

So Just Make a Difference: A Unique Approach to Leadership
and Social Justice Education

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Abstract

Exploration of social justice issues should be integrated into a person's life. A student's understanding of social justice cannot be developed in a single course or conversation on a college campus. This article describes how one institution of higher education in the United States created and implemented a Social Justice Living Learning Community. In this community, students explore social justice issues by taking courses together, living on the same residence hall floor, and reflecting on their own development. The words "So Just" (short for Social Justice) have become an active reference to this living learning community culture, capturing the community's vision of becoming aware of and engaged in social justice issues. This article explores the use of leadership theory in the program framework, practical implementation strategies for building community, education and reflection, as well as successes, challenges, and implications of the program.

Keywords: social justice education, service-learning, living learning community, co-curricular programming, peer mentoring, intergroup dialogue

Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained.

— Helen Keller

The process of education is a constant struggle. Educators struggle over how to convey to their students a realistic hope for a better life. They wrestle to understand and figure out ways to achieve a better life for themselves and then pass that learning on to hopeful students. This struggle is seen daily in institutions of higher education. Creating spaces where people with diverse backgrounds and experiences feel welcome to discuss topics such as racism, oppression, and inequality is a daunting task; however, providing supportive yet challenging environments across campus can shift an entire institutional culture in ways that allow these dialogues to occur naturally.

It is important to first describe and explore civic leadership and social justice education programs in an effort to understand practical implementation strategies. Adopting a case study framework for such description and exploration is appropriate. Case studies take into account a variety of evidence, including documents, observations, interviews, and artifacts (Yin, 1994). Case studies concentrate on experiential knowledge and pay close attention to contextual influences (Stake, 2005). In exploring social justice pedagogy, which is contextual, a singular case study on why and how a program works can provide a rich base of information. Stake (2005) specified that an “intrinsic case study” (p. 445) is undertaken because a better understanding of a particular case is the goal. An “instrumental case study” (p. 445) is a particular case that may provide insight into a broad issue. The design of this case study drew from both intrinsic and instrumental types of case studies. Gaining a better understanding of how one specific living learning community works and what insights it can provide to leadership and social justice education were important goals for this case study.

The Social Justice Living Learning Community (SJLLC) researched in this case study has attempted to provide students an environment with abundant opportunities and multiple pathways for civic leadership and social justice learning.

An abundance of student writing (e.g., journals, papers, assessments, [blogs](#)), video projects, and staff documents, in addition to student interviews, served as data for this case study.

The SJLLC is a collaboration across the institution and has helped foster strong partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs. While funded primarily through academic affairs, the majority of the program is managed through student affairs. The SJLLC learning outcomes include: (1) developing students' self-efficacy through identity development; (2) increasing students' competency in intercultural education and promoting students' appreciation for intergroup dialogue; (3) providing students with the resources to become civically engaged; and (4) strengthening students' commitment to social justice through leadership education. Incoming first-year students apply to be a part of this community once they accept admission to the institution, and 34 to 38 are selected. Student participants are required to take three courses together over two semesters and to live on the same residence-hall floor. They must also attend specific co-curricular programming. These programs include an off-campus retreat, service projects, a weekend institute, and discussions throughout the academic year. As Sanford (1967) maintained, student development requires a balance of support and challenge. The SJLLC program provides an environment comprising such a balance.

Theoretical Basis for Social Justice Education

Teaching for social justice adds a complex dynamic that arouses students and engages them to recognize the perpetuation of inequality and to push against societal obstacles (Ayers, 1998). An educator's role reaches far beyond knowing a topic well enough to teach it; rather, teaching is about relationships. Specifically, relationships with students during particular moments of dissonance and clarity become the center of teaching and learning. Of course, learning requires choice and action from students, whereas teaching requires a relationship and an invitation to take a journey of development and to explore new information and frameworks.

As Ayers (1998) stated, "The fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world." (p. xvii). Kincheloe (2004) held that institutions of higher education should prepare citizen leaders whose commitment to true democracy and justice will empower them to improve their own lives and the communities with which they identify. Social justice education, then, becomes

not only about making students aware of injustices but about providing them with tools to work toward social justice and empowerment to change the world.

