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An Abolitionist Approach to Creating Communities of Care: Decolonizing Theory, Acknowledging Disequilibrium, and Questioning Systems

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May 25, 2020, exponentially reinvigorated a global reckoning around the uniquely American way of murdering Black people through policing and imprisonment. Calls for anti-racism, police reforms, and abolition permeated nearly every industry with statements, commitments, and trendy Instagram graphics. Once an idea reserved for the most radical, abolition entered the popular culture lexicon not only for its dedication to destroying oppressive systems but also for building communities of care. As student affairs professionals dedicated to community development at institutions built upon white supremacy and bound by federal policies, approaching community development through an abolitionist framework requires an imaginative playfulness to create new realities and a grounded conviction to effect tangible change for our most vulnerable communities. We welcome you to join us as we nerd out with theory, grapple with deeply personal questions, and offer practical ways abolition can bring us closer to creating communities of care.

Keywords: abolition, community, self-actualization, disequilibrium, care

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Reflection Questions: What are your feelings and memories associated with May 25, 2020? How does the impact of that summer show up in your life and practice today?

Abolition seems new but dates back four hundred years when free Black people and liberal Northern whites argued for the eradication of slavery. While fighting for the same cause, differing motivations arose between various factions. Some abolitionists believed slavery should be demolished because it is morally wrong to capture and enslave another human being. Other abolitionists believed slavery stifled overall economic growth while only providing excessive wealth for a select few colonizers (sound familiar? *coughs in capitalism*). Rightly so, abolition has focused on America's particular foundation of enslaving Black people and has since shifted to its modern iteration - the prison industrial complex (PIC). As America has grown into a gargantuan white supremacist settler colonialist state, we find that the policing, surveillance, incarceration, and murder of our most vulnerable communities extends into our schools, suburban neighborhoods, and even our psyches. Rodriguez's (2018) definition encapsulates abolition's expansion beyond the prison industrial complex well:

“Abolition is not merely a practice of negation - a collective attempt to eliminate institutionalized dominance over targeted peoples and populations but also a radically imaginative, generative, and socially productive communal (and community-building) practice. Abolition seeks (as it performs) a radical reconfiguration of justice, subjectivity, and social formation that does not depend on the existence of either the carceral state (a statecraft

that institutionalized various forms of targeted human capture) or carceral power as such (a totality of state-sanctioned and extrastate relations of gendered racial-colonial dominance).”

Within this definition of abolition, we seek the eradication of borders, binaries, and cages conceptually and literally. Simultaneously, we must bring forth tangible ways of building community and meeting people’s needs undefined by colonialism, capitalism, and the cis-heteropatriarchy. Hint: Indigenous communities have been doing this for thousands of years despite America’s attempts at genocide, assimilation, and removal of sovereignty.

Reflection Questions: What historical examples do you have of abolitionist work? Does your understanding of abolition align with the definitions provided?

The First Nations (Blackstock, 2011; Cross, 2007) often go uncredited for the globally recognizable hierarchy of needs published by Maslow in 1943 that scholars such as Dr. Blackstock re-theorize for contemporary understanding. Dr. Blackstock (2011) provides 4 respective domains: cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional to describe the principles of the Blackfoot Nations’ prioritization of need being a balanced recognition of self-actualization, purpose, and relationships, surpassing the familiarized need for physical protection. As we collectively turn towards abolitionist approaches to change, we must also decolonize our practices and measures of success. In an attempt to correct behavior, incarceration, and policing tend to miss the nuance of humanity.

We often hear about the school-to-prison pipeline in our K-12 school system, but rarely continue to draw connections to what Johnson and Dizon (2021) call the college-prison nexus. Instead of two entities - school and prison - connected by a linear pipe, the college-prison nexus emphasizes how “campus structures, policies, and practices coalesce in the surveillance, control, punishment, and criminalization of minoritized and socially and economically disenfranchised populations.” Johnson and Dizon’s (2021) intentional use of populations rather than students includes the communities historically and currently displaced by institutions through financial investments in endowments, policies and practices upheld by administrators, and ideology and discourse in and out of the classroom.

Despite an institution’s desire to develop diverse student experiences with systems that safeguard marginalized students; the pervasiveness of the college-prison nexus and discrimination persist. Yes, there is often no simple solution to be found when attempting to meet the needs of millions of students across the nation, but the limitations of institutional support are palpable. The college-prison nexus serves as a reminder that the ivory tower of education does not protect everyone. As individuals, staff can maintain abolitionist ideologies, however, the ability to act against the

institution comes at a cost. Disregarding and circumventing institutional policies pose not only professional, but legal ramifications, yet we are met with the recurring conundrum of supporting our students' frustrations with care and limited power.

