The Impact of a Diversity and Social Justice Course on a Higher Education Assessment Professional's Practice

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the impact of a diversity and social justice course on the assessment philosophy and practice of an early-career higher education assessment professional. The author, who directs institutional assessment practices at a public 4-year institution in the northeastern United States and is pursuing an online doctorate in higher education, reflects on the impact of this course. The experience of the course prompted significant reflection on the author's inherited privilege and the need to incorporate equity for social justice into their professional practice. This essay tracks the author's journey through this course from a self-described ally to an aspiring co-conspirator, reinforces the need to incorporate equity for social justice into higher education assessment practices, and argues for the inclusion of a diversity and social justice course as a standard offering in higher education doctoral programs.

KEYWORDS

assessment, equity, social justice, co-conspirator, higher education

In early 2021, I was recruited to revitalize my 4-year public institution's assessment practices and culture as their higher education assessment professional. Despite the leadership's preference for a candidate with a terminal degree, I was selected based on my skills and availability, although I only held a master's degree. To address this qualification gap, I enrolled in an online doctoral program in higher education. Since then, I have leveraged the program's coursework to benefit my institution and am developing a dissertation with the same aim. Each course has significantly enhanced my professional development and improved my institution's assessment processes and culture, with a recent course having an exceptionally profound impact.

In the Spring 2024 semester, I enrolled in an elective course on diversity and social justice in higher education. With two history degrees and a habit of staying informed, I anticipated that the class would be important for my role as a higher education assessment professional. However, I did not anticipate the emotional, intellectually taxing, and profound journey that the course would facilitate. This essay tracks my development through the course, from a self-described ally to an aspiring co-conspirator. I will describe how the course facilitated this journey while providing a supportive environment for confronting a fraught history and the pressing issues of privilege and oppression in the United States and American higher education. I will discuss the course's impact on my philosophy and practice as a higher education assessment professional and emphasize the need to incorporate equity for social justice into institutional assessment practices. Furthermore, I will argue for including diversity and social justice in higher education courses as a required component of doctoral programs in higher education.

CONFRONTING PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

My experience in this course on diversity for social justice in higher education progressed through three distinct phases: understanding the history and modern issues of privilege and oppression in the United States, confronting my own place in the contemporary social hierarchy of privilege and oppression, and incorporating equity for social justice into my professional practice. The initial learning phase was facilitated primarily through the course's texts, supplemented by articles and videos. The major texts of the course were Paulo Freire's (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Beverly Tatum's (2021) *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*, Khyati Joshi's (2020) *White Christian Privilege*, and Frederick Engram's (2023) *Black Liberation through Action and Resistance: MOVE*. Although I was already familiar with the issues of equity and social justice, the course provided me with an academic framework and language to discuss these issues in the context of my role as a higher education assessment professional.

The second phase of the course was the most emotionally and intellectually taxing experience of my educational journey thus far, yet also the most profound and impactful. This phase involved the first two course assignments, an inventory and timeline of critical incidents and a racial identity development reflection paper. The first assignment prompted students to connect a list of critical incidents, such as the assassinations of JFK and MLK, 9/11, and learning about, discrimination and the social constructs of gender and race, to points in their lives. This timeline was complemented by an autobiographical essay contextualizing these incidents through the matrix of oppression (Office of Equity, 2020), which is based on Patricia Hill Collins' (2022) matrix of domination.

This exercise compelled me to explore my own story in the context of these critical incidents and the issues of equity and social justice they imply. For example, the juxtaposition of the assassinations of JFK and MLK prompted reflection on which tragedy I subconsciously considered more important and which one I knew about. Although I was relieved upon reflection that I had been conscious of MLK's assassination significantly earlier than that of JFK, I realized that this was based purely on the inherent diversity and urban nature of the environment in which I went to primary school, and not the result of some intentional philosophy of raising a child. The exercise brought past traumas to the forefront, providing an opportunity to contextualize them through the lenses of equity and social justice. Placing myself within the matrix of oppression (Office of Equity, 2020) highlighted my inherent privileges as a White heterosexual and upper-middle class male, and my few categories of oppression due to my Jewish upbringing and atheism. As a result, I reaffirmed my concerns that my efforts as a self-described empathetic ally were insufficient and resolved to become a co-conspirator (Engram, 2023), leveraging my privilege and professional career to help address the damage inflicted by a history of racism and oppression in the United States.