Social justice, as defined by Adams et al. (2000), is both a process and a goal, mirroring the definition of education. However, some critics of social justice education have described this pedagogy as ideological and running counter to education (Applebaum, 2009). These detractors maintain that silencing students whose beliefs oppose those of social justice educators seem to counter educational objectives, such as gaining multiple perspectives. This critique can be examined from the perspective of ideology and how it connects with educational settings. Burbules (1992) proposed that ideology as a concept is itself an ideological struggle because it implies different epistemological and political positions. Thus, in the context of social justice education, viewing ideology through the lens of different frameworks is important to social justice pedagogy. To be in opposition to true knowledge is one way the term *ideology* is framed. Ideology often serves as grounds for making certain claims explicit (Applebaum, 2009). When ideology is used in this sense, a person or some belief is said to be ideological because it is one-sided or partisan. Ideologies are then argued fallaciously; truth is distorted and facts are ignored to protect the belief or person (Rakow, 1992). Programs such as the Social Justice Living Learning Community challenge this perception by allowing space for disagreement, self-discovery, and dialogic practice.

A “real” deepening of understanding can only be accessed through discourse in communication (Applebaum, 2009). Educators for social justice must create environments that have multiple entry points for learning and multiple pathways for success (Ayers, 1998). Dialogue, as a method of communication, enhances awareness through both content exchange and seating arrangement, allowing for true understanding of oneself and others (Banathy & Jenlink, 2005; Bohm, 1996; Zúñiga, 2003). This process then allows students to make sense of both the world they live in and themselves. Social justice pedagogy that includes dialogue focuses on critical thinking and reflection on personal experiences and experiences of others. Teaching for social justice not only is grounded in moral and ethical development but is undertaken for the sake of arousing critical thinking, student reflection, and experiential responses toward a better understanding of what social justice actually means (Greene, 1998).

Leadership for Social Justice

In the creation of the SJLLC, three leadership theoretical frameworks were used to anchor the program learning outcomes in both curricular and co-curricular pedagogy. Leadership does not refer solely to what people in formal positions do, but to anyone who serves as an effective change agent (Astin & Astin, 2000; Gardner, 1990), which is critical in the study of societal inequalities. The theoretical foundations that provided the leadership focus for the SJLLC include the social change model of leadership development (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996), adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994), and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978).

Social Change Model of Leadership Development

Initially created in 1993, the social change model (SCM) of leadership development (HERI, 1996) focuses on enhancing student learning and facilitating positive social change. This model emphasizes the need to understand oneself and others in an effort to create community change. It is less about the leader as an individual and more about how leadership functions within a community. The SCM is inclusive in that it is designed to enhance the development of leadership qualities in all participants—that is, those who hold formal leadership positions as well as those who do not. Leadership is viewed as a process rather than a position, and the values of equity, social justice, self-knowledge, personal empowerment, collaboration, citizenship, and service are explicitly promoted.

In the SCM, leadership development is examined from three perspectives: the individual, the group, and the community/society. These perspectives are dynamic in their interaction with each other. Since values are critical elements of the model, the SCM proposes seven critical values, dubbed the “7 C’s”: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. Change comprises the central hub of these seven values, giving them meaning and purpose (HERI, 1996). Change—specifically, positive change in community and world—becomes the ultimate goal of the leadership process. Structuring a program that focuses on development of leadership qualities and that values social justice will help to promote student engagement and empowerment.

The incorporation of the SCM framework also assists students in their understanding of civic leadership and the close alignment with social justice. In her writings on civic education, Musil (2009) highlights the *civic learning spiral* as

a concept that aims to connect students' personal knowledge with civic action and leadership. The spiral encompasses six areas: self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action (Musil, 2009). When combined with the SCM, the overlapping importance of self-awareness, consideration of surrounding communities, and the element of action for social change provides a framework for student learning in civic leadership.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership work consists of addressing conflicts related to the values people hold—in other words, diminishing the gap between the values people hold and the reality they face. Adaptive work requires changes in values, beliefs, or behavior. Heifetz (1994) stated that “ongoing adaptive capacity requires a rich and evolving mix of values to inform a society’s process of reality testing. It requires leadership to fire and contain the forces of invention and change, and to extract the next step” (p. 34). In social justice education, adaptive leadership centers on interrupting oppressive behavior and educating (McClintock, 2000).