It is common to hear phrases like “bring your whole self to work” within the field of student affairs, yet bringing one’s whole self can often lead to disequilibrium, especially for those who experience the very discrimination institutions claim to protect our students from. Taylor and Baker (2019) describe disequilibrium as a result of “developmental challenges, such as facing complex work and life decisions that do not have simple solutions, experiencing the need to listen to one’s voice to make decisions, and engaging in interdependent work to solve mutual problems.” For example, if student employees decide to protest against unfair student wages on campus and protest, a potential supervisor is likely met with the decision to support their students knowing that they alone cannot change the student employment structure while tasks go unmet, or hire new students who will oblige to the set wages. The crossing of a metaphorical picket line is only one example of how disequilibrium can affect our willingness to act as an agent of the institution, as opposed to an independent supporter.

Reflection Questions: Have you ever experienced disequilibrium at work? What resources exist(ed) for you to address the disequilibrium?

Unfortunately, when faced with a value-based dilemma there are limited resources for staff to rely on. Human resources and peers can provide consultation and recommendations, but they cannot dissolve someone of their values. As we continue our conversation on creating communities of care, there is a need to hold space for the compounding concerns one may have against the very system from which they are employed. When seeking opportunities to keep our students safe and provide them with what they need, we must remind ourselves that they often know exactly what they need and it should be our responsibility to adjust the system to meet our students, rather than students adjusting to meet the system. The United States has relied on capitalism and individualization to encourage prosperity, yet our history shows the glaring inequities of such an approach.

Moving beyond the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), Strayhorn’s (2021) definition of carceral logic and Castro and Magana’s (2020) view of carcerality play well together in conceptualizing the necessity for abolition beyond the PIC. Carceral logic refers to the “punishment mindset or reasoning assessed according to strict principles and/or beliefs about crimes, criminality, prisons, and prisoners in the broadest sense,” whereas carcerality operationalizes punishment through “spaces and mechanisms of social control that are outside the physical prison,” in spaces like our college campuses. In other words, carceral logic is the internal thought process of how we decide someone is deserving of punishment, or why a particular action needs a punishment. Carcerality refers to the strategies in

which our carceral thoughts become external actions and strategies that can influence our socialized implicit bias. The acceptance of prisons demonstrates a social understanding that restriction of physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual agency has become synonymous with consequence. The restriction of land access for *safety* has lent itself to the gross privatization of resources and reward-based access are insidious examples of how carcerality is riddled throughout capitalism.

Within the realm of higher education, a student code of conduct serves as an example of how institutions operationalize carcerality and dictate student behavior. More important than the guidelines themselves are the implementation of school values. The process of educating students once mistakes are made is an indicator of an institution's carceral practices. Blatantly, if students *break* a rule, there are often consequences that escalate based on frequency and severity. When seeking communities of care we must challenge ourselves to redirect the focus of communities to promote critical self-awareness and healthy self-esteem rather than homogeneity. Although heavily reflective work, abolitionists must acknowledge the systems that exist in order to challenge or absolve them. With such diverse landscapes and structural types, it can be beneficial to review how institutions align their values with their actions by addressing the following areas.

Reflection Questions: What does accountability mean? How do you hold someone accountable and to whom?

Ideology & Discourse

- As much as we would prefer to think that the college-prison nexus is a clandestine relationship, many universities openly contradict their performative diversity statements. As of October 2022, New York University's Office of Admissions openly offers support and resources for undocumented students, and yet the NYU School of Law hosted an event spotlighting two Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. This event not only excludes any undocumented students but also encourages students in attendance to participate and envision a career built on the surveillance and punishment of others.
- Discussions about safety, especially within urban college campuses, often delineate into which neighborhoods students should avoid and the dangers of public transportation. Whether overhearing students talk about "Kro-ghetto" in reference to a Kroger grocery store with predominantly Black shoppers or campus police departments discouraging students from interacting and acknowledging the existence of their unhoused neighbors, these formal and informal discourses around safety implicate who is seen as a threat, should be surveilled, and subsequently punished if their behavior crosses over into safe (read: white) student spaces. This further implies that only certain populations - students, white people, or those residing in

traditional housing - deserve safety. A Hasinoff & Krueger (2020) study illustrated that students on an urban college campus associated the presence of non-students with higher rates of crime, despite the low campus crime rate and the likelihood of unhoused individuals being victims of crime rather than perpetrators of crime.

