



SCHOLARSHIP-TO-PRACTICE

HELPING STUDENT LEADERS ENGAGE AS ALLIES

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IN FIGHTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, ALLIES AND THEIR EFFORTS RECEIVE A SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF ATTENTION. This attention can be justified, as allies serve essential functions in efforts to eliminate inequities present in social systems, through the pursuit of social justice (Russell & Bohan, 2016). “Allies are a crucial group in the work of social justice” (Munin & Speight, 2010, p. 249). Add to this that higher education is increasingly looked to as a critical source of leadership development (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Hastings & Sunderman, 2019), and the need to address allyship among student leaders is especially poignant. Embracing action as allies is one avenue to aid students’ learning to integrate social justice into their approach to leadership, which is a key aspect of developing as socially responsible leaders (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Irwin, 2015).

I use the term student leaders in this article as an all-encompassing term to reflect students who are actively engaged in student organizations and activities, and who are likely to take part in organizational meetings and training sessions. This definition is important to note, as conceptions of leadership have shifted from industrial notions of leadership (Dugan & Komives, 2007) to questioning the importance of position-based leadership (Linder, 2016). Involvement in activities and leadership roles increases students’ development of community values. “Community values define leadership as active community participation as a result of a sense of responsibility to the communities in which people live” (Foreman & Retallick, 2016, p. 86).

In addition to student leader being a bit difficult definition to nail down, social justice is a somewhat ambiguous term “without a consensus definition” (Bredemeier & Shields, 2019, p. 202) that has earned buzzword status across student affairs (Patton, Shahjahan, & Osei-Kofi, 2010). Because of that, I want to offer a clear definition and description of what social justice is and represents. Social justice reflects actions aimed at eliminating systems of oppression, which involves both procedural justice and distributive justice (Reason & Davis, 2005). Procedural justice is where students and student activities professionals are likely to focus their efforts, as it relates to who has access and input in decision-making processes. Bell (2018) described social justice as being both “a process and a goal” (p. 1), which reinforces the idea that social justice is active (process), but that it also represents a state of being (goal). But as a buzzword in student affairs, social justice has lost some of its meaning. I have encountered this at student affairs conferences and within individual institutions. When something is a buzzword, it gets used without intention. For example, a department might use language about a commitment to social justice on its website without having discussed what that commitment looks like.

An advisor plays a critical role in assisting students in their development as socially responsible leaders (Irwin, 2015). Advisors help students learn to navigate policies and institutional practices. This role is especially import-

ant when student leaders' allyship enters into the realm of activism, which is a link that has been brought out in recent scholarship (see Martin, Linder, & Williams, 2019)

Approaching the link between leadership development and allyship development of student leaders fits with prior calls to better understand the development of student leaders between "a person's capacity to lead" (Rosch, Collier, & Thompson, 2015, p. 286). This link is critical, as research has shown that participation in activism-related activities, which are often lumped under a label of social justice efforts, contributes to student growth on measures of citizenship and civic responsibility (Martin, Williams, Green, & Smith, 2019).

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE ALLIES

Ally is another term that is used, possibly in ways akin to a buzzword, but I do not see or hear ally being tossed around the way buzzwords often are in student affairs. Regardless, if student activities professionals are going to help students who identify as allies engage in social justice action, it is important to spend some time digging into allies and allyship.

Defining Social Justice Allies

Social justice allies are people from dominant identity groups working to address the effects of oppression on members of underrepresented groups. Sometimes allies are defined as individuals working on behalf of members of oppressed or underrepresented groups (Washington & Evans, 1991). Broido (2000) focused allyship on privilege: "social justice allies are members of dominant social groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals) who are working to end the system of oppression that gives them greater privilege and power based on their social-group membership" (p. 3).

The work of allyship has to be with the oppressed, not for or on anyone's behalf (Freire, 2008). The ally, because of their possession and performance of one or more dominant identities that are inscribed with power, and function to then reinscribe that power in systems, lives in precarious spaces. The power differentials that exist between oppressed and oppressor results in ongoing dehumanization, because "the oppressor, who is [themselves] dehumanized because [they] dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle" (Freire, 2008, p. 47). The concept of this power differential is very important to keep in mind in the context of student leaders. It can be common for student leaders to take the mantle of leadership to mean advocacy for other students. Advisors have to help student leaders recognize the importance of actually seeking out and hearing the voices of other students.

