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The Writing on the Wall: Equity, Access, and Liberation in Higher Education

Garrett Naiman

What does liberation mean to you?

Will you reach liberation in your lifetime, or is it something you will always be fighting for?

The questions above are from a bulletin board that hangs in a middle school I work with in East Oakland, California, at which over 90 percent of the student body is Latino or African American and where almost all the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. One recent morning on the way to work, I stopped at the school to drop something off for the English Language Development Social Studies teacher. I was in a hurry to get to a meeting at my office and had no intention of stopping to examine the colorful student projects that adorn most of the school's hallway walls. But when I saw the word liberation out of the corner of my eye, I was intrigued and paused to look at the bulletin board. "What does liberation mean to you?" Such a poignant question was being asked of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

My initial response was one of exhilaration. It was uplifting to observe a middle school engaging in dialogue with students around such a powerful concept—one that is central to both their survival and success. Seconds later, my excitement gave way to a more somber reaction as I began to reflect on all the social injustices and challenges that youth in many of our communities face every day, the resultant trauma of which they bring with them into the classroom. How can we not ask our students to consider their own liberation starting as early as 11, 12, and 13 years old, when their survival and success is put in jeopardy daily?

It was exciting to see a middle school engaging students in such a way, but at the same time, the writing on the wall was clear; our schools and communities are in crisis, and our students are caught in the middle. Those of us who

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dedicate our lives and careers to the learning, development, and wellbeing of students of all ages are engaged in what bell hooks (1994) called “education as the practice of freedom.” Though every student who reads that bulletin board is going to respond to those questions in their own way and with their own truth, as educators our contribution to their liberation is to work tirelessly for equity and access in education. This is particularly true for those of us who work directly with students who come from under-served schools and communities, but it is incumbent upon all of us in education to work in solidarity toward this goal. In higher education and student affairs specifically, whether it be in outreach programs like the one I work for or in college student services, we are charged with forging a pathway to and through college for students. Though I don’t believe fighting for equity and access in higher education to be tantamount to the work of true liberation, I have dedicated my life and career to social justice from within the academy because I believe strongly in the ability of higher education to liberate minds and lives. The academy is far from a perfect place, but it is, for better or worse, the particular landscape I have chosen to carry out my work and to engage in the struggle for learning and liberation. hooks (1994) so powerfully captured the importance of our work when she wrote:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom with all its limitations remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (p. 207)

Though most of us in student affairs do the majority of our work with students outside of the classroom, we do labor for freedom by creating fields of possibilities for our students vis-à-vis the advising, counseling, programming, and mentoring we engage in with them every day. It is a privilege to be part of a profession in which our job is to guide students through their journey to reimagine the world and their place in it.

Practicing Freedom is a Collective Effort

Over the last several years, I have had the pleasure of meeting Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) students from subsequent cohorts. Some of them have asked me what it is that I found most valuable about my time at the University of Vermont (UVM). Though I learned and gleaned much during my two years in the program, my greatest lesson came just after. While in the program, faculty and HESA alumni/ae spoke to us of the legacy endearingly called The Vermont Connection. But it wasn’t until I graduated

and moved elsewhere that I began to understand just how special The Vermont Connection is.

I have benefited greatly from having a network of colleagues and friends across the country (and the world), all connected by a common commitment to student success. In bell hooks's (1994) quote above, she explained that education as the practice of freedom is a collective effort. "We collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress" (p. 207). When I come across difficult situations in my work and I am unsure about how to proceed, I pick up the phone and call other HESA alumni/ae or UVM staff for guidance and eagerly reciprocate the gesture when I am called upon.

Recently, a college student to whom I serve as a mentor was in crisis and needed support. Normally I refer students who come to me in need to people and resources that I know and trust. What was particularly challenging about this situation, however, was that the student does not attend UC Berkeley, where I work, but rather a university on the other side of the country where I did not know anyone. I asked a colleague, who has access to a national listserv of higher education professionals committed to social justice, to send out an email inquiring about staff at that university who would be able to support the student in the ways she needed. Though no one replied from that particular institution, somebody did respond with several names of people that he knew and trusted on that campus. What was remarkable about the response was that it came from Raja Bhattar, who is not only a HESA alumnus, but also a member of my graduating class. There are probably hundreds of people on that listserv, and my name was never mentioned in the email, yet in the end, it was a member of my HESA cohort who had replied with information I needed to aid a student I care deeply about. This is The Vermont Connection at work.

In actuality, as the story demonstrates, The Vermont Connection is only a small part of a larger connection shared by all of us in higher education and student affairs. Student affairs educators are bound together by a commitment to students' learning, development, and wellbeing. I will continue to fight for equity and access in education and to support students, particularly those who must overcome social injustices and challenges to be admitted to and graduate from college. But my endeavors are only as strong as the community I build and belong to in higher education and student affairs.

Building a Better Tomorrow

Equity and access work in higher education can sometimes be disheartening and feel Sisyphean in its scope. At a recent leadership meeting scheduled to discuss our department's contribution to the University's role in furthering

educational equity and inclusion, a colleague of mine, who is Mexican American and in his late forties, spoke to the group about the climate on campus for students of Color. He shared with us that students of Color he works with today are marginalized in ways that mirror his own experiences on the very same campus nearly three decades ago. For all the ivory tower intellectual jargon that is put forth about furthering diversity in the academy, we have a long way to go before we achieve real inclusion and social justice.

And yet despite all the challenges, I am continually inspired by the resolve and resilience of the students with whom I work. Every time I see a student become the first member of her or his family to go on to higher education, I am rejuvenated. Each year, against incredible odds, students walk across the stage at their college graduation, an achievement celebrated with their families and by their communities, and I am reminded of the positive effects of our work.

Yuri Kochiyama challenged all of us to realize that “tomorrow’s world is [ours] to build” (as cited in Gottheimer, 2003, p. 472). As higher education and student affairs educators, we build a better tomorrow for all of us by supporting the lives and learning of students today. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, an Associate Professor at San Francisco State University and a teacher and community member in East Oakland, echoed this sentiment. While lecturing at Harvard University, Duncan-Andrade spoke of building a better tomorrow through his work as an educator:

I don’t believe I’ll change the world as a teacher. I don’t believe I’ll change the world as a researcher. I don’t believe I’ll change the world as an academic. But I do believe that my students will. I do believe every day when I stand in front of those 31 ninth graders, that I might be looking at the person who moves us to a better society. (Duncan-Andrade, 2010)

We move closer to the society we want to live in by increasing access to institutions of higher learning and by working to make them more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable for all students.

My thoughts turn again to the bulletin board on the wall of the middle school. What does liberation mean to me? It means that if *we* are not free, I am not free. My own liberation is linked to that of the students, families, and communities I work with every day. All of us in higher education and student affairs must continue to work to improve access to and equitability in our institutions. We are engaged in education as the practice of freedom, our students’ freedom, and our own.

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