Policies & Procedures

- 95% of four-year institutions have their own on-campus law enforcement agencies. This number does not include relationships with third-party security firms or additional partnerships and collaborations with city law enforcement agencies (Johnson & Dizon, 2021). Many college campus departments often have jurisdiction beyond campus boundaries. (Johnson & Dizon, 2021; Baldwin, 2021)
- Even though there is “no evidence that criminal history screening makes college campuses safer,” all State University of New York (SUNY) applications have a question regarding an applicant’s criminal background. Asking about criminal records on college applications effectively discourages complete applications because of the excessive amount of additional required materials during an already difficult process. 63% of applicants who acknowledge a previous felony conviction do not finish the application process (Rosenthal et al, 2015).
- While the intent of the conduct system is to ensure student rights, university conduct offices continue to mimic a punitive legal system. The sanctioning process often uses carceral logic for the sake of consistency. While adjudicators may discuss a student’s motivations and reflections within a brief conduct conference meeting, this student-centered process does not translate through the sanctioning process. For a large majority of cases, sanctions are determined first by the number of offenses in a particular category rather than prioritizing a student’s specific context. Consistency and fairness can be compatible, but not at the expense of decentering our students’ motivations.
- In addition to the discourses around safety mentioned above, federally mandated reporting via the 1990 Jeanne Clery Act can breed fear of bordering communities. Hasinoff and Krueger (2020) delineated two effects of frequent Clery notifications - disregard or excessive fear and overreaction, neither of which actually created a greater sense of safety. Students whose fear increased along with Clery’s mandatory text or email crime notifications reported leaving classes early, not participating in evening extracurricular activities, and even leaving campus upon notification even though the alert did not instruct them to do so. Students also complained of broad racial descriptors that “any black man with that type of outfit on could be mistaken as the criminal” (Hasinoff & Krueger, 2020, 596). Not only are students with exaggerated fear triggered by several notifications decreasing their campus involvement but also are fearing people - both on and off campus - who hold a particular marginalized identity. For

marginalized students, and Black students in particular, this homogenization contributes to “the struggle to forge an identity larger than the one society forces upon them” (we highly recommend reading Wilson Okello’s theory of self-definition that beautifully complicates self-authorship through a Black feminist lens). This fear of both people and places demonizes already marginalized folks and encourages a special kind of collegiate exclusion that antagonizes the communities of care we claim to create.

Financial Investments

- Aramark, a food supplier employed by several universities, not only supplies food to prisons but also exploits prison labor to package food. Aramark classifies over 6,000 incarcerated people as “students” to avoid paying already-unlivable wages. In one instance, incarcerated people were forced to participate in unpaid labor under the threat of longer sentences and solitary confinement. Additionally, Aramark provides a variety of services to other carceral federal agencies such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and the federal Bureau of Prisons (BoP). Many are familiar with the idiom, “put your money where your mouth is.” Universities are blatantly supporting the PIC by employing companies that both supply and utilize prisons for labor. Aramark is a specific example of university investment in the PIC, but is certainly not the only pathway to PIC investment. Passive investments, such as endowments, have the highest risk of being invested in popular and profitable funds. Target date funds, often the default option for employer-offered retirement plans, tend to use several stocks and bonds associated with the PIC as well.

Reflection Questions: How can you address both segments of an institution and the institution as a whole? Which approach is most aligned with your strengths?

Rather than focusing staff efforts on maintaining the structures presented, we can invest labor toward the creation of communities of care. Although there is no active definition for communities of care, we posit the following necessities.

- Holds similar interest and/or geographical proximity
- Shares a practice of communication and facilitates opportunities for engagement
- Recognizes and appreciates group members’ social identities on both systemic and interpersonal levels
- Addresses conflict with concern for community goals and relationship maintenance with oneself and with others

Seemingly complicated to define a way of living we have yet to see in our generation, however, no more complicated than reacting to the harm caused by our current system.

What are some practical ways we can begin to support this work now?

- Supplement restorative and/or transformative practices in conduct. Develop student-facing language and practices to distinguish accountability vs punishment. Implement this framework into the sanctioning process, which will allow for tailored accountability processes based on student context.
- Avoid considering former incarceration status in application processes. Support the Fair Access to Education Act.
- Utilize positive reframing of strategies that helps students see local communities as neighbors (i.e. encouraging students to become familiar with the city and neighborhood, addressing needs/people when possible). Instead of encouraging students to avoid places or people, how do we empower students to feel safe and confident regardless of the situation (i.e. keeping a charged phone or portable charger, de-escalation tactics, etc.)?
- Reduce the threat of mandatory Clery Act fines due to a less heightened response to non-urgent campus incidents. In tandem, advocate for limiting Clery messages to those with actionable steps for student safety.
- Strengthen relationships between communities and students by supporting local businesses and including local communities in decision-making processes via forums and town halls.
- Use this tool to see if your 401k, retirement, etc. are investing in private prisons.
- Support your university's divestment from private prisons.

Conclusion

As abolition conceptually integrates further into social justice rhetoric and diversity efforts across the nation, higher education institutions will need more intentionality when reviewing their strategic plans to meet the needs of the evolving student populations. The intentional creation of communities of care can assist with the integration of social change and amplify the feelings of acceptance amongst campus affiliates. We hope this article encourages others to establish and seek communities of care through an abolitionist lens at their respective institutions and look forward curation of communities of care across the field!

Reflection Questions: What is your definition of a community of care? What role does community involvement play in your overall definition of success?

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