In the current academic discourse on equity and social justice, the term *ally* has come to signify a passive form of anti-racism practiced by individuals with racialized privilege, often perceived as performative. Consequently, a stronger term, *co-conspirator*, has emerged to describe those who actively engage in anti-racist efforts. A co-conspirator makes a significant personal investment in anti-racism by leveraging their racial and class privilege and challenging their own privilege to advance equity (Engram, 2023). While the term co-conspirator may carry uncomfortable and negative connections from its use in criminal justice contexts, it is an established term in the field of equity and social justice. Therefore, it is used in this essay to replace the outmoded term, ally.

The second assignment involved reflecting on my racial identity development through a series of questions based on the Janet Helms' (2001) statuses of racial identity development, as discussed by Beverly Tatum (2021) in Chapter 6 of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?: And Other Conversations About Race*. The provided questions prompted reflection on my understandings of racism, race as a construct, discrimination, the connection between religion and White supremacy, Whiteness, colorblindness, and how these understandings shaped my worldview. Building upon the experience of the critical incident inventory timeline and essay, this exercise expanded my contextualization of past experiences in the context of my current worldview regarding equity and social justice. It facilitated reflection on my racial identity development by forcing me to confront my identities, privileges, oppressions, and traumas, leading me through the statuses of racial identity development: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independent, immersion/emersion, and autonomy (Tatum, 2021).

Racial identity development, as defined by Beverly Tatum (2021), is the process by which an individual defines the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial group. This concept also extends to ethnic and cultural identity development (Tatum, 2021). Helms' (2001) six statuses of racial identity development are universally applicable, but for White individuals, the process involves three key tasks: abandoning individual racism, recognizing institutional and cultural racism, and opposing that racism (Tatum, 2021).

The initial status, contact, occurs when an individual is exposed to new experiences or knowledge that trigger the active exploration of their racial identity. This leads to the disintegration status, marked by an increased awareness of racism and white privilege and their impact on oppressed groups. The discomfort arising from this awareness may cause a regression into the reintegration status, where feelings of guilt and shame are transformed into fear and anger towards oppressed peoples. However, progression to this status is not inevitable (Tatum, 2021).

In the pseudo-independent status, the individual's understanding of institutional racism deepens and the threat of reintegration diminishes. At this stage, White individuals often experience a sense of guilt for their inherited privilege. The immersion/emersion status follows, wherein this guilt and shame are alleviated as the individual realizes the necessity of being actively anti-racist. The final status, autonomy, is achieved when the individual internalizes their new understanding of their racial identity, driving their efforts to confront racism and other forms of oppression (Tatum, 2021).

Reflecting on my racial identity development through this assignment reinforced my awareness of my privilege through the disintegration status and helped me navigate the shame associated with that privilege characteristic of the pseudo-independent status. The exercise supported my transition through the immersion/emersion status to overcome that sense of shame, empowering me to begin shifting my focus on using my privilege productively and positively, thus reaching the final autonomy status (Tatum, 2021). Although preparing the first two assignments was both emotionally and intellectually taxing, raising personal traumas and insecurities, it was transformative in allowing me to confront these issues, move beyond them, and to grow as an individual.

INCORPORATING EQUITY INTO MY ASSESSMENT PHILOSOPHY

The course structure built on the personal growth achieved through the initial assignments to facilitate professional development by prompting students to articulate a social justice philosophy and to undertake a research project on equity and social justice. The social justice philosophy assignment required students to articulate a philosophy of social justice based on the course's readings, discussions, and assignments. I expanded this assignment to incorporate equity for social justice into my philosophy of assessment, which guides my professional practice and thus my institution's assessment practices.

