

“My Head is Spinning:” Doing Authentic Intersectional Work in Identity Centers

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In the fast paced industry of higher education, where the efficacy of a college education is regularly questioned, standing still is close to sacrilege for student affairs professionals. This article, however, advocates just that. Using intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the authors review its purpose and potential for use in identity centers. Specifically, this article uses a case study methodology to examine the work of three identity-based centers working together to inform *Intersections*, an intersectional, social justice effort. The authors conclude by providing suggestions for how to authentically engage in this work with the goal of stimulating different ways of leading, inspiring new relationships, and creating innovative practice in the field of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As identity-based centers have grown in number and influence on college campuses, the frameworks that guide their work, as well as the ways in which these theoretical locations manifest, have undergone significant changes. Over the years, what we term identity centers, have also been called advocacy offices, cultural centers, and social justice centers, within the higher education lexicon (Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2011). Much of what has been written about these centers focuses on their historical significance, most notably in connection to the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s (Patton, 2010), often utilizing a founding narrative to tell the story of a specific location. While there has been some recent writing on how the work in centers is evolving (e.g., Cuyjet, Howard-Hamilton, Cooper, 2011; Marine, 2011; Stewart, 2011) an explicit discussion about intersectionality theory and practice is a newer contribution.

In this article we briefly discuss the history of intersectionality in higher education, from its Black feminist theory roots to some of its current uses. In doing so, our assumption is that centers should be challenged to move beyond identity work to engagement in authentic social justice work, undergirded by intersectionality theory. To tell this story, we will use the experience of our own intersectional efforts with three identity-based centers that were originally initiated as spaces to address gender, race and sexuality, to tell this story. Throughout this article, they will be called “the three centers.” Finally, we will use a risk-benefit analysis to reflect on how we have made meaning of our journey toward intersectionality and embed recommendations for how others might also engage. It is important to note that we do not attempt to solve the tensions that arise from operating within an intersectional framework. Inspired by Bromley’s (2012) notion of engaging in critical intersectionality, “making my head spin” (p. 47), we provide suggestions to ease such tensions and hope our story motivates the continual struggle to contribute to transformational change, both as practitioners and as centers.

METHODOLOGY

In case study methodology, the outcome is an in-depth understanding of a case or cases set in their real world contexts (Bromley, 1986). We employed a quasi-case study approach by examining the work of the three centers through the lens of intersectionality. As participants in the centers, our closeness allowed for an insightful appreciation of the processes taking place. Case study was chosen because of the descriptive question we sought to answer: What is happening in the centers as we attempt to apply intersectionality to learning and in practice? Robert Sake’s (1995) research on case studies makes evident that the type of phenomena studied by qualitative researchers “often takes long to happen” and “evolves along the way” (p. 45). Sake’s insights about shifting phenomena are useful as we engage in an inquiry in a constantly changing setting and draw on case study methodology.

Upon entering this analysis, we rejected the positivist paradigm, which suggests there is an objective reality (England, 1994). We have also been influenced by Smith’s (1990/2007) assertion that researchers’ identities matter and we mustn’t attempt to stand outside the process. Thus, as we studied and reflected on the efforts of the three centers, we acknowledged our own positionality as both participants and observers. We embrace the social constructivist paradigm, which requires us to recognize that our life experiences shape our understanding of the world, and that those understandings are further influenced by personal, cultural, and historical contexts (Creswell, 2003).

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality as a means to understand the combination of identities in a specific location has been used for more than a decade to understand the combination of identities in a specific location (Dill, McLaughlin, & Nieves 2007). Its usefulness is in connecting identity to systems of privilege and oppression (Jones & Abes, 2013) and has not been fully realized throughout the academy, although it is gaining attention and momentum (Mitchell, 2014). As Jones (2014) points out,

to only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power.

Higher education scholars have been relatively unsophisticated in the application of intersectionality because they overemphasized its identity applications. In fact, intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

In this article we suggest that doing the work of social justice (e.g., social change) cannot be done without engaging in the personal work of intersectionality. Thus, truly embedding intersectional thinking in social justice locations makes for an authentic application where participants must reconcile their own biases and identity conflicts in order to make true social change. Importantly, the layering of identity, intersectionality, and social justice is not a linear process, but rather a necessary journey for those doing work in identity centers in higher education.