Understanding Ally Developmental Models

As Edwards (2006) theorized, there are three stages to ally development, where the individual progresses in their motivation for allyship: beginning with self-interest, followed by altruism, then reaching a pinnacle of working toward social justice. Allies for self-interest are often motivated to don the ally label because of a personal experience of someone they know. This type of motivation could be seen in a student leader who expresses their allyship in response to a lesbian friend being on the receiving end of slurs being shouted as they walk across campus. The ally for self-interest will probably not engage in action to address any issues related to their friend's experience, because they see what their friend encountered as being driven by ignorant people, rather than systems that support negative behaviors. Allies for altruism express ally identities driven by a belief that they can and should use their privilege to advocate for others. Their motivation likely comes from experiencing guilt for their unearned privileges (e.g., White guilt), but have yet to comprehend that their unearned privileges are linked to broader systems of oppression. They also fail to recognize that advocating for others does nothing to address systemic oppression. Finally, allies for social justice engage in allyship to confront and dismantle systems of oppression. They see that the roles they play as allies do not take center stage, as their focus is on working alongside members of oppressed groups.

Accomplices, not Allies

One of the critiques of allyship and allies is that allies have the privilege of not having any skin in the game. In other words, allies can risk little in their performance of allyship because they inherently have little to nothing to lose. The lack of risk becomes more apparent when considering the different stages of development where advisors might encounter allies.

STRATEGIES FOR HELPING ALLIES TAKE ACTION TOWARD BECOMING ACCOMPLICES

Like any identity development model, Edwards' (2006) model offers student activities professionals a framework for thinking through the potential development trajectory of students with whom they work. The strategies provided in this section do not represent an exhaustive list. These strategies are drawn from a combination of sources: scholarly literature, conference sessions, and conversations with student affairs educators, including conversations with graduate students in classes I have taught.

The strategies I share here are not sequential; one does not lead to the next. Likewise, addressing these are not tasks to be marked as completed on a task list. Rather, the strategies are equally important and require advisors to approach supporting leaders in this realm as a critical component of their work.

Focus on Actions

Help students focus on actions rather than ally identities. "By definition, the focus of allyship should be on actions (i.e., defining allyship as a verb) rather than identity (i.e., defining allyship as a noun)," (Toomey, McGeorge, & Carlson, 2016, p. 248). One of the pitfalls of allyship, which is connected to social justice being a buzzword, is that it is easy for someone to call themselves an ally without doing anything. The result is that this means there is a great deal of work to be done in shifting the definition of allyship to a verb rather than a noun focused on identity. As student activities professionals work with student leaders engaged in allyship, they can focus on actions by asking questions about what students are doing, which means spending time digging in with student leaders.

Understand Spheres of Influence

You likely have worked with students who are fired up and ready to take on the world and get in everyone's face. You might have been that student. While there can be a time and place for engaging in that type of work as an accomplice for social justice, staff have responsibilities to help students navigate their institutions. Learning to do that requires understanding the places and spaces where they might be able to have influence. One of the keys to understanding one's spheres of influence is being able to recognize power dynamics both within and between groups (Linder, 2019). This recognition includes both the role of one's own privilege and how privilege is used and leveraged by others.

Embrace Discomfort

Allyship can be uncomfortable (Case, 2012). There can be discomfort in sharing an ally identity with others. There can be discomfort when engaging in social justice action as a member of a dominant identity group. There can be discomfort in starting conversations about social justice and allyship with groups to which a campus activities professional is assigned as an advisor. One of the first moments of discomfort for would-be allies is wrestling with the recognition of one's privilege (Case, 2012). Helping allies in their development means that the advisor has down their own work.

Do Your Own Work

The struggle for some student activities professionals in helping student leaders engage as allies is that the professionals are still finding their places and voices in addressing social justice. All of the other suggestions for helping student leaders engage as allies are rendered meaningless if advisors do not attend to their own development in this area.

