



# CAMPUS ACTIVITIES LEADERS AS STEWARDS OF HOPE AND LIBERATION: REFLECTIONS WITH DRs. MAMTA ACCAPADI AND JAN ARMINIO

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NACA has recently released an updated Research Agenda to support the work of campus activities professionals that includes a more specific focus on and integration of values related to equity, diversity, and inclusion and student belonging. With this update in mind, JCAPS has dedicated this special issue to these topics including:

- How can campus activities professionals cultivate environments which holistically include and support all students – particularly those representing systemically underserved communities?
- How can campus activities professionals move beyond programming that is representative of the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of students to more holistically address the marginalization and oppression experiences by minoritized populations?
- How can campus activities professionals lead and guide efforts to challenge systemic oppression on their campuses?
- How can campus activities professionals respect and affirm the intersecting identities of students?
- In what ways do campus activities professionals negotiate their own identities (from privileged and minoritized lenses) as they support student programming?

Moreover, in a 2022 JCAPS article, Peck et al., posited that in a Venn diagram of the concepts of diversity, inclusion, and equity, their intersection would be sense of belonging. They continued that achieving a sense of belonging of *all* students requires involvement and engagement of *all* students. Beyond the celebratory cultural events campus activities are probably most noted for, they wrote that our profession must engage in the active anti-racist movement, change oppressive structures (e.g., budgets, policies, marketing strategies) and staff behaviors (e.g., mentoring, advising, leadership education) to ultimately ensure 100% engagement. The articles to follow offer insights into how this can be achieved.

To frame and introduce the individual articles to follow, Special Guest Editor Dr. Mamta Accapadi, former Vice President for Student Affairs and currently Higher Education Consulting Director, Huron Group, was interviewed by JCAPS Advisory Board member Dr. Jan Arminio.

**Jan:** Dr. Accapadi, thank you for taking the time to be a part of this Special Edition of JCAPS. We appreciate you sharing your expertise and perspective in the ongoing struggle for equity in higher education. Several articles in this issue speak to the importance of recognizing and investigating the needs of intersecting identities (e.g., first generation transfer students) and how physical space plays a role in whether and how students and their intersecting identities can feel they belong at an institution. **What do you think are the ways in which we in campus activities can be more collaborative on our campuses to create more of a sense of belonging among underrepresented students?**

**Mamta:** It has been so inspiring to see how the functional area of campus activities has evolved over the past two decades. When I think about the experiences that prepared me to become a student affairs educator, those experiences began with the mentorship I received from campus activities staff members and organization advisors. Because of the nature of the work, I find that campus activities educators are among the most collaborative colleagues one can find on a college campus. In many ways, my reflections for how campus activities teams can create a greater sense of belonging apply to our entire profession in student affairs, and frankly, all of higher education. Campus activities colleagues are uniquely positioned to advance students' sense of belonging because of their nuanced understanding of situation, story, and self.

It can be really tempting to take a reductive approach to how we talk about core student matters on college campuses. The first thing that we can all do as educators is reframe the situation. When we talk about creating a sense of belonging, we truly have an opportunity to untether the energy by which we approach this question. Are we asking the question as if we are trying to address a problem? Or are we instead approaching the question with a sense of creation? How we approach the situation, and subsequently the energy we bring to the table, has the power to transform our student experiences and institutions. As such, I think our ability to understand the situation of our work and service to students matters. What central questions can we ask? For example, in Francine Rudd Coston's article on examining first generation transfer students' experiences, and Vigneau, Hillebrand, and Pettigrew's work on all-gender restrooms, the authors respectively consider the institutional situation, and ultimately inspires me to ask myself, "Do I consider the institutional situation, and its differential impact on student populations?" What is our role in shifting the institutional situation- whether the focus is designated spaces, rethinking of processes (for example, how resources are allocated to student groups), or actively reflecting on our programming models.