Black feminists introduced the concept of intersectionality to highlight how the axes of identity interact on multiple levels within systems of oppression (Combahee River Collective Statement, 1977; Crenshaw, 1994). “Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class, and religion, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination” (Collins, 2009, p. 3). Building upon this theory, Gloria Anzaldua (1987), a Mexican-American feminist theorist, posits that by engaging in intersectionality “the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That element is a new consciousness” (p. 02). Grounded in this thinking, a postmodern critique of identity challenges the stability of identity categories, and thus, adds to a robust theory of intersectionality. Identity not only contains multitudes, but is also subject to change the way in which an individual interacts with the world around them.

BACKGROUND

The earliest creation of identity centers were largely Black cultural centers (BCCs) and were created out of students’ demands to hold higher education accountable for racial inequity in the college experience (Patton, 2010). They provided stimulus for the growth of cultural centers that served racially and ethnically diverse students, in addition to other students with marginalized identities (Davies, 2002). Similarly, women’s centers “emerged as a phenomenon in their own right in the early 1970’s” (Willinger, 2002, p. 47) with the primary goal of making universities aware of the contributions of women as well as working towards gender equity. Following these, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) centers in the early 1990s, sought to provide voices to sexual minorities (Magolda & Baxter Magolda, 2011). While the specific history of each center type, and that of each individual location, contains variation, it is understood that what many consider identity centers have become a fixture on the majority of U.S. college campuses (Patton, 2010).

While centers have grown, expanded, and changed, their stories are largely represented as static in the current literature of higher education. As a result, little has been noted regarding the fluidity of theory that governs the work of these centers. Since inequity in higher education remains an ongoing social justice challenge (Bensimon, 2005), it is important to broadly examine the current theoretical frameworks and practices that centers use in undergirding their work.

The construct of identity can be found throughout higher education, and readily in student affairs practice (Jones & Abes, 2013; Renn, 2004). In the most basic of descriptions, identity has

shaped the creation of centers to bring together students with a shared identity (e.g., race, gender, and sexuality) in spaces designed specifically for them. These spaces strive to be free from intolerance and prejudice; build community; are staffed by people who share an identity and/or work as dedicated allies; offer programs and events about issues pertinent to this identity group; advocate for equality; and serve as sites of resistance (Patton, 2010).

When identity-based centers were first established, the structure and governance of their universities dictated their mission, vision, and goals. As a result, the frameworks that guided the efforts of these locations were understood as identity-based and linked to the notion of increasing diversity on college campuses. They have also been linked to the notion of increasing diversity. Many institutions, and as a result centers, are committed to *diversity*, although there are a variety of meanings attached to that word (Ahmed, 2006; Anderson 2008; Jones, 2006). Some define diversity in terms of numerical representation and others the presence of activities related to educating dominant identity holders about those with marginalized identities. These two almost contradictory notions about what diversity is poses challenges; diversity work may or may not entail a commitment to social justice (Ahmed, 2006; Iverson, 2010; Jones 2006)—and diversity work often does not question, much less try to alter systems of dominance.

As the landscape of higher education has continued to evolve and change, identity-based centers have been encouraged to be less singularly focused and be able to articulate the tensions among and amongst the groups which they serve. While the previous focus on identity certainly yielded clashes regarding access to power, allocation of resources provided by upper administration, and the types of students who associated with each location, the early 2000s shifted the focus of some identity-based centers to that of social justice. As women's centers were linked to feminism, Black cultural centers and/or multicultural centers to critical race theory and LGBT resource centers to queer theory, the research and scholarship of each field influenced the frameworks that governed the actions of these centers (Lee & McKerrow, 2005). As all three distinct, and yet complementary, theories articulated, oppression based on gender, race, and sexuality are all intrinsically linked. From this influence, what were once identity-based centers, grew into locations of social justice focused on attempting to dismantle systems of oppression. While social justice was certainly not a conceptual part of the creation of higher education, public education created opportunities for social justice to be seen as a tool for change in academia.

