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Co-creating Equity and Justice: Student and Employee Partnerships for Racial Justice

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CO-CREATING EQUITY AND JUSTICE: STUDENT AND EMPLOYEE PARTNERSHIPS FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

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“...it was just when Ferguson was really starting to heat up, [there were] a lot of riots. It was honestly really affecting me emotionally.”—Marvin, BSU Senior and Student Leader

The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Gardner and Tamir Rice, among others, at the hands of police in the fall of 2014 affected us all emotionally—as students and employees of color, as white allies, as a campus committed to addressing racial injustice and supporting the academic success and well-being of all of our students. In this essay, our focus is how we, as university students and employees, addressed broader racial injustice by fostering authentic and collaborative partnerships through three campus initiatives.

The first, Supporting the Success of Men of Color Summit, was a statewide summit of male students of color and employees from 19 colleges and universities in Massachusetts on the role of higher education in supporting the success of males of color. The second, Black Lives Matter, was a student-led campus-wide event in response to the ongoing criminalization of people of color. And the third, Acting for Justice, was a student acting group highlighting issues of racism and racial inequality through a series of innovative campus-based interactive performances. All of these initiatives were created, designed, and organized through employee-student partnerships.

The reality of U.S. racialized systems of inequity includes underfunded K-12 education, police killings of unarmed people of color, and persistent and highly demoralizing racial micro-aggressions. Students of color experience marginalization and exclusion on college campuses (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), and research indicates that fostering supportive relationships among

students and employees and creating an inclusive campus culture are key in supporting the success of all students. In addition, structured collaborations between racially diverse students can have positive outcomes for students' academic success and leadership capacity notwithstanding their racial/ethnic identity (Bowman, 2013; Densen & Chang, 2009).

Our commitment to racial justice predates the three campus initiatives discussed in this essay. Beginning in 2007, BSU focused on increasing the retention and graduation rates of students of color, first-generation students, and students from low-income families through a series of institutional initiatives informed by higher education diversity best practices.

In the pages that follow, we share our reflections on the pedagogical promise inherent in student-driven learning, affirm the necessity of non-traditional mentoring and collaborative student-employee learning spaces outside the classroom, and highlight ways in which students and employees can and do form meaningful partnerships to foster racial justice. We describe the three student-employee partnership projects, with a particular focus on how they embodied a collaborative, socially just model of co-created learning, and social action. We center the results of reflection sessions where students and employees shared what they learned through these partnerships, and highlight two core themes that emerged: (1) enactment of social justice/racial justice through authentic, equitable student-employee collaboration, and (2) action-based learning with students embracing leadership roles. We conclude by discussing strategies for and our ongoing reflections on infusing racial justice in future student-employee collaborations.

An Overview of Student and Employee Partnerships for Racial Justice

Summit on Supporting the Success of Male Students of Color

Men Integrated in Brotherhood (MIB), BSU's student-led initiative focused on supporting the success of males of color, was established in 1998, in order to "provide support, show respect, and create a sense of brotherhood with minority men on this campus with the goal of increasing retention and graduation rates." It was this commitment to service that motivated Marvin Ezhan, MIB president, to approach BSU employees in Fall 2014, to propose a partnership to convene a state-wide conference focused on what higher education can, and must, do to support the success of males of color.

President Dana Mohler-Faria and President-elect Fred Clark provided funds needed to offer the conference free of charge to the 19 member institutions of the Leading for Change Diversity Consortium in Higher Education, a group committed to the elimination of opportunity gaps experienced by those from under-represented groups (see <http://www.bridgew.edu/the-university/diversity-consortium>). Each institution sent a team of up to ten employees and ten male students of color to attend the conference. Six MIB student leaders and four employees met for seven months to collaboratively partner in planning the conference entitled Supporting the Success of Males of Color in Higher Education. The employees offered mentoring and leadership development to the MIB student leaders regarding conference planning; the students created the workshop topics, discussion questions, and format for the students attending from across the state.

