Critical Reflection Paper 3: Where and How I Enter

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As the semester draws to a close, it has become apparent how much wider my lens has grown in recognizing issues of multicultural competence and awareness.  I have also found that as my lens has grown, so too has my willingness to address issues of multicultural competence in my campus environment.  As noted throughout the semester, developing multicultural competence is a lifelong process of acquiring knowledge, awareness, and skill.  Still, I have noted a considerable amount of self-realization, reflection, and growth in my competency this semester.  Much of my growth and development this semester was described by Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004), who stated that "multicultural awareness begins with a basic understanding of our own social identities in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and class" (p.40).  Through the process of introspection, reflection, and journaling, I have been able to further explore and develop my own identities.

**THE ISSUE OF INCLUSIVITY**

One example of multicultural unawareness from this semester was dealing with the vernacular "Easter Break".  A recent (at least to me) trend in higher education to promote inclusivity and awareness has led to "Christmas Break" or "Holiday Break" to be referred to as "Winter Break".  I find the term "Winter Break" much more inclusive than "Christmas" or "Holiday" break, as not every student or person celebrates Christmas, or for that matter, any holiday during that break.  Just the same, not every student celebrates Easter, yet there are no alternative vernaculars or terms for the break.  The Thursday evening of Easter Break I had dinner with a Jewish student in the campus dining hall, and as we were checking out the cashier wished us both a "Very Happy Easter".  I winced a bit, knowing that the student I was with does not celebrate Easter, and noted the general Christian privilege and dominance being perpetuated by the cashier.  Though I did not feel comfortable correcting the cashier as she seemed innocent,

I did ask the student I was with how she felt about so many college employees and professionals wishing students and staff alike a "Happy Easter".  Her response was that, after twenty-three years of it, she was used to the prevalence of Christian privilege in educational settings.

Another event that I witnessed multicultural unawareness was during the B-W Residence Life end-of-the-year barbecue.  During the preparation and cooking period, several events worth noting occurred.  First, one residence life professional staff member asked several staff members to move picnic tables from a green space over to the building, but curiously enough only asked men to move tables (there are significantly more women in the residence life department than men).  Once I had returned from helping move tables, I realized that the two cooks had begun cooking hotdogs and hamburgers on the grills, as opposed to initially cooking the vegetarian burgers prior to the meat products.  As a result, the vegetarians present were left with the options of eating a vegetarian burger coated in meat grease, or not participating in the barbecue. Additionally, since hot dogs were being cooked on all of the grills, I brought up the question if it was excluding any Muslim students from eating during the barbecue.  The supervisor cooking acknowledged that it was a good question, and proposed the solution of wiping off the grill with a wet rag, in order to "Wipe off the rest of the grease".  Ironically, the rag started on fire and had to be extinguished by dumping a bucket of water on it.

As I continue to reflect on these two examples, the authors and pieces we have read this semester reinforce the need for not only student affairs professionals, but that all higher education employees to strive for inclusive environments.  Pope et al. (2004) noted that interventions cannot simply happen on individuals levels within higher education; instead, "There must also be an effort to create institutional or organizational change where multicultural issues are embedded in the job expectations, training requirements, and policies and practices of

a specific program or office" (p. 71).  I would extend that comment to include that, at times, institutional or organizational change can only happen when personnel changes happen, as complacency tends to grow with those who have acquired tenure and incumbency, and at times staying well beyond their stay at institutions.

Pope et al. (2004) also reinforced the significance of acquiring knowledge in developing multicultural competency, nothing that "Having some awareness increases a helper's ability to have empathy for the experiences, feelings, and concerns of these diverse cultural groups" (p. 87).  Again, the experience of my student interacting with religious oppression was frustrating to watch, but being able to know that oppression was occurring and converse with her about it was refreshing.  Knowing that students with various religious or personal beliefs (and food restrictions) were being excluded, and then questioning the process, was exhilarating.

Still, "Multicultural competence in theory and translation needs to involve more than simply applying current theories to underrepresented groups or developing new and unique theories for these groups" (Pope et al, 2004, p. 37).  As I have begun to internalize and practice the theories presented in class and started dabbling in advocacy, I have also begun to realize the significance of training other advocates and allies.  Naming an issue or experience is significant to a student's development, so that they too can begin their own process of identity development. However, I believe that in order to bring about societal change, members from all dominant identity groups must themselves become advocates and allies for subordinated groups.  It is not enough to train only subordinated and underrepresented groups; the goal should be to train all groups.

**STRIVING TOWARD GROUP EDUCATION**

With the goal then to be training all groups, the first opportunity for an institution to begin educating students on issues of multicultural competence is first-year orientation.  Few forums exist on campuses of higher education that reach as many students in establishing a culture of inclusivity and advocacy as effectively as orientation forums can.

It is an important endeavor when considering the value of developing multicultural competency and awareness in a student body.  Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen (1998) called for institutional leaders themselves to become their own agents of change for campus climates.  By implementing a multicultural component to first-year orientation, institutional leaders can create and confront stereotypes and myths of students before they begin their college careers (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 9).  By confronting stereotypes and myths, institutions may then interrupt societal trends of segregation and subordination in college students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007, p. 14). As a result, a multiculturally focused orientation session, or even an entire orientation program, would succeed in educating all groups on campus while breaking down privileged statuses, myths, and stereotypes.