A big part of being able to reframe the situation is honoring the sacredness of student stories. The consistent story of our students is that they all bring a form of hope for a better and brighter future for themselves and their families. And that hope is often sitting under layers of experiences - triumphs, traumas, celebrations, grief, and so much more. We may never know what our students are carrying when we meet them, but we do have the ability to be present and open to their sacred stories. The way in which our campus activities colleagues steward the sacred stories of our students not only sets an example for our students, it also elevates the often untold stories and lived experiences of different student communities, and this practice creates a culture for a sense of belonging. We see this perspective thoughtfully raised in Womble's article, "Agency - A Key Driver of Students with Minoritized Identities into Student Activities Leadership," in which the author highlights the factors that influence how and why students engage. How do we celebrate the students who work full time while pursuing their education? How do we publicly recognize the work that students from specific communities do to care for one another? The ways in which we recognize student leaders, how we define leadership, and expand recognition of our students' life journeys can have a big impact on cultivating a sense of belonging. In these ways, we honor the sacredness of their stories.

Finally, the most meaningful way to consider situation and story is for us to take a deep and loving look at our 'self.' I cannot think of a single student who has reflected on their time in college and said, "Gosh that workshop just changed my life!" Instead, they look back and remember their mentors - people like us. So, the self we bring to our campus is the most powerful tool we have to create a sense of belonging. I think the article, "This is Bigger than Me: Why Black Women Create Inclusive Environments in Predominantly White Campuses" by Neale, highlighting the ways that Black Women VPSAs draw from their identities to elevate empathy, understanding and care, is one such example of why we need to consider the 'self' we bring. In what ways are we accessible to students to understand their situation and stories? In what ways might we present barriers? Campus activities educators are often the first tier of mentors that students seek, especially when the remainder of their academic experience may feel daunting or intimidating. How do we engage our most loving 'self' to not just create a sense of belonging, but a space where students feel affinity, affection, and hope?

**Jan:** The articles in this Issue reveal that to accomplish the reality that all students feel they belong to our institutions, further work must occur on individual, organizational, and institutional levels. How do and how should

campus activities leaders encourage and make opportunities for the learning, unlearning, and relearning that this shift will require? Of course, this includes our own relearning. **What do you believe are some of the things that our field needs to “unlearn” about our work, and how might we “relearn” that work to become more effective with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion?**

**Mamta:** Our profession has the opportunity to elevate student learning. I don't think in terms of learning or unlearning, because we are all on a journey together. One wish I have for our profession is for us to leverage our gifts in a more integrated manner. Because we are often known for being gifted tacticians on our campuses, we find comfort and purpose in filling those roles. We have a program for everything. It is tangible. We can point to our contributions easily. We feel a sense of agency and purpose. I wish we could take this gift and apply it to leading at an institutional level. Instead of 'doing more things and creating more programs' I wish we could 'convene more communities of practice.'

Now, you may think I am not answering the question you asked. I think in any kind of work, and especially diversity, equity, inclusion work, our instinct is to “perform the work,” as pointed out in Sasso and Marcy's article “Saying the Right Thing, Doing the White Thing: Perpetuating the Enlightenment Narrative in White Undergraduate Student Leaders.” While that article is a study of white student leaders, I think it could have universal application for all of us. As a woman of color with many privileged identities, this article made me think deeply about how I try to 'say the right thing' without deeper reflection on how I can actually be a change agent in my own privileged identity. How often do I try to look good, by saying the right thing, as a cisgender woman? How can I actually be vulnerable and courageous to the self-work so I can be a tool for inclusion, transformation, and liberation?

In short, I think we need to trust our talents and remember the wisdom we bring to our communities. This requires us shifting our perception on where the 'work' sits. We know how to do the work, I think we need to think about how we free ourselves energetically to be the work – the work of reflection and self-awareness, convening courageous conversations and ultimately personal freedom.