The need for doing one's own work is not exclusive to student activities professionals from dominant identity groups. Everyone needs to recognize who they are in relation to others; how experiences with and within systems of oppression intersect. Social justice efforts in higher education have to be intersectional (Pitcher, 2015), wherein efforts should include understanding and actively addressing the complexities of intersecting systems of oppression. This differs from a common misuse of the concept when talking about intersecting identities (Pitcher, 2015). Understanding intersectionality means understanding social forces such as heterosexism, racism, and transphobia, to name a few.

Promote Accountability

Allyship exists largely as a neoliberal construct, where individualism is celebrated (Shahjahan, 2011). One of the challenges of allyship is moving beyond a savior or liberator perspective, leading allyship to be often construed as a lone beneficent actor doing good deeds. What the advisor should do to promote accountability is to help students connect with others and forge connections where they can hold each other accountable. Advisors have a fine line to walk in this regard. If the advisor takes on the mantle of holding students accountable for the allyship, they run the risk of overstepping the boundaries of their official roles; at the same time, doing nothing to address accountability could mean advisors become seen as do-nothing blowhards who only give lip service to social justice.

Beyond helping students develop accountability networks, advisors have a responsibility to provide feedback to student leaders. “An essential component in the learning process [for student leaders] is feedback” (Posner, 2019, p. 28). For example, guiding the front-end of how to navigate institutional policies, procedures, and politics is important. That guidance needs to be matched with ongoing guidance and feedback throughout the students’ experience.

Encourage Collective Action

One of the most important advisor roles is helping students understand and navigate campus policies and practices. Advisors need to help students develop the tools they need to build coalitions that enable collective action. Promoting collective action among allies is critical because so often, individual allies receive attention for supposed extraordinary efforts (Russell & Bohan, 2016), rather than exploring and emphasizing the importance of collectivism. Allies need to engage in collective action because students from marginalized groups who participate in social justice efforts can be left out on islands by themselves (Linder, 2019). Regardless of labels, allies need to seek out opportunities to work alongside others.

CONSIDERATIONS

Advisors aiming to address allyship and social justice action need to consider how to undertake such an endeavor. For the purposes of this article, I offer food for thought between two avenues: addressing one-on-one with student leaders, and approaching formalized education approaches with groups of leaders. All of the strategies addressed above can be engaged through either of these approaches. Ultimately, helping student leaders engage as social justice allies will require both/and rather than either/or approaches.

One-on-one. Consider working one-on-one with student leaders to develop individualized learning and development plans (Shah, Ladhani, Morahan, & Wells, 2019). One-on-one developmental work can be especially important for allies who fall in Edwards’ (2006) aspiring allies stage. Developmental dialogs can open up spaces for allies for self-interest to begin to refine their thinking beyond individual bad actors to beginning to recognize the role of privilege. Individual discussions can also be powerful for Allies for Social Justice as they continue to process the potential unintended consequences of engaging in socially just leadership, such as being seen as self-serving.

Formalized education. When considering any approach to educating student leaders, advisors need to consider pedagogical approaches to be used (Shah et al., 2019). This consideration also needs to be weighed against approaches for building and maintaining a respectful and inclusive learning environment. When approaching allyship development through formal education programs, especially in group settings, advisors need to take extra care in adhering to ground rules that promote respect for the agency of everyone in the space.

Both of these considerations for approaching the space where allyship and leadership development meet can be approached from an appreciative framework. Appreciate frameworks in higher education are based on constructivist views that focus on what works in a particular experience and how to build upon that (Bloom & McClellan, 2016; Evans & Lange, 2019).

CONCLUSION

What all of this boils down to is helping allies reflect the principle of praxis, which is the active practice of making one's words and actions congruent (Freire, 2008). Simply proclaiming oneself to be an ally is insufficient. As increases in social activism in recent years, it is important to recognize that there is not a line between student leaders and student activists. Leaders are taking on activist roles, and activists are leaders on campus (Linder, 2019). Student activities professionals have responsibilities to not only help student leaders navigate the terrain of institutional policies, but also play a role in addressing developmental needs. Advisors have to help allies participate in meaningful and powerful dialogues (Shaw Bonds & Quaye, 2019) as part of the process of connecting their allyship to their roles as student leaders. Helping student leaders engage as allies requires careful planning and active work over time.

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