Adaptive leadership shifts the responsibility of change from authoritative figures to the stakeholders involved (Heifetz, 1994), which is key in social justice education. The SJLLC strives to frame social justice issues in ways that allow students to comprehend opportunities and then challenge them to make change. The adaptive leadership framework provides a structure in which students are given the opportunity to struggle with gaps between goals and reality within social justice work. It also provides strategies for students to engage with situations that are ever-changing and extremely dynamic.

Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a “relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4). Transformational leadership helps to foster environments in which relationships are reciprocal, engaging, and supportive. Transformational leaders serve as role models and focus on followers’ need for growth. These leaders support optimism and mobilize commitment to a shared vision (Bass, 1996; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Kuhnert and Lewis (1987) furthered the idea of transformational leadership by suggesting that it involves shifts in the needs, beliefs, and values of followers. Northouse (2007) added that transformational leadership involves moving followers to accomplish more than

what is usually expected to assess needs, satisfy needs, and “[treat] them as full human beings” (p. 175).

Transformational leadership as a theoretical underpinning of the living learning community provides an important structure for all individuals involved. Students, faculty, and staff are able to engage in difficult conversations around issues of social justice in a structure that offers shared support and encouragement to create positive, sustainable change. This not only demonstrates transformational leadership through role modeling, but participating students are challenged to become transformational leaders themselves. In the journey toward social justice, leaders are encouraged to focus on followers’ need for growth.

In combining the three theoretical frameworks of the social change model of leadership development (HERI, 1996), adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994) and transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), the SJLLC is built on a strong foundation in which community building, education, and reflection are able to thrive.

SJLLC: Community, Education, Reflection

Within leadership and social justice frameworks, the SJLLC focuses on building community, education, and reflection. Leadership is both active and reflective (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). It is active in the areas of building relationships and learning dynamically together as a cohort, while reflection is present consistently in the courses through journaling and public speaking which enhances the engagement of learning and continuation of relationship building.

Part of the language used to describe the living learning community and the findings (discussed later in this article) developed from a thematic group of words used in the initial programming. “So Just,” short for Social Justice, has become an active part of the living learning community culture. From t-shirts to e-mail signoffs to conversations, “So Just” captures the community’s vision to become engaged in social justice issues. “So Just” and the engagement it refers to is evident throughout the practical strategies of this living learning environment.

So Just ... Build Community

From the outset, building community is important to creating a living learning environment. A residence hall is a place where students live and interact in a way that is completely new to them. Students meet diverse people and form

new relationships, living on their own for the first time, navigating a new environment on campus, and managing time with many new demands. These experiences form an engaging environment for those who live in residence halls (Johnson & Cavins, 1996). Structuring a living learning community within this environment allows for education of social justice to explore responsible citizenship through leadership and service. Komives (1994) wrote, "Residence halls provide a unique experience ... to learn and to practice the challenges of shared leadership. This shared leadership must be built on the foundation of each resident's responsibility as a citizen of that environment to influence the character of the living experience" (p. 218).

In addition to the community building that occurs as a result of living and taking courses together, intentional SJLLC programming occurs within the first few weeks of this new experience. The mandatory overnight retreat occurs the first weekend of classes during the first semester of the program. Students, mentors, and advisors discuss the requirements and expectations of living in this community, beginning with a low-ropes challenge course. Throughout the weekend, workshops are provided on the development of social identity awareness, defining social justice, and accessing campus resources. This format builds a strong supportive community foundation in which tough discussions can occur around civic leadership and social justice issues.

So Just ... Educate

Experiential learning theory focuses on the process of making meaning from direct experience, which is central to the pedagogy of the SJLLC. Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning theory as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). A growth-producing experience refers not only to a direct experience but also to the total life experience, which includes experiences of others (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb proposed two ways one grasps an experience—by concrete experience and abstract conceptualization—and two ways one deals with experience—through reflective observation and active experimentation.

Experiential learning theory provides a basis for developing and implementing curricula for the SJLLC as it is focused on not only understanding issues but taking action to identify root causes and work toward alleviating societal

ills. Students are required to enroll in three courses (nine credit hours), which are open to SJLLC students only. As an end goal, the courses aim to create a solid foundation for students to deepen their understanding of social justice, while sharpening their communication skills, understanding of leadership, and practice of dialogue.