**Jan:** Several articles speak to the importance of beginning the higher education experience in a way that all students feel they belong, particularly those who have been marginalized. **How do you think current higher education orientation programs and student advising get that right or miss the mark?**

**Mamta:** The way in which we welcome our students, especially our systemically minoritized students, to our campus communities matters. I think the most meaningful way we can situate our students for wholeness and success is by demystifying the academic journey. I remember attending my new student orientation session, and the VP at the time said to us, “Look to the left, and look to the right. One of you will not be here at graduation.” I think about that moment from thirty years ago, and it breaks my heart. I know our profession has changed, and the words we use have changed, but it takes time for that kind of culture to change. Have our structures and processes changed to center the sacredness of students, or do we still operate with the mindset that 'one of you won't be here?'

We have an opportunity to think about orientation programs and advising as experiences vs. programs. I think we miss the mark when we live in our silos and when we fail to operate with a shared set of values around student dignity and care. If I lead an orientation program, then I am motivated to think about the delivery and logistics of the program. Typically, that covers the 'who, what, when, and where' of the work. If I see myself as the facilitator of an orientation experience, I might also consider the situation and sacredness of the students. This consideration means I am also thinking about the 'why and how' of the work. Can a student-parent, a student who uses a wheelchair, a genderqueer student, and a student of color all access this experience with wholeness? Similarly, related to academic advising, how do we engage in holistic advising that moves beyond a graduation checklist, and where advising conversations can focus on more than just academic success? How should an academic advisor consider the overall condition of our students?

I think critics might say that what I am offering may be unsustainable because it requires slowing down our processes, and given the understaffing and underfunding of our areas, this reflection may feel overwhelming. This feeling is very real. What if we let go of our nostalgia of how we experienced campus activities? What if we were more generalist in nature? What if campus activities units were situated as a campus facilitator of student dignity and wholeness? Imagine if academic advisors identified a need for creating affinity groups for specific populations. Now imagine us as partners in advancing that kind of work in a way that created a sense of belonging, advanced the academic mission of our institutions, and centered student needs? I think we could align our work with more attention to a student success mission and embrace a radical change in what our work looks like.

**Jan:** The on-going problem of uninformed students, faculty, and staff making comments that reveal assumptions of the superiority of the white dominant culture and inferiority of other cultures is highlighted in several articles. **Is higher education making progress in this regard, or are we slipping backward?**

**Mamta:** I certainly do not have the ability to discern whether higher education is making progress or slipping backward related to how we engage race on our campuses. Higher education is one tiny and privileged part of our society overall. This is a societal issue, and it continues to get more and more complex. I think we need to stay in the complexity.

Honestly, now could be the time any one of us might want to give up. The exhaustion is real. And this is exactly the time we need to reach deep into the abundance within our souls to be present and active - especially in our privileged identities. When I see different forms of anti-LGBT legislation, this is the time I need to be even more active and move beyond 'saying the right thing,' and think about what my privileged identities allow me to do and be. In our privileged identities, we want instant gratification for our 'good work' so we can feel better about ourselves. I don't get to opt out of the uncomfortable conversation with family members over holiday gatherings because they are tiring for me. In our privileged identities, we tend to diagnose others who are not as 'evolved' as we think we are, and then we distance ourselves from those folks, thinking that this is some form of activism.

Our society is unravelling because we are less and less present with each other. Oppression is real. Violence toward systemically minoritized communities is real. A structure of systemic oppression that took centuries to create will not be dismantled with our opting in and out of our responsibility for social change at our convenience. We need to be sustainable, but ever present, in our dominant identity spaces. And we need to be present with an abundance of love. Our diagnosing and distancing of others who may engage in active behaviors of identity-based superiority is often an internal management of shame that we feel around our privileged identities. So let's just be honest about that, and name it. And when we name it, we can do something about it.

