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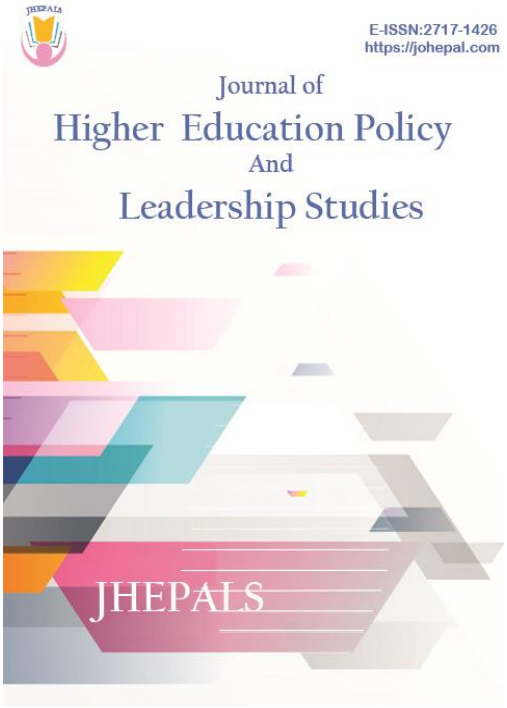

Book Review: Creating a Faculty Activism Commons for Social Justice: Finding Hope in the Messy Truth

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Book Review

Creating a Faculty Activism Commons for Social Justice: Finding Hope in the Messy Truth

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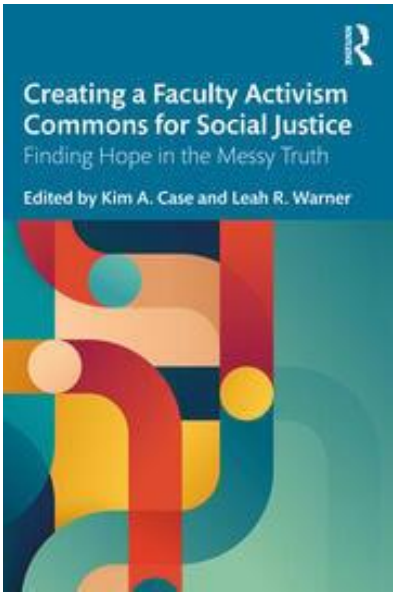

Hilary Houlette *

Keywords: Faculty Activism; Social Justice; Higher Education; Collective Action; Coalition-Building

Kim A. Case and Leah R. Warner's edited book *Creating a Faculty Activism Commons for Social Justice* provides a series of timely and compelling narratives of higher education faculty members pursuing social justice efforts on college campuses. Spanning across 14 chapters, 27 authors identifying as faculty, administrators, or students, discuss the lessons they learned and the hardships they faced engaging in activism. From challenging institutional policies and pursuing litigation to partnering with students and rejecting toxic

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forms of advocacy that undermine social justice efforts, this publication offers a fresh perspective on how to effectively lead activism efforts and identify the pitfalls that threaten campus change movements.

C*reating a Faculty Activism Commons for Social Justice*, edited by Kim Case and Leah Warner, is a timely publication for faculty members committed to tackling injustices within their institutions. Its innovative approach, in terms of how the book was assembled as well as the substantive contributions made by the contributing authors, represents a crucial addition to the higher education activism literature. Furthermore, the current political climate under the Trump administration has led many U.S. colleges and universities to acquiesce to local and federal political pressures, limiting or eliminating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives within their institutions. As faculty activism increases on U.S. college campuses in response, establishing a shared understanding of what constitutes the "faculty activism commons" and how to cultivate the requisite conditions for the commons to unfurl is warranted for both theory and practice.

Book Analysis

Structurally, alignment across chapters helps readers easily identify the discrete social justice issues that the contributing faculty activist authors encountered and the follow-up steps they took to tackle the identified injustice(s) taking place within their campuses. Facilitated through four writing retreats, Case and Warner sought to "promote cohesion and avoid the choppy nature of over 25 authors writing 14 chapters in isolation" (p. 10) and disclosed that during these virtual meetings, contributing authors were encouraged to share the hurdles associated with writing their stories. Additionally, Case and Warner provided collaborating authors the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, both in individual spaces and within the larger group sessions. This resulted in a cohesive publication, distinguished by profound vulnerability, hope, and strategies for change, whereby the faculty activism commons organically emerged during the writing of this book.