The three courses—Leadership for Social Justice; Social Justice: Rhetorically Speaking; and Leadership Through Intergroup Dialogue—also support university requirements for graduation. The fall-semester session of Leadership for Social Justice delves into self-awareness of identity and the historical context and personal accounts of “isms” such as racism, sexism, religious oppression, heterosexism, ageism, classism, transgender oppression, adultism, and ableism (Adams et al., 2000). It also focuses on developing students’ civic leadership capacity. One of the SJLLC learning outcomes—that is, strengthening students’ commitment to social justice through leadership education—is foundational in this course. In reflecting on the entire SJLLC experience, students have expressed, for instance, that “I learned a lot about leadership and the social change model” and “[I learned about] equity, social change & collaboration.” Leadership for Social Justice serves as a basis for students to discover which areas they are passionate about, while completing an action plan project that is carried into the spring Leadership Through Intergroup Dialogue course.

Leadership Through Intergroup Dialogue serves as a capstone experience for students and continues the focus on personal development in connection with social issues through the exploration of leadership and active engagement in the community through service. The dialogue component of the course uses the nuances of Zúñiga’s (2003) work on intergroup dialogue to deepen community bonds while welcoming individual dissonance, with the goal of seeking to understand others. Students create a leadership manifesto, write about social issues, and learn dialogic skills such as deep listening, reflective inquiry, suspending judgments, identifying assumptions, voicing, and respect (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). One SJLLC learning outcome is to promote students’ appreciation of intergroup dialogue. At the end of their time in SJLLC, some students have expressed how much they learned regarding intergroup dialogue. As one student expressed, “It was nice/useful to get dialogue training.” Another student stated, “We talked about things that people are afraid to talk about,” implying an opportunity to practice

adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). Yet another student said, “[I learned the most about] oppression, single stories, importance of dialogue.”

Social Justice: Rhetorically Speaking is a public-speaking course. Communication is an important aspect of leadership and social justice, the belief being that you need other people in the process of social justice. How one communicates and leads efforts in these complex issues is extremely important.

Another educational opportunity is the spring retreat, a two-day, on-campus experience that occurs in connection with a program offered in the format of a summit conference focused on parallel themes of justice, societal issues, and current events. Another major part of the retreat occurs in the form of bridge-building workshops that create space for linking the conference to the SJLLC experience.

So Just ... Reflect

Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) suggested that structured reflection is the key to learning from experiences. Daudelin (1996) stated that “reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior” (p. 39). Research suggests that reflection is critical to a student’s learning (Eyler, & Giles, 1996).

McCarthy (1987) suggested that learning involves the two dimensions of perception and processing. Human perception refers to the ways people take in new information, typically through experience. Human processing refers to the ways people process new information, typically through reflection and action. Boud et al. (1985) suggested that structured reflection is the key to learning from experiences. For this reason, reflection has become central in the implementation of the SJLLC. Structured reflection within the program takes the traditional forms of discussions, journal writing, and reflective essays. However, nontraditional forms of reflection employed in the program have included creation of a video self-portrait and a letter written “to my future self” which is started by students at the beginning of their first year and returned at the completion of the program.

Writing reflectively for a grade can be challenging for some students. Providing personal reflection in a form of a paper challenges students to think

critically and reflectively simultaneously. In the Leadership for Social Justice and Leadership Through Intergroup Dialogue courses, high-quality reflective writing through weekly journaling is essential to students' course grade, and often reveals a steady increase in their personal leadership perception (Burns, 1978). Honoring differences in learning styles, the program pushes to expand the ways in which students reflect on social justice issues, their own development toward understanding social justice, and how they personally can make a difference in their community, country, and world. With the current student generation more technologically savvy than ever (Howe & Strauss, 2000), reflection via technology is an exciting new endeavor.

In one recent Leadership Through Intergroup Dialogue course, students reflected verbally through the creation of a video self-portrait. As seen in mainstream reality television shows, students recorded themselves discussing their own definition of social justice using a web camera. These definitions were then uploaded for viewing on YouTube. Students were able to reflect by preparing and delivering a speech and recording it for public viewing. This reflection activity was not only beneficial in students' own preparation of the video self-portrait, but conversations were sparked in reflecting on other classmates' self-portraits.

