I made the vegan gluten free sugar cookies – and when colleagues asked “Why?” I said, “Why not? Taste one. They’re delicious!” and reminded them about food allergies and different dietary needs.

I made the choice to engage and encouraged others and supported them as they did the same. I volunteered to be on a Presidential Commission, I served as a

co-facilitator for the Next Step Social Justice Retreat and for the CLIMB Social Justice Retreat for Fraternity and Sorority Life – having never been a member of a Greek organization myself. Through these opportunities I brought up my concerns with the disconnect between student affairs and the administrative side of higher education, the need for more social justice education and professional development, and built bridges to help address this concern along the way.

In writing communications, speeches, recommendations, and reports for Staff Council, I helped shift the focus away from blaming “those people” to the issues and concerns with statements that were respectful and left the door open for collaboration and dialogue. We could still disagree – and often still do – but do so from a place of goodwill rather than anger and to be brutally honest, sometimes what I saw as hate.

I led workshops at internal professional development events that opened the door to discuss social justice issues for staff.

I took the time to listen and hear where people were coming from, knowing I would never fully understand their experiences, but doing my best to be an aspiring ally for all the identities I had learned about. I did my best to combat the “isms” of oppression, but dug deeper – what did it mean to be a middle aged white woman who is a single mother working at UVM? How does someone who is not able-bodied get around this University? What do the rising costs of health care coverage mean to the financial decisions of families – are our wages really equitable? How are we providing professional development to staff across the institution and where is the focus on being a welcoming and inclusive community? What are we doing to help English Language Learners who work at the University better their English skills? When we talk about change at UVM, how are we identifying those being impacted by the change and how are we supporting them – did we forget someone? How does communication impact inclusion?

Every situation, concern, or issue always provided a new way of seeing how social justice education and professional development could have made a difference. I had to take the initiative, but I certainly wasn't alone. I had colleagues who believed there was a way to be a better institution and who were and continue to be there with me on this journey, and that has made all the difference.

I am not a student affairs professional (maybe someday I will be), and I am not an alum of HESA. I am, however, a lifelong learner, an individual who sees the big picture as well as the details, who wants to grow, and who recognizes that there are lessons to be learned from others whether you realize it or not. I am taking those lessons from my own journey of self-awareness that started with the support and education I was given by HESA students and student affairs professionals at

UVM over the last eight years. I know there are many others like me out there in the field of higher education doing the same.

While I have not resolved the disconnect, I am building connections and growing support and understanding. I've found others who share this mindset, and we collaborate. This is the first step. It isn't something you can fully recognize right away, but when you look back over a few years, you can see the shift, you can see what those little things have done, what possibilities they have enabled that seemed unfathomable in the beginning. Taking the time to listen and then engaging and educating--that can make all the difference. And knowing that there is still work to be done and always will be, keeps me going. And wherever my career takes me, those are the lessons that will be with me.