We are in a moment in which many people with dominant identities are reacting to a deeper set of reflections situated in self-perceptions of goodness. If I have a dominant identity, I must be bad, and I feel shame. So, to counter that thought progression, it is easier for me to say that my identity is not actually dominant; therefore, everything else is not valid. It protects me from feeling shame. And I then engage in all of the activities, legislation, school board decisions reviewing curriculum, etc., to get rid of all of the content that makes me feel shame. How can we as educators recognize this very human dynamic within ourselves and our students? When we experience this dynamic, the response has to be an abundance of love and presence. We can be loving and present, while also having accountability. Right now, in our dominant identities, when we step out of this work, we create a default environment where our colleagues with systemically minoritized identities are expected to carry the burden. I think, right now, we need to continue to pay attention and figure out how we hold onto each other.

**Jan:** As we will read in the subsequent pieces, because learning assumes some challenge or dissonance, balancing new learning while promoting a sense of belonging demands trust and vulnerability. **What suggestions do you have for campus activities professionals to show more vulnerability while also presenting a professional persona on campus?**

**Mamta:** Honestly, I am a little biased here. I think overall as a collective, campus activities professionals are

deeply skilled in building trust and modeling vulnerability. I think where we can strengthen our approach is by making sure our teams are diverse and inclusive, and that all of our colleagues feel whole within our teams.

Campus activities colleagues could take the opportunity to regularly assess themselves as individuals and as organizations. How do our colleagues at the counseling center, in academic advising, involved in faculty governance experience us? Do we know? I think building trust and credibility goes a long way across campus. Taking the time to demonstrate to other functional areas that we value and understand their contribution to the student experience is probably one of the best investments in relationships we can make.

When we take the time to center the sacredness of others, we maximize the opportunities for mutual understanding. This isn't to say that this process always works, or the climate allows us to engage in this manner. Our campuses come with unique sets of politics, personalities, and cultures. As such, the tension between presenting with vulnerability while also presenting a professional persona almost assumes that these two concepts are oppositional, and they aren't. Vulnerability doesn't mean to bring all of your baggage to the table and expect others to pick it up. Vulnerability means owning, loving, and holding yourself accountable for that story. Imperfect people may judge presentations of vulnerability based on their own internalized definitions of professionalism, and this can be very difficult and painful. So, I don't know if I have advice, but I certainly have deep love, affection, and respect for my colleagues who lead with vulnerability because this requires so much courage.

**Jan:** Technology is providing ever more ways to share stories. How might institutional context (i.e., history, type, geography, [white] traditions) influence this story telling? **What are the types of stories that you have told and are trying to tell to positively influence diversity, equity, and inclusion in places where you have worked?**

**Mamta:** I come from a culture of story-telling. For a long time, I refrained from telling my own story, because it felt self-centered to me. In my own culture, and more specifically the way I was raised, women were expected to be demure, quiet, and basically invisible - as markers of good, dutiful, daughters. That message, spanning many generations, is part of my DNA. I hear it every morning. So, when I started telling my story, I told it from a generational lens, and from the perspective of the women of my family. What is the generational story I can tell and what transformation can I see across the span of multiple generations?

We are in the work of social change, so our hearts and spirits are in the right place. We are also in a time where the wash, rinse, repeat cycle of react to incident and demonstrate change limits us from seeing a longer arc of our stories. I think the generational stories we tell remind us that we are both very insignificant, and yet SO significant in the story of social change. My individual participation in a protest, in the grand scheme, may be insignificant, but the tiny change that emerged from a series of protests that people like you and me participate in, has significance in influencing changes of practices.

I try to bring untold stories to my communities, of course respecting the agency and consent of our students. On many campuses, for example, we have not paid attention to the lives of military veteran students and their families. At one campus, I had a student who left to become a movie star in the Indian film industry - literally the largest film industry in the world - but no one knew this on that campus. I also love telling stories of generational hope. So many of our students are surviving on the hope of their loved ones, and that story needs to be told. The purpose of story-telling, to me, is to remind all of us that there is a universality of hope in all of our lived experiences, and that we are not alone. The beauty of campus activities professionals is that we are often the first curators of these stories.