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(Dis)Connection Through Language: Interrogating Buzzword Culture in Student Affairs

Arnelle Faye Sambile

My excitement for discovering new words that could more precisely explain, capture, and convey my lived-experiences began during my time as an undergraduate student studying English and Communication at San Diego State University. I recall myself sitting in lectures, jotting down new terms in my notepad, eager to expand my vocabulary. Outside of the classroom, I would spend significant amounts of time introducing myself to new language through social media, adding to the list of words that I hoped would help me share my experiences as a poor, woman of color.

The yearning I felt to better tell my story amplified during my graduate program. Through the articles, book chapters, and readings, I was constantly exposed to unfamiliar jargon that aided me in being closer to accomplishing my goal of becoming a more careful and poetic storyteller. Now, given the opportunity to reflect, it has become clear to me that my desire for an extensive vocabulary was equally fueled by: my need to tell my story, imposter syndrome, and my desire to perform—to appear as an intellectual student, a competent paraprofessional, and, perhaps most strongly, a “woke” social justice warrior—resulting in my plunge into buzzword culture.

It would be disingenuous for me to not admit that I, too, fell victim to the allure of buzzword culture as it pertains to social justice—incorporating into my daily conversations words that I discovered through Twitter, workshops, and class discussions. Since my time as an undergraduate student, I have observed numerous terms come into popularity in social justice spaces, now recognizing that these terms were often used out-of-context or incorrectly. My experience in my graduate program developed my critical lens, and forced me to reflect upon my own complicity and participation in buzzword culture. Presently, as a new professional in student affairs, I witness the misuse of social justice terms by universities, departments, senior-level administrators, and professionals throughout the field. Part of me believes that the mistaken use of buzzwords is due to miseducation, but the rest of me has confronted a quiet truth in the profession: that conceivably, the use

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of buzzwords is an attempt to pander toward specific populations and to perform values, that unfortunately are more often not actualized or supported through policies, practices, or procedures.

This year's theme "Embracing the Whole: Sentience and Interconnectedness in Higher Education" prompts readers to examine the ways (dis)connection appears in one's work as student affairs professionals. There exists a disconnect between the radical history of social justice terminology and the present-day use of the terms in the academy, leading to incongruence between the intentions and impact in the actions of student affairs professionals regarding social justice. To address the tension between the genesis of social justice terms and their use in higher education today, the history of the terms must be critically revisited and centered. Many social justice buzzwords emerge from leftist spaces, as they are coined in an effort to explain the lived-experiences of marginalized communities. Regrettably, most buzzwords have been stripped of their radical origins, and are liberalized to become more digestible and acceptable for university settings. A distinct difference exists between the definition of a term evolving and changing over time and a term being misused in order to fit a context: when the original definition of a word is used by the group the term was created for, in order to explain their particular experience (i.e. marginalized populations), the history of the word becomes central to its use. While there are an abundance of social justice buzzwords, I reflect upon the following terms and their variants because I feel that they are both frequently and improperly used: decolonization, emotional labor, and intersectionality.

In recent years, educational spaces have adopted the term (as opposed to the concept) of decolonization. From "decolonizing minds" to "decolonizing methods," higher education has divorced decolonization from its history, and instead, morphed decolonization into a metaphor. While attending a conference on educational research, Tuck & Yang (2012) observed an alarming amount of presentations on decolonization, none of which made mention of Indigenous people. Furthermore, they argue that the usage of decolonization as a metaphor "centers whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future" as it separates Indigenous epistemic, ontological, and cosmological relationship to land (p. 3). To undo colonization, it is imperative to recognize that decolonization is inseparable from land. Wilder (2013) asserts that racism, slavery, and colonization are embedded into the fabric of colleges and universities, as institutions of higher education were built by slave labor and were sites of forced assimilation for Native Americans. "Decolonizing higher education" without land reparations only furthers the erasure and the oppression of Indigenous communities. I argue that decolonization cannot take place in higher education, not while institutions physically occupy Indigenous land. To use the decolonization in reference to the academy is an oxymoron.

Emotional labor is a word that has rapidly found its way into educational spaces. Notably, I have heard emotional labor used to describe interactions with colleagues and students, typically involving listening or explaining. Although the line between engaging in an educational conversation and emotional labor is contested, especially in education, the two are not interchangeable. The earliest remnants of emotional labor can be found in the work of Federici (1975) where she discusses physical, emotional, and sexual labor women perform for capital. Emotional labor was later coined by Hochschild (1983), she defined emotional labor as regulating feelings in the workplace to perform the emotional requirements of a job. Certain emotions were seen as reserved for the home, or private sphere. Cowan (2019) underlines that emotionally charged work is disproportionately performed unpaid, by women; emotional labor is not an issue of interpersonal conflict, but structures of inequality, specifically for women of color and non-binary folks. Emotional labor is labor performed for capital, and is inextricably connected to capitalism, sexism, and racism. Popularized interpretations of emotional support consider listening to a friend's qualms and engaging in conversations surrounding politics as emotional labor. Emotional labor is the managing of emotions and the performing of actions for capital, and, indeed, for some, the aforementioned actions are emotional labor. However, I want student affairs to be cautious of using emotional labor as a scapegoat from difficult and necessary conversations. Cowen (2019) contends that in order to eliminate emotional labor, investigating the structures that cause emotional labor to exist is essential. Abolishing prisons and immigration policies rids the burden of care that falls upon unsupported individuals. Addressing emotional labor in the academy involves being honest about who is most often asked to perform emotional labor and to undo the norms and structures that cause emotional labor to exist.

Intersectionality is one of the most misused buzzwords in higher education. Whether it be "intersectionality of identities" or "intersectionalities," intersectionality is commonly used to describe overlapping social identities, sometimes including dominant and marginalized identities. An arguably understandable assumption, to operate under such definition removes the essence of intersectionality. Coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is a tool used to analyze how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, create multiple levels of injustice. Crenshaw (2016) retells the experience that led her to the concept of intersectionality. She employs the analogy of a road: where the streets are racism and sexism and the traffic is hiring policies, all with a Black woman standing in the middle, at the intersection of the two systems of oppression. It is critical to distinguish that intersectionality is not how identities are layered, but rather, how overlapping, intersecting, systems of oppression lead to unique forms of discrimination. Intersectionality should not be used to illustrate the intersection of a dominant and marginalized identity (i.e. white women). Using intersectionality as a tool in higher education demands that student affairs professionals bring those from the

margins to the center, and that those who do not live at the margins honor the truths of those who do.

I write this article, because it is my sincere belief that, as a field, we want to do better. In order to do so, all student affairs professionals must address the complicity and performativity that exists in higher education and strive to ensure that the language we use matches the actions we deliver, that our decisions are informed by history. The interrogation of buzzword culture allows for student affairs professionals to re-examine how the misuse of language can contribute to the erasure of history, construct our current reality, and shape the future. This year's theme challenges readers to create the future student affairs professionals dream of what higher education could be--- a future not built on a falsely articulated harmony, but rather, a future that involves first looking at the past as it is "a means of understanding more clearly what and who [we] are so that [we] can more wisely build the future" (Freire, 1970, p. 84).

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