This transformation was, like many movements within the confines of higher education, subtle to many, but radical to those working closely within centers. A social justice perspective shifted a number of priorities in these centers, perhaps most significantly, serving as locations of resistance for minority populations. As previously noted, resistance has always been associated with centers, as their mere existence could be seen as an act of opposition against the hegemonic structures of higher education. This open shift in ideology and practice allowed for the acknowledgement of not only interlocking systems of control but also the subjugation of identity groups by one another. Poet and activist Audre Lorde (1983) articulated this shift:

The oppression of women knows no ethnic or racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical at those boundaries. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries either. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference. For then beyond sisterhood, is still racism. (p. 94)

There are no boundaries on sexism, Lorde (1983) astutely notes, just as there are none on racism or white supremacy, nor homophobia and heterosexism. This implicates each location ideally built on creating shelter and resistance as a potential perpetrator of counter subjugation. Using a social justice frame that recognized this lateral oppression (Native Women's Association of Canada, 2012), identity-based centers actively worked to connect with one another and expose the places where the struggles of each group were linked with each other. Thus, some still consider these spaces identity centers or advocacy centers while those who work within and support these locations often think of them as sites of social justice. On the surface this looks like intersectionality, and it certainly moves the work of centers closer to an intersectional approach, however, there are some distinct differences.

Intersectionality is associated with both the external work of social change as well as the personal work of understanding one's own identity. While Patricia Hill Collins (2000) understood that "cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society" (p. 42), she also recognized intersectionality to be a politics of difference. In her construct of dichotomous oppositional difference (1986), she notes that "intersectionality is characterized by its focus on differences rather than similarities" (p. 20). More specifically, while the social justice model of operation present in centers is vitally important, it must also be present in conjunction with an intersectional frame. According to Collins (1986), having a sense of self-value and a stable self-definition not obtained from outside influences helps to overcome the oppressive societal methods of domination.

Understanding the identity of oneself, and perhaps most importantly, one's role as both oppressor and oppressed, is a requirement to challenging the status quo. This way of thinking poses obstacles to those engaged in identity center work as it forces personal reflection while working towards social change. While a social justice frame illuminates an understanding of interlocking systems of oppression, it does not, implicitly, position everyone as potential perpetrators of oppression, nor motivate personal discomfort. Using a non-intersectional application of social justice has the potential to create spaces where one can engage in efforts to effect change outside but still retain unspoken bias and prejudice within.

This is why a diversity, or identity-specific approach alone, is not always effective to move a location towards social justice orientation. Some researchers have found that social justice may be more easily achieved through a diversity frame (Jones, 2006), however, others see operating in this way as problematic:

Whereas the concepts of equity and equal opportunities imply an underlying concept of social justice for all and active endeavors to change this, the notion of diversity invokes the existence of difference and variety without any necessary commitment to action or redistributive justice. (Deem & Ozga, as cited in Ahmed, 2006, p. 745)

What it means to be a woman, to be African American, queer, and so on is complex and as centers practice intersectionality, it becomes core to their work to consciously and consistently complicate identities, both among students as well as practitioners.

Before intersectionality emerged as a defined theory, Freire's (1970) critical theory emphasized the importance of examining inequities through a critical lens. Freirean theory offered a way to deconstruct hegemonic ideology. Intersectionality should connect, enhance, and further the deconstruction of identity to include action based challenges to systems of

oppression. As Naomi Zack (2007), a feminist philosopher, explains regarding the gap between understanding the importance of intersectionality but finding it difficult to apply, “The mantra of ‘race, class, gender’ quickly became the new expression of liberatory enlightenment, but the deeper scholarly implications of intersectionality are still working their way through the academy” (p. 193).

The movement towards an intersectional approach requires a shift of centers’ self-concept. Instead of assuming an identity group has a universal experience of oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and/or the combinations of these identities, intersectionality imposes no limits to the numbers or types of intersected identity experiences. According to Museus and Griffin (2011) intersectionality “enables a more accurate reflection of the diversity in higher education...centering the voices and experiences of those at the margins” (as cited in Jones, 2014, p. xi). At the onset, the limitless quality of this type of thinking can, as we indicated earlier, make ones’ head spin. Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) advised that understandings of intersectionality are constantly developing and that it is important, as we move forward, “to assess what intersectionality does” rather than what intersectionality is (p. 304). . Carbado and colleagues (2013) have called intersectionality a “work-in-progress” (p. 304), and the experiences we will share related to this journey reinforce this.