The modern higher education assessment profession began developing in the 1980s in response to state and federal calls for greater accountability for learning outcomes and internal pressures to improve curricula through scholarly processes (NILOA, 2019). The resulting tension between assessment for compliance and assessment for continuous improvement persists (Ewell, 2009). Effective assessment processes are not designed to simply achieve compliance, but rather to yield meaningful student outcomes data to inform their continuous improvement (Suskie, 2018). My work has focused on establishing processes that facilitate assessment for continuous improvement.

Equity in assessment has been a background consideration since early in my career. However, I postponed the explicit incorporation of equity into assessment while I focused on

revitalizing assessment processes and culture. My experience in this diversity and social justice in higher education course compelled me to reconsider that strategy. The social justice philosophy assignment allowed me to explore the ongoing discourse on equity in higher education assessment.

In 2017, the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) launched its initiative to explore equitable and culturally responsive approaches to assessment (2023). The initiative was a response to increasingly diverse student enrollment and the vast differences between the needs of different student populations. In the NILOA Occasional Paper that launched the initiative, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) argued that student learning outcome statements, assessment approaches, and the use of assessment results must be responsive to students' diverse backgrounds and that assessments should be about demonstrating learning rather than enforcing a narrow vision of how that learning should be demonstrated. The resulting discourse established equity as a major theme of higher education assessment scholarship. Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) reflected on this discourse in a subsequent NILOA Occasional Paper, further arguing that higher education assessment professionals needed to embed equity in all aspects of institutional assessment practices to address inequities and avoid perpetuating them by meaningfully involving students, disaggregating, exploring, and acting on assessment data and adopting context-specific approaches and responses to advance equity through assessment.

Before this course, my philosophy of assessment stated that assessment processes must be (a) effective, efficient, and meaningful, (b) facilitated centrally through community engagement, and (c) transparent. Through the social justice philosophy assignment, I articulated a statement acknowledging my inherent privilege and affirmed my racial identity development autonomy status by declaring my intention to advance equity for social justice as a co-conspirator (Engram, 2023) by incorporating social justice into my philosophy of assessment. My revised philosophy of assessment now includes a fourth component, stating that assessment must also be (d) designed to actively identify and address inequities. In practice, this means ensuring that all categories of assessment address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The data provided to institutional stakeholders is disaggregated to facilitate the identification of inequities, and procedures are designed to promote action towards resolving identified inequities with social justice in mind.

INCORPORATING EQUITY INTO MY ASSESSMENT PRACTICE

The final assignment of the course, an equity and social justice project, provided an opportunity to immediately implement my updated philosophy of assessment into my practice as a higher education assessment professional. At my institution of higher education, the next phase in developing the data infrastructure for informing processes of assessment for continuous improvement involves designing data visualization dashboards. These dashboards will empower academic program directors to analyze student learning outcomes data, identify opportunities for continuous improvement, and plan actions accordingly. Considering recently updated institutional accreditation standards that require institutions of higher education to disaggregate student outcomes data, these dashboards must necessarily incorporate outcomes data

disaggregation features that effectively inform assessment for continuous improvement (Kelderman, 2023). My equity and social justice project aimed to determine how higher education assessment professionals can account for intersecting identities (Bolding, 2020) in these dashboards to facilitate equity-minded assessments and improve all students' outcomes (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020).

Assessment data must not be disaggregated solely by individual student subpopulation categories, as this approach fails to accurately identify equity gaps. Rather, equity-minded assessment must consider students' unique characteristics and needs that result from the intersection of identities. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2016) pioneered the concept of intersectionality, which highlights the compounded impact of multiple identity factors, particularly the specific experience of Black women, whose combined racial and gender identities create unique challenges not faced by either Black men or White women. This concept has since expanded to address various combinations of oppressed identities and the broader notion of intersecting identities, which includes intersections of both privileged and oppressed characteristics (Bolding, 2020).