Elaborating further on this process, each chapter provides a summary of the social justice conundrum that the faculty activist author addressed, offers a critical reflection to "break the silence" (p. 2), discusses each author's intersectional identities and their impact on faculty activism, and concludes with key takeaway lessons for readers to consider and apply within their own institutions. Each chapter author references at least one other chapter, knitting the publication together for readers to identify how discrete injustices within higher education institutions overlap. This further clarified the need to embrace community building that is associated with forming the faculty activism commons.

A few prevalent themes throughout this book include the role that employment protection via tenure plays in dictating which activities are safe to pursue, the emotionally draining and physically taxing nature of leading activism work, and the need for actors to engage in coalition and community building to undercut the power dynamics that seek to maintain hegemony over various higher education systems. Succinctly summarized in Yolanda Flores Niemann's forward,

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> Social justice activists must use strategies to grasp and deconstruct the institutional hypocrisy that hijacks their activism; use their personal and collective agency to empower themselves and others toward fairness and equitable opportunities for career success and satisfaction; and set boundaries for their health and success of their projects (p. xix).

Faculty occupy a unique position on campus and hold institutional power to advance social justice outcomes. Clustering a few key chapters together, topics discussed in this book include 1) initiating and advancing DEI efforts, 2) embracing the student/faculty activism partnership, 3) improving campus accommodations for broad benefit, 4) identifying and overcoming social justice hijacking efforts, and 5) understanding leadership and administrative efforts to undercut faculty activism.

Chapter Themes Analysis

Initiating and Advancing DEI Efforts

In chapter 3, Ryan M. Pickering explained that his institutional administrators expressed a commitment to enhancing student services on campus but left the faculty facilitators unprepared and under-resourced to engage in the work necessary to produce change. Furthermore, the administration disagreed with how faculty activists designed DEI programming and denied events "targeting specific forms of marginalization," as well as disregarded the faculty's expertise in addressing student needs (p. 38). Initiating DEI programming is challenging enough without antagonistic administrators and those "so intent on protecting relationships with administrators (i.e., power-holders) that they defend those administrators, and their decisions, above all else" (p. 41). Pickering leaves us with strategies for identifying our roles in larger social justice activism movements, and he reminds us how to establish boundaries for activities that impinge on our mental health and subsequent ability to advance the movements we care about furthering.

In chapter 7, Debra A. Bercovivi, Kosha D. Bramesfeld, and Jessica Dere summarized the process of initiating a department-level DEI training program. One of their successes included "a cultural shift of collective responsibility by helping to formalize structures and leadership roles" (p. 108). Engaging in DEI initiatives within an institution that viewed these efforts as an expression of political activism and a liability, rather than an asset to be cultivated, marked a substantial hurdle to overcome. In a similar vein, Fadoua Loudiy, Christine Pease-Hernandez, Emily Keener, and Cindy LaCom described in chapter 8 the process of creating a DEI-centered faculty training program. Challenges included engaging with colleagues who could not fully grasp the operational merits of DEI in counteracting systemic oppression, which left activist faculty feeling perpetually "tired and over-extended" (p.119). Despite these challenges, Loudiy et al., also successfully implemented the program and continued to push social justice efforts forward. They advised that "to achieve systemic change...building communities of faculty allies and engaging in readings, challenging conversations, and training" (p. 122) are key tools developed through the faculty activism commons.