PRACTICING A PARADIGM

As educators working from an intersectional framework, we are required to constantly look at the confluence of multiple identities and the systems in which they operate. As a result, the three centers, of which this analysis is about, are engaging in radical thinking; reconceptualizing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, functioning as transformative sites of resistance, and also rejecting additive approaches to oppression that essentialize identity. The work of these three centers linked together during the 2012-13 academic year under the title *Intersections*. *Intersections* allows the centers to engage in coalition work, with intersectionality as a frame. Examples include designing and planning of events, developing initiatives and facilitating shared learning. This process resulted in a shared mission, values, and goals, as well as agreements to guide our work (see Figure 1).

Intersections is about looking at the interlocking systems of oppression.

We need to understand that each form of oppression is intertwined with every other form of oppression. Not one of these oppressions can be isolated. Even though we are constantly trying to use a singular frame, a more thorough examination reveals the complexities of these issues. Systems of oppression include: racism (white supremacy), sexism, heterosexism, ableism, classism (capitalism), etc.

Intersections practice requires stretching ourselves to develop a shared critique in how we approach our work.

Whenever one center responds to a particular issue/incident (bias incident, newspaper response, violence on campus, etc.), we should consult the other centers to examine additional intersectional issues we could respond to as well. Constantly refer to other forms of oppression as is done in liberation movements. Example: For our current need of single user restrooms to

accommodate our trans* and gender non-confirming community, we could incorporate the following comparison that just as people with disabilities could not access public restrooms because able-bodied people did not recognize their needs.

Intersections thinking involves understanding and critiquing the systems that are operating where we work and our role in them.

Higher education is not immune to manifesting and supporting systems of oppression. Therefore, we must both be members of the campus community – engaging in university-wide commitments to fulfilling our mission – while also working to strengthen the campus and make it more inclusive, equitable and just.

Intersections work requires recognizing and responding to the tensions that exist in our work.

We need to recognize that this work is not easy – that we may bump up against one another in the process of how we frame issues, ask questions and do our work. In the moments of dissonance, it is imperative that we examine our own privilege and sit with what is uncomfortable before responding. Examining what we have to lose -- is the most important and threatening aspect of intersectional work. We need to examine what is at stake for us in dismantling unjust systems: It may be our identity, our access to resources, and/or our comfort level.

Figure 1. Shared agreements (Kowalski-Braun, 2011).

The well-placed criticism of singular identity foci helps our centers understand our work as advocates in a more complex and systems-based way, but does not negate the multiplication of attentions we are now required to hold, and the resources allocated towards our work. An important aspect of social change is focusing one's attention on the root causes of problems rather than on the surface level issues they create (Komives, 2009). As we move towards a socially just intersectional approach, our work must integrate resistance while attending to the fluidity of identity, which quickly becomes complex.

In our centers, our primary focus is on the experience of students who we know are largely shaped by their forced group membership. True freedom for students will occur when individuals have the right to move in and out of groups “much as we join clubs and other voluntary associations” (Collins, 1997, p. 375). Collins asks us to consider, how do we use our spheres of influence to challenge simplified thinking? For example, some staff in the centers feared that in sharing too much work the distinct identities and corresponding needs of our students would become diluted. However “fluidity does not mean that groups disappear” (Collins, 1997, p. 376). It became necessary to remind ourselves that intersectionality did not function to eradicate difference, but to illuminate the potential interactions among identity groups and to uncover how we are oppressed by the same systems. As we engage in fresh thinking and a new paradigm is understood, it was virtually impossible to go about any type of business as usual.

Risks and Benefits

As one can imagine, in addition to a hefty workload, this approach comes with considerable hazards and rewards. However, little scholarship is devoted to providing centers with guidelines on how to manage either. This section outlines the risks and benefits our *Intersections* work exposed, and makes suggestions on how to maximize opportunities for growth. The areas we will explore include: shared work; new leaders, new leadership; institutional structures; consciousness raising; and slowing down as a tool.

Shared Work

One of the first, and perhaps most exciting benefits, is being able to create a shared vision. Beyond crossing institutional boundaries, the invisible boundaries created during the formation of our centers needed to be—if not dismantled—examined. Consensus building was a necessary strategy to move *Intersections* forward. Similarly, this work needed a shared language and a common understanding of words and their power: words like oppression, social justice, advocacy and activism.

In our centers we were guilty of using these terms as buzzwords without deeply exploring what they meant to each of us. This misstep exposed how locations defined terms differently contributing to misunderstandings and confusion. These processes allowed for a *critical consciousness* around intersectionality to develop. Critical consciousness is defined as “a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including white privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism” (Capper et al., 2006, p. 213). As a result, we began to see our centers as spaces that are inextricably linked.