After seven months of planning, 19 institutions comprising the Leading for Change Diversity Consortium in Higher Education, a group committed to the elimination of opportunity gaps in higher education experienced by those from under-represented groups attended the conference (see <http://www.bridgew.edu/the-university/diversity-consortium>). Each institution sent a team of up to ten employees and ten male students of color to attend the conference.

The conference included: a keynote address by Marvin; a performance by the AFJ Troupe on racial micro-aggressions commonly experienced by male students of color; student and employee workshops; a 90-minute session during which the employees listened to students share how our campuses can best support male students of color; and finally, campus-specific visioning among employee/student teams for future work in supporting the success of male students of color. (For summit materials see <http://www.bridgew.edu/the-university/diversity-consortium/summit-supporting-success-males-color>).

Black Lives Matter

In 2013, three Black Queer women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi, founded the #BlackLivesMatter Movement after the George Zimmerman verdict in the murder of Trayvon Martin and in response to a “world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza, 2014). BSU’s Black Lives Matter event was a collaboration between MIB student members and staff advisor, Richardson Pierre Louis, and students in Social Work Practice with Communities and Organizations (SCWK 432) and their professor, Laura Boutwell.

The goal of the Black Lives Matter event was to provide a supportive space for campus members, in particular, students of color, to share their experiences with and responses to systemic racism and the criminalization of people of color. In particular, we sought to honor and amplify the voices of students of color, to highlight the realities of systemic racism, and to create a socially just space for multiracial dialogue.

Each semester, SCWK 432 students are tasked with selecting a social justice issue and implementing a campus-based intervention. Students in Laura’s class selected the criminalization of young black men after two students of color, both mothers, shared their fears surrounding their adolescent sons’ physical safety and emotional well-being. Out of their commitment to social/racial justice, SCKW 432 students and MIB student leaders built a collaborative working relationship, one rooted in a vision of equitable and authentic connections.

The shape of the event was designed through mutual collaboration between Laura, Richardson, and the students, and was heavily informed by the experiences of the students of color. Laura and Richardson supported the student planners through their legitimate and intense emotional reactions to the continued deaths of black people at the hands of police, including a validation of self-care as an integral part of racial justice work, especially for students of color. This helped students find the strength to act as student leaders and to use their grief, fear and anger as a catalyst for social change.

The Black Lives Matter event was held in the campus center and for two hours, hundreds of members of our campus community discussed the realities of racism, our grief and anger over the deaths of young men of color, and our vision for individual and collective action for change. Students performed spoken word pieces, read poetry, shared personal stories, issued challenges to each other for greater engagement in racial justice, and bore witness to all that was shared. While faculty, staff and administrators were in attendance for support, the focus throughout the event was on student voice, student experience, and student collaboration.

Acting for Justice

The Acting for Justice (AFJ) initiative was created through the BSU Office of Institutional Diversity in order to engage campus community members in productive conversations about injustice and social change. The student troupe co-created scenes with the faculty collaborators, Colleen Rua and Judith Willison, and performed scenes which led to audience/actor discussion targeting dynamics of injustice and avenues for social change. The scenes portrayed incidents of interpersonal oppressions, including racial micro-aggressions and racial targeting by police. Troupe members and faculty partners then co-facilitated discussion with the audience about allyship and social action.

The AFJ Troupe performed at three events during the 2014-2015 academic year. We felt that building a genuine employee-student partnership included honoring the students' already full schedules and expressing the value they brought to the work by providing financial compensation. In order to create a rich learning experience we chose ten students who were diverse in terms of sex, age, race, gender identity, country of origin, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and year in college.

Students and faculty collaborators shaped the direction and focus of AFJ together, including rehearsal time which was split between learning about social justice and leadership, and acting activities using Theatre of the Oppressed methods grounded in the work of Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal. Theatre of the Oppressed concentrates on understanding and addressing social inequities using dialogue between actors and audience members.