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The Student Faculty Partnership

In Chapter 6, Emily A. Leskinen, Parker Rodgers, and Leah R. Warner discussed how their university's refusal to update the student information systems to apply "used name" rather than legal name harmed students, and specifically trans and non-binary students. Implementing a "used name" policy was warranted, sparking campus activism efforts toward achieving this aim. The authors discussed how faculty leveraged their research skills to inform proposed policy and used their social networks to strategically share information about key activism activities. Faculty and students had differing perspectives on timeliness, which posed a challenge to advancing the movement. Whereas the former population has their careers to inform institutional policy changes, students' timelines are limited to the terms in which they are enrolled. Therefore, when collaborating with student activists, activist faculty should be mindful of this differential and center student needs throughout the policy change process. Additionally, Leskinen et al. advised that faculty should ensure participating students "see the fruits of their labor" (p. 93), receive the recognition warranted for their efforts, and maintain a presence in policy change negotiations. Faculty and student coalition building is a productive activism strategy (Kezar, 2010), and when possible, faculty activists should seek to incorporate students. In chapter 14, Michelle R. Nario-Redmond, Alexia Kemerling, and Ceara G. Nario-Redmond expanded upon this approach and discussed student and faculty coalition building to advocate for disability resources on campus. They advised that "documentation holds the key to effective long-term activism" (p. 208) and small modifications over time can create lasting and substantive social justice changes.

Enhancing the Campus Environment for All

In chapter 4, Lauren B. Smith described her experience of being the victim of age-based discrimination perpetrated by a senior male leader at her institution. She recalled the painful process of filing a complaint and pursuing legal action that resulted in retaliation and further personal and professional harm. Although she acknowledged that filing a complaint would pose a challenge, and one that would likely prevent her from obtaining a leadership position in the future, Smith noted that in light of the ageist and sexist discrimination occurring at her university, "filing a complaint served as a necessary form of activism" (p. 54). In recounting her experiences, Smith disclosed that she refused to sign a non-disclosure agreement and leveraged her institutional positionality as a tenured faculty member for activist risk-taking. She also advised that, when possible, engaging in campus unions and other large-scale organizations to formalize the discrimination complaint process can help ensure broad protections for diverse campus community members. Unfortunately, not all faculty are afforded these protections or have access to such resources. Therefore, it is imperative to "protect vulnerable faculty and staff from discrimination in the pipeline and from retaliation once they report a problem" (p. 63).

Chapter 9, written by Heather K. Olson Beal and Lauren E. Brewer, discussed how, skirting faculty shared governance within a Texas university, the Board of Regents approved a policy that was suggested to prevent employees from bringing their "unsupervised" children to campus during work hours. This created unnecessary hurdles for parents affiliated with the university, and specifically women, who are disproportionately responsible for childcare. Activist faculty partnered with staff to advocate for more parent-

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centered resources on campus and confront Texas' patriarchal, sexist social norms. Olson Beal and Brewer advised that coalition building between faculty and staff is effective, but the former should be attuned to the power discrepancies that extend protection to tenured faculty that is not afforded to staff.

In chapter 12, Regina Day Langhout and Tchad Sanger, through their positions as a college provost and campus registrar administrator, respectively, advocated for a change to the institutional course enrollment policy to reduce the course requirements from 36 to 35, which at the time posed an unnecessary hurdle for non-white non-middle-class students. Through a data-driven approach, they found that although seemingly insignificant, this reduction would support more students to complete their degrees. Langhout and Sanger advised that building coalitions can help inform policy changes and promote compelling negotiations with leadership. However, faculty activists should be realistic about the time requirements for initiating and propelling a movement. Recruiting help from other faculty activists can help relieve this burden.

Social Justice Hijacking

One of the biggest threats to social justice activism is the performative activism that Apryl A. Alexander described in chapter 2 and social justice cannibalism that Kim A. Case described in chapter 5. Although discrete, each maneuver undermines the efforts to create more inclusive and social justice-oriented campus environments. Regarding performative activism, Alexander described how higher education institutions and the individuals who contribute to and participate in these organizations may claim to stand for social justice, but are in fact ill-prepared to genuinely improve social justice outcomes. As such, earnest DEI efforts are overshadowed by the superficiality of inauthentic allyship and transactional engagement in DEI spaces. As "colleges and universities cannot engage in activism or advocacy as they simultaneously maintain and defend oppression" (p. 30), performative activism is an illusion and a particularly nefarious form of social justice hijacking given its ability to sidestep direct confrontation.

Similarly, while performative activism undercuts social justice efforts, the cannibalism that Case described in chapter 5 can be equally damaging. What she coined as toxic social justice cannibalism, Case identified how alienating and ostracizing valuable coalition activists, through