New Leaders, New Leadership

While a shared vision and language was a good first step, changes in leadership practice were also required. Authenticity as a leader is more challenging when needing to negotiate multiple and intersecting identities. In educational leadership theory and practice, some of the most common models are transactional leadership (Burns, 1979), transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1979), and situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1988), as well as some focus on leadership for social change (Astin & Leland, 1991; Komives & Wagner, 2009) and social justice (Diaz, 2011; Rusch & Horsford, 2008). We learned, however, that when multiple identities and the experience of marginalization are taken into account, the understanding of leadership practices, and the understanding of organizations, is substantially and qualitatively changed (Santamaria, 2014).

What an intersectional lens brings to higher education leadership required us to more deeply think about *who* both leaders and followers are. The dominant leadership paradigm remains white, male, hetero-normative, and non-poor leaving little room for the valuing of identity and oppression. When these are acknowledged they are still seen as additives and not core to leadership knowledge and practice. With intersectionality as the paradigm, the directors of the centers, supported by administrative leadership, began to lead differently. Transformational leadership theory focuses on obtaining trust and displaying respect for followers (Bass, 1985), but does not make clear our need to achieve an understanding of followers’ identity oppression within systems. When striving to put intersectional thinking into

practice, we quickly found that few leadership models fit our work. In this space, leaders took risks by telling their own stories as well as asking and listening to the stories of followers. Our hope is that our interactions with each other, and the ways in which we value each in higher education environments, will lead to opportunities for deeper understanding of our work, ourselves and each other.

Institutional Structures

As this work began to pick up speed, institutional inequity among centers regarding budgets and resource allocation could no longer remain private and, at times, became divisive. Projects favored by upper administration were difficult to suddenly share when they correlated with high visibility and rewards. The centers continue to work to overcome this, but not without exposing the sources of these tensions, and more importantly, not without those possessing privilege (e.g., budget, staffing, visibility) being asked to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged partners. This area is one where the work of Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, and Tomlinson (2013) reminds us that intersectionality is a process. Moving from obligation to personal motivation is the desired outcome.

Consciousness-Raising

The most apparent risk in engaging in new learning together was being committed to confronting information that may make members of centers uncomfortable. This remains difficult as awareness of oppression within the centers unfolds. For obvious reasons this work can be uncomfortable, bumping up against norms of a depersonalized professional environment in higher education. All participants have to be committed to confronting the ways in which they benefit from privilege and suffer from oppression. This has proven to be an occasional breaking point, where dissonance causes individuals to retreat to their comfort zones. The answer to this has been to create sustained and purposeful spaces where people have to communicate and connect. This is motivated by the knowledge that social justice awareness is born out of personal and professional struggles with injustices, but can also be purposefully taught (Bussey, 2008).

Slowing Down as a Tool

One way to preempt the paralysis that confronting privilege can inspire is to intentionally slow down the pace of the work in anticipation of setbacks described above. As a team comprised of staff from multiple centers learns to trust one another enough to expose their gaps in knowledge and their emotional fragility, building in time to process this can be a great benefit. Naturally, this method of creating time and space for authentic stages of learning is ideal, but can be difficult to accommodate in a fast-paced higher education landscape.

Strong leadership and advocacy of intersectional learning allows the space for internal growth. “In an increasingly diverse and multiethnic world, leadership....needs to be re-formed as critical, reflexive and concerned with social justice and praxis” (Taylor, 1995, p. 60). In the centers, this reflexivity manifested through regularly scheduled meetings, shared readings, multiple daylong retreats, and reinforcement of successful *Intersections* work. The work is difficult so coming back together again gives opportunity to constantly revisit and keep building.

CONCLUSION

This article outlined the ways in which identity-based centers have evolved and makes the case for why intersectionality theory is critical to shaping practice. Specifically, we utilized a case study methodology to examine the work of three identity centers to highlight the risks and benefits associated with deeply embedding this commitment. As discussed, this is not easy. We consider our efforts a work in progress and hope our journey will motivate aspirational thinking about what can be achieved when intersectionality is applied. Additionally, as more research related to integrating intersectionality into multiple spaces in higher education occurs, we are encouraged by the possibilities. Creating a robust community of intersectional practitioners allows for emancipatory ways of operating within the academy.

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