In preparing my equity and social justice project, I discovered a lack of existing research on accounting for intersecting identities in assessment data dashboards. Current research often combines intersecting identities into visualized categories rather than integrating intersections within the data visualizations themselves (Sloan-Lynch & Morse, 2024). I concluded that the best way to account for intersecting identities in assessment data visualizations was to utilize a heat map, as they are particularly suitable for visualizing intersecting factors (Ryan, 2023). For example, Figure 1, a heatmap disaggregating student outcomes data by intersecting identities was created using 2022 cohort and completion data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for a four-year private institution in the northeastern United States (NCES 2024). Although this is a simple example, it allows users to quickly analyze data through literal intersections of student identities, thereby identifying inequities in outcomes.

Figure 1. 2022 Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Gender

Race/Ethnicity	Men Graduation Rate	Women Graduation Rate
White	58%	69%
American Indian or Alaska Native		
Asian	55%	70%
Black or African American	20%	41%
Hispanic	35%	63%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander		100%
Race/ethnicity unknown	35%	50%
Two or more races	67%	67%
U.S. Nonresident	56%	67%
Totals	40%	60%

The scope of the equity and social justice project was constrained by the page and time limitations of the assignment, necessitating a focus on identifying a data visualization mechanism that accounts for the intersection of two identities. Further research is recommended to explore how to analyze changes over time in student outcomes and to effectively account for more than two intersecting identities, thereby deepening the equity analysis of student outcomes. In alignment with my updated philosophy of assessment, I have resolved to expand the original scope to address these questions, with the intention of submitting the results for publication in a scholarly journal focused on higher education

assessment. Additionally, beyond the scope of the equity and social justice project, I am committed to embedding processes that facilitate equity-minded assessment. This includes prompting academic program directors to engage with disaggregated assessment data and encouraging them to adopt context-specific action plans to advance equity through continuous improvement.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE COURSES IN EDD PROGRAMS

As discussed throughout this article, the diversity and social justice course had a profound and immediate impact on my assessment philosophy and practice as a higher education assessment professional. By the end of the course, there was a consensus among my fellow students and myself that such a course should be a requirement for doctoral programs in higher education rather than an elective. While I was notably the only White male enrolled, the course profoundly impacted all participants. This anecdotal sentiment reflects a broader need within higher education doctoral programs. As Philis George (2017) argues, the evolving demographics of higher education raise critical issues of access, accountability, affordability, and attrition that institutions must address. Consequently, higher education doctoral programs should aim to develop staff and administrators into co-conspirators who understand and are committed to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. These programs must equip professionals with the motivations and tools to strive for equity for social justice in their practice.

Relevant scholarly discourse surrounds the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate's (CPED) Framework, which calls for EdD programs to reimagine how students are prepared to be educational leaders (2022). A core element of the framework is to frame the programs around issues of equity, ethics, and social justice to promote the development and implementation of solutions through the study of problems of practice (CPED, 2022). Much of this scholarship calls for the infusion of social justice, among other critical concerns, across EdD curricula (Arrows, 2017; Becton et al., 2020; George, 2017; Strom & Porfilio, 2017), which are also supported by scholarship unrelated to the CPED Framework itself (Capper et al., 2006; Guerra et al., 2013). Although I concur that the infusion social justice across the whole of a curriculum is an impactful means of implementing the CPED Framework, fewer researchers have called for the inclusion of specialized courses that focus deeply on issues of social justice as has been recommended by Becton et al. (2020) and Capper et al. (2006). In my own anecdotal experience, encountering issues of social justice throughout a curriculum is not nearly as powerful as undertaking a guided journey of racial identity development, as described in this article, and being equipped with the motivation to develop meaningful solutions through my problem of practice as called for in the CPED (2022) Framework.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I have outlined how the inclusion of a course on diversity and social justice in my higher education doctoral program facilitated a transformative journey. This course enabled me to confront issues of privilege and oppression, evolving from an ally to an aspiring co-conspirator for equity and social justice. It prompted me to integrate equity for social justice into both my assessment philosophy and my professional practice as a higher education

assessment professional. The course had an immediate, profound, and lasting impact on all students who elected to enroll. However, I contend that such courses should be a fundamental component of doctoral programs in higher education, mandated for all students. The higher education assessment profession acknowledges the critical importance of addressing equity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This recognition should be embraced and acted upon by the broader higher education doctoral community.

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