Reflection is an important part of the educational process. As Eyler and Giles (1996) suggested, reflection is critical to a student's learning. The SJLLC provides structured reflection to guide students on their journey of learning. Reflection in curricular and co-curricular contexts, traditional forms of writing, and discussion and use of technology in video production comprise an assortment of reflective formats for students. Providing such variety of structured reflection allows students with different learning styles to think critically about their experiences.

SJLLC: Successes and Challenges

As with any educational undertaking, the SJLLC has encountered both successes and challenges. Opening students' hearts and minds to injustices and challenging them to make a difference continues to be a success of this program. Along with other learning outcomes, the SJLLC strives to increase students' competency in intercultural education. After completing the SJLLC program, one student stated: As a White male coming into the social justice LLC, I was expecting

to hear a lot of bashing directed at males and Whites in the form of extreme feminism and “Black power.” Couldn’t have been further from the truth.

Another student said, “[The most powerful part of the program was to] learn about different perspectives. The program surpassed my expectations, and I have experienced growth as a person.” Though even one student developing into a more socially responsible citizen is considered a success, this program strives for maximum impact. On the other hand, expanding student development and pushing students beyond their comfort levels continue to be a challenge.

Program Successes

Since its inauguration in the academic year of 2007-2008, the Social Justice Living Learning Community has seen an increase in the number of students interested in participating, in the diversity of interested students, and in the actual number of student participants. As with any new program, the first year of recruiting posed challenges, the SJLLC has emerged into a success. For the ninth-year cohort of students, over 70 applications were received for 35 spaces.

The diversity of students wishing to participate in the program has increased significantly. During the first year, participants were overwhelmingly White females. By contrast, the ninth cohort is approximately half White and half minority, and the number of students who identify as men as well as transgender has increased, which is ideal for intergroup learning and growth. This enhanced diversity provides a more dynamic environment in which to discuss issues of social justice.

Another success of the program is the greater confidence and empowerment students feel in making a difference in their community. Students discuss this new sense of empowerment openly in town hall meetings, classes, and reflective conversations. Their heightened confidence is demonstrated through their ability to lead and motivate others to become involved in various community service projects and social justice programming. The community service projects range from episodic opportunities to semester-long projects in the local community to international spring-break service trips. Social justice programming created and led by students include movie nights, days of awareness activities, and an interactive program dealing with oppression.

Development of program participants beyond the first-year experience has been another success of this program. Generative leadership is the process through which leaders enable others to act (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). This is accomplished through building relationships, establishing trust, and providing support and encouragement to new leaders. Past participants in the SJLLC have frequently demonstrated generative leadership. Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) proposed a grounded theory in which leadership identity develops in six stages. The six identity stages are (1) awareness, (2) exploration/engagement, (3) leader identified, (4) leadership differentiated, (5) generativity, and (6) integration/synthesis. The fifth stage in this theory is generativity—when students become actively dedicated to larger purposes. Students in the SJLLC often want to articulate passion for what they are involved in, which is usually connected to the beliefs and values they identify as important to them.

Former participants have articulated their passion for the community and have typically wanted to continue their involvement in the program. Serving as the primary voice in the creation of a second-year SJLLC co-curricular program, students continue to demonstrate application of leading described by the social change model (HERI, 1996). The mentoring program began by pairing incoming students with former participants but has developed to include up to five individuals who serve as small-group mentors, coordinators for programs, and teaching assistants in SJLLC courses. These mentors participate in the co-curricular programming aspects of the community, complete a book club and service-learning internship, and serve as resources for staff and students in the program.

Program Challenges

While the SJLLC has experienced several successes, there have been challenges, many of which have offered the program opportunities to grow and evolve into a stronger educational tool. Continued growth in a program can have an even more powerful impact on students, faculty, staff, an institution, and the world. Such challenges include continued development in social justice pedagogy, screening incoming students for participation, and racial identity development within the living learning environment.

Research (e.g., Corbett & Smith, 1984; Dembo & Howard, 2007; Vermunt, 1996) has suggested that individuals have unique learning styles. A continuing

challenge for social justice pedagogy is how to facilitate this diversity of learning. Like social justice education as a whole, the SJLLC is confronted with the challenge of enhancing pedagogy and developing curricula and programs that appeal to all learning styles. Adding to the complexity is the task of understanding where students “are at” individually. Topics of social justice and civic leadership need to take into account individual backgrounds and experiences. Providing a space in which students and staff are able to process information from different perspectives provides a challenging aspect of curriculum development and implementation. Creative facilitation styles, topic development, visual aids, technology, and use of space have challenged all educators involved in the SJLLC.