In spring 2015, AFJ concentrated on racial injustice and we utilized Forum Theatre scenes depicting "A Day in the Life of Young Men of Color." Troupe members of color contributed their lived experiences of racial injustice, and white students shared their attempts at being allies in the creation of these scenes. Spring semester performances included the BSU Summit and the BSU State-wide Leading for Change Conference, both focused on Supporting the Success of Male Students of Color, the latter with an audience of almost 400. As an extension of the mutual collaboration between students and Colleen and Judith, AFJ Troup students co-facilitated the discussion with audiences in all our performances. Troup members prepared ahead of time through an examination of the oppressive dynamics in the scenes and the creation of discussion questions for the audience to stimulate dialogue focused on what racial oppressions were demonstrated and what social action could be taken.

Reflections on Teaching and Learning in Partnership

How We Gathered Feedback from Students and Employees

Through the three racial justice programs described above, students and employees gained knowledge about partnership, teaching, learning, leadership, and creating forums for campus communities to come together in their commitment to racial justice. To further explore our learning, we held two focus groups for students and employees involved. The first focus group was held with students in the AFJ Troupe who completed a written self-assessment focused on their learning about diversity and social justice, their growth and confidence as leaders, and their beliefs about their capacity to effect social change.

The second focus group included students and employees involved in all three projects who shared what they learned through these partnerships. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Two employees read the transcripts to identify emergent themes. For the purposes of this essay, we will discuss two core themes: (1) the enactment of social justice/racial justice through authentic, equitable student-employee collaboration, and (2) action-based learning with students embracing leadership roles.

Core Themes in Employee-Student Partnerships for Racial Justice

The first core theme of the enactment of social/racial justice through authentic, equitable student-employee collaborations surfaces the complex nature of genuine partnerships. Employees came to the projects with an understanding that including students as equal partners in co-creating social/racial justice requires attention to power differentials and honest invitations for students to become co-leaders. However, through these projects, students and employees alike came to a deeper appreciation of how these student-employee partnerships develop, and what it takes to sustain them.

Engaging in honest, inclusive, and open dialogue was one theme that surfaced as essential to building partnerships. Marvin describes the budding partnership between, Laura, her social work class, and MIB around the Black Lives Matter event: *“That was the first day I met Laura... I could tell her passion... about students and wanting them to be successful. And she showed that to us... that she really wanted to work with us and she followed up with us... she would ask me questions, she would honestly want to know what my input was... Right there, that’s a partnership... And later I had a meeting with her and Richardson and it was the same thing. ‘What should we add?’ ... that’s when I could see that it was a partnership and that’s what made Black Lives Matter so special.”* This model of student-employee alliance diverges from traditional employee-driven models and allows for student’s lived experiences to inform the knowledge base that compels project design.

The development of meaningful employee-student relationships takes us outside of customary mentorship to a place where learning becomes mutual, creating a reciprocal process whereby social justice work is co-created. This requires that employees be truly open to what students have to teach them, despite the cultural, age, and gender gaps that may exist. Richardson describes the importance of sharing ideas with students, rather than initiating employee-led

projects: *“For me I think all three of these endeavors were student driven and... that was key. Like I told Marvin, he’s the third (student) president that I pitched the idea of the Summit to. But he was the one to buy in...we could have done this as administrators years ago when I thought about it, but I wanted this to have been done as something that students...were invested. And that is... precisely why it was successful.”*

It is clear that the Summit was transformed by the student-employee planning and leadership that took place. For instance, student members of MIB brought their own experiences as male students of color to bear in planning the workshop where employees were asked to listen to students’ wisdom about what they need to be successful.

The process of student-employee partnership was facilitated by sharing information about ourselves in a transparent way such that our social identities, including as employees and students, and associated power or disadvantage, were on the table for discussion, as difficult as that may be. An environment of trust and acceptance is critical for mutual partnerships to grow, particularly around such deeply emotional areas as racial justice. Employees reflected on learning how to address power differentials in racial justice work.