However, institutions cannot solely rely on first-year orientation programs to wholly and effectively educate students; they must establish programs and cultures that span the length of time students will spend at the institution.  This means incorporating programs, practices, and policies throughout the institution, which is often a costly endeavor.  Providing students with programming that challenges students to reflect and address their own cultures and identities throughout the duration of their collegiate careers will serve to continue reinforcing the messages from the first-year orientation (Bennett, 2007, p. 22).  The concept of consistent multicultural education is one that I have discussed in length during class, as well as out of class.  It is simply

not effective multicultural training or culture-building for an institution to rely on one week of events and awareness-raising in creating a campus-wide culture that celebrates and fosters multicultural competence and awareness.  Instead, if an institution has truly dedicated itself to multicultural awareness, trainings, events, and programs must be dedicated year-round to continue educating and encouraging its students to participate in the campus culture.

As this course has transpired, I have noticed a significant shift in my perceptions on the importance of institutional practice in creating an inclusive environment.  Initially, I had believed that there should be a higher prioritization on individual practice and awareness, with the sum of its parts actually being greater than the whole.  The second example provided above, regarding the Residence Life barbecue, is an example of individual practices and decisions that affected students directly, but were not decisions implemented by the institution itself.  However, the first example provided is a case of the institution making decisions that affect the student body, and as a result, exclusionary practices.

Another example of institutional practice impacting the inclusivity of the campus environment was during "April Reign", the annual spring campus competition.  The event consists of four competitions: an obstacle run, human pyramid building, a boat race, and tug-of-war.  Additionally, competition is separated by gender identity, with men competing against men and women against women.  What I soon realized was that the components of each event were significantly different between men and women.  For example, in the obstacle race the men were required to run twice the distance than the women, while completing four components completely missing in the women's race.  In the tug-of-war competition, the men were given shovels and wooden planks to create reinforced pits, or trenches, for six minutes on the beachfront.  The women, on the other hand, were given two minutes to hand-dig divots in the

sand in which to establish footing.  One professional staff member joked during the day of competition that Baldwin-Wallace follows Title IX well, except when it comes to April Reign.

As I continue to reflect and discuss the events of April Reign with fellow graduate assistants and professional staff members, I find it intriguing that glaring issues of multicultural exclusion exist at such an important campus event, yet no changes have been made to address those issues.  Furthermore, I found it puzzling that professionals at an institution would overlook as important of a federal policy as Title IX, even if only for a weekend.  Pope et al. (2004), who noted that student affairs professionals must take the time to explore what, how, and why we do what we do in working with students, so that we can establish better relationships with students while effectively helping all those who cross our paths, reinforced my puzzlement that stemmed from April Reign.  Ultimately, I am not in a position of authority or decision-making, but voicing my opinion of the event, reinforced by theory and logic, led to a feeling of duty fulfillment and satisfaction.

**CONCLUSION**

Upon enrolling in this course, I was struck with several preconceptions.  I had an instant assumption that the course would be intensive in reading and writing, that the material would require a significant amount of introspection and reflection, and that it was being taught by a competent and passionate professor.  With those three factors, I realized that if the proper effort and time were dedicated to the course, it would be a cornerstone for my professional career.  My greatest concern, however, was that I viewed myself as a relatively monoculturalistic individual, having come from and grown up in a homogenous environment.  Due to the conceptualization I had of my multicultural competence, I was quite nervous about the growth and challenge this course could and would provide.

As the semester has transpired, I have been able to alter the perceptions and preconceived notions I had of myself when I first began the course.  I have become more aware of my upbringings, of my privileges, and my own experiences related to multicultural competence development.  I am not as novice in the realm of multicultural awareness as when I began the semester, but I also recognize that my own development is a lifelong process that will continue with my search for better tools, newer knowledge, and more effective applications to implement theory into practice (Pope et al., 2004, p. 34).  As I continue to prepare for a career that will see me continue as a scholar-practitioner, if not faculty, the inclusion of and constant search for new multicultural trainings and material will be imperative in my ability to be the best asset to my students as possible.

The implementation of theory into practice will foreseeably be crucial to professionals as time continues, as student bodies grow more diverse in culture and need.  It will be imperative to recall that culture and diversity "is more than race and ethnicity, and should include identities such as religion and spirituality, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability" (Gallardo et al., 2009, p. 428).  It is possible that we are already experiencing a boom in multicultural student body populations without recognizing it, and as a result are responding in contextually inconsistent manners due to our lack of recognition and foundation (Gallardo et al., 2009, p. 428).  It is in this recognition that the personal development of knowledge, awareness, and skills become ever more important, as multiculturally competent professionals are, if nothing else, prepared to work with multiculturally diverse student populations.

Still, we must not allow ourselves, our institutions, or our field to grow stagnant and complacent.  We must continue to "transform [the] perceptions, practices, and policies [that] privilege some students at the expense of others" (Patton et al., 2007, p. 47).  Finally, we must

continue to reflect on our own experiences, continue to acquire knowledge, develop awareness, and practice skills.  As gatekeepers, allies, and advocates for our students, we cannot give any less than our full effort to foster and encourage inclusive environments, encourage our students to explore their own privileged and/or subordinated identities, and strive for best practices that embody multicultural competency and awareness.

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