The selection process for incoming students represents another challenging aspect of the program. One layer of this challenge includes incoming first-year students and their parents having an unclear understanding of what social justice means. To remedy this, students should be selected based on their desire to learn together about social justice toward making a difference, and on the ability to create a diverse community within the group. However, creating a balanced, diverse community that includes a wide variety of experiences and beliefs is challenging with only a small amount of student information available. Screening includes an online application and phone interview, but this does not always provide enough data to make informed selections. Adjusting questions asked both on the application and during the interview has helped in gaining important information; however, refining those questions has been an ongoing developmental process. An added difficulty is the housing process, as it does not permit questions about a student’s racial identity, posing a barrier to creating a diverse cohort of students for the program.

Assessing, supporting, and challenging students in relation to their own personal racial identity development is also a growth opportunity. When tackling such tough, in-depth issues of social justice, personal “inner” work must occur. Drawing from Cross’s (1995) theory of nigrescence, students enter the living learning community at all five stages of pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. Thus, assessing where students are and supporting their struggles, while also challenging them to grow in their thinking becomes complex. Moreover, building individual relationships with students participating in the program is ideal but often not realistic for faculty and staff involved.

Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Exploring an established program such as the SJLLC can assist administrators, faculty, staff, and students who envision implementing a similar program on their own campus. Engaging in conversations around strategies, successes, and challenges would allow social justice educators to support colleagues to build upon this unique pedagogy.

Partnerships across academic and student affairs are essential to the success of higher education institutions in general. However, in creating and implementing a program such as the SJLLC, strong relationships in all areas of the institution are even more vital. Three coordinators from across campus work together to ensure program implementation; these coordinators include a faculty living learning coordinator, a housing coordinator, and a program coordinator. The faculty coordinator provides guidance and support in student academic advising. Housing logistics as well as the marketing of the program is the responsibility of the housing coordinator. The program coordinator provides leadership in planning the retreat, colloquium, mentoring program, and selection of students. While this partnership is not equal in terms of the amount of responsibilities each coordinator has, each person is essential to creating a supportive and successful living learning environment.

Living learning communities can be structured very differently depending on the institution (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2007). In relation to an interdisciplinary topic such as social justice, the appropriate structure of the living learning environment may be more focused, for instance, on building community, diversity of thoughts and experiences, and engagement. Being aware that social justice living learning communities may not fit into the traditional model of discipline-focused living learning communities will encourage program developers to focus on learning objectives rather than historical models in their planning and implementation.

Student emotional preparedness is another implication of such a program. Since the SJLLC focuses on first-year students, emotional readiness should be taken into consideration when creating and implementing such a program. Students are often being exposed as they discuss and reflect upon tough topics related to social justice. Many first-year students have not been exposed to—and therefore do not understand the complexity of—a wide variety of social justice issues. Further,

first-year students may have not encountered such complex and emotional conversations with peers during high school. Thus, creating a safe environment and structuring activities to prepare students for complex and tough conversations is essential to preparing students emotionally for such in-depth discussions.

Along with students, all staff involved in this program should be trained in facilitating difficult conversations. Whether it is faculty teaching courses, staff facilitating co-curricular programs, or student mentors having personal conversations with students, all staff involved should be prepared for potentially emotional discussions. Staff themselves should have a high emotional intelligence, which is defined as identifying, evaluating, and controlling one's emotions, other's emotions, or a group's emotions (Goleman, 1995). This requires faculty and staff to be gifted leaders where thoughts and feelings meet (Goleman, Boyatzi, & McKee, 2002).

Civic leadership is an important aspect of the higher education experience. While the social justice living learning community is only one model, it provides a useful framework whereby educators can learn from the strategies, successes, and challenges in civic leadership and social justice education. Higher education institutions, in the current political and social climate fraught with economic inequality, violence, and heightened race relations, could benefit from implementing this curricular format. The constant struggle of education should move those who benefit from it toward a better life. A utopian life free from oppression and unjust acts should be the goal for humanity. Teaching students to be responsible citizens who feel confident and empowered to make positive sustainable change is the overall goal in this living learning environment in their first year and beyond.

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