For example, during AFJ, exercises based in the Theatre of the Oppressed were utilized to make power visible, to understand its effects, and assist students in claiming their own power as leaders in racial justice. The two white faculty members expressed their intention to be allies in racial justice and talked about their attempts to use their privilege to make social change. The process of inter-racial dialogue and connection is represented by Marvin’s statement: *“...one thing I’ve learned through Acting for Justice is the power of allies. I never really thought of allies that much, having such an impact until I joined Acting for Justice. And the importance it is to have people there who don’t know really what you’re going through...but support you and who are willing to fight beside you. It’s very important.”* Through in-rehearsal activities focused on power and disadvantage, room was made for students’ and faculty collaborator’s social identities to be shared, accepted, and celebrated.

The second core theme relevant to our work on these racial justice projects is the use of action-based learning with students embracing leadership roles. Students from diverse backgrounds were key players in planning and designing the three racial justice initiatives. All of the projects involved partnerships within co-curricular forums that included members of the larger campus community and were lead or co-led by our students. As employees relinquished positions as experts to become co-creators, students were elevated into leadership roles and fashioned dynamic forums for social action-based learning. Students who had not previously considered themselves leaders found that they could bring their own unique style to leadership and could contribute significantly to racial justice work.

Jovan, a student member of MIB, described the process of stepping into a leadership position in planning for the Summit and his relationship with Sabrina, the Director of the Office of Institutional Diversity: *“...Sabrina kept asking us ‘How do you feel about that?’ And...with her partnership she let us dictate everything, let us run the show. But...sometimes where (we would) be stuck... And Sabrina, or even Richardson too, he will come by and...when there’s silence in the room and he’s like, ‘Ok, what do you think about this?’ And he will ask us questions to make*

us think more. And they allowed us to think in ways that we never thought we would think that helped the summit be successful.” This comment reflects the ways in which employees worked to uncover students’ ideas, talents, and skills.

Students commented on learning concrete skills related to social action and leadership including critical thinking, organizing, meeting participants where they are, facilitation, advocacy, and problem solving. An example of action based learning was the way in which students who were part of organizing the Black Lives Matter event served as project leaders and, supported by a staff advisor and a professor, utilized multiple strategies to highlight systemic racial injustice and to affirm the inherent value of Black lives. These student actions/learning opportunities included event publicity, background research, a Facebook page (Color is Not a Crime), a Black Lives Matter flyer series featuring ten stories of black men killed by the police, chalking events, a radio broadcast, spoken word pieces, and “The Listening Project,” a collection of interviews with campus and community members on racism, with an emphasis on the first hand experiences, thoughts, and feelings of Black men.

In addition, students and employees highlighted several core elements that equipped them to lead difficult conversations around racism and racial justice on our campus. These included trusting the process and emerging partnerships, working in co-curricular forums that promoted community-building; and allowing oneself to feel loved and accepted and honored while extending those same sentiments to other members of the collaboration. As students fashioned their roles in the employee-student community that each initiative built, they became more comfortable with their inter-racial leadership roles. The leadership role varied for white students and students of color. White students stepped up as allies to people of color, and students of color represented hope and leadership for other students and employees of color.

Faculty in particular learned to surrender their typical role as “teacher” in order to encourage students to step into their own leadership power. In fact, faculty discussed the ways in which student-led racial justice initiatives are more powerful than employee-led ones in that students create the culture of any higher educational institution through peer influence and group relationships. Judith commented on students co-leading the AFJ Troupe: *“And the students in AFJ got to be the centerpiece of the project. So it wasn’t me getting up teaching a class, it wasn’t me teaching a lecture, it wasn’t me doing a conference...it was the students actually reaching out to the other students and employees.”* Once students had learned the social action related skills necessary to carry out racial justice work, they were able to more independently lead.

Another component of the experience of action-based student leadership that employees and students talked about was the impact on the BSU community. Julian described the influence he felt the Summit had on the campus community’s capacity to engage in cross-racial dialogue: *“...seeing the whole BSU community finally come together and talk about something that’s... hard for others to talk about. Like me talking about... racial things outside of my racial group is... uncomfortable for me. But that day... made me more comfortable. Just seeing people from... different races, different cultures come together and finally... say “You know this is wrong and this is right” ...It really had an impact... Like, my roommate is black but my suitemates they’re white and they were talking about it. They were like, “Wow, this is a great thing that you guys did.”* This enactment of racial justice work in community afforded students

the opportunity to understand their own capacity to act as leaders in larger communities and to witness the impact on others of social action.

Both the structure of the projects and the inclusion of members of the campus community appeared important to the success of these student-employee partnerships. Danielle commented on the use of social action-based performances by AFJ: *“...combining acting and social justice is a good way to get it out there. I feel like people are very moved by this and they’re able to grasp the concept if the situations are placed right in front of them. I feel like, if you see a performance...[you] tell people about it...people are going to spread the message of what we’re doing on campus.”* Employees supported the empowerment of the students such that they delivered the messages about racial justice in innovative formats that were based in social action.

Regarding social action-based learning and having an impact on the campus community through AFJ, Marvin commented: *“After we did those skits and had...the follow-up questions...you could really see people thinking and start making action as well...there were people that said, ‘Hey, we’ve gone through the same thing as this skit has shown me. I’ve been through that. And this has shown me a way I can get out of it or this has shown me a way that I can bring it up on campus.’ So I think it has made a difference.”*

The specific goal of enacting racial justice work was deepened by the fact that students of color were front and center in all three projects. Commenting on the impact of male students of color leading the Summit, Sabrina stated: *“...one of the groups we know isn’t well served in higher education is males of color. For me it was to have one small bit of contribution to help address that inequity. There is something very powerful about white people being in an environment where they are encouraged to sit, be quiet, and listen to the pain, experience, wisdom, hope, vision, skill, competencies of all those men of color.”* Students of color become visible in the campus community as leaders, honoring their lived experiences and their knowledge.

Conclusion

In reflecting on what aspects of our experience could be applied to other campuses and their efforts at co-creating racial justice in partnerships between employees and students, we would emphasize that these initiatives did not feel like “projects” to those of us involved, but like movements aimed at racial justice. As Jovan put it: *“Reach out. Reach out to staff and see if this is something they would really like to be a part of and if not, start with the students themselves. Start a movement and see where it can go from there.”*

The experience of employee-student partnership is unique, but we also believe this can be replicated on other campuses, given the commitment of employees and students toward racial justice work. Laura, commenting on the Black Lives Matter event, described it this way: *“And then, I think the moment I wish I could so capture, if I were going to teach future students about collaboration and partnership is...that day, how it looked...when you’re really trusting your partners and you’re sharing a vision and you know everyone’s heart is in the right place.”*

The other insight that seems relevant to employee-student partnerships working towards racial justice is that one important starting place is creating an inclusive environment where students

feel accepted and can generate momentum for social change themselves. Advising campus faculty, staff and administrators, Julian said it best: “*Definitely create a place where students can come and be themselves. That is going to vary based on the campus and based on the demographics of that campus and whatever the space the students need...every campus is different, but as long as they start something... It won't be perfect because things do change... just start somewhere, and once you have the foundation you keep bettering it and making improvements on it.*”

The hope and joy experienced by both students and employees involved in these three racial justice initiatives confirms the power of genuine partnerships characterized by non-traditional mentoring and student leadership. In using co-curricular forums which included the BSU and larger campus communities as mediums for social change, students were honored as co-creators and public leaders, creating a culture of commitment to racial justice. All of us who were privileged to be part of these efforts are grateful for the alliances we built and hope this model can be useful for other campuses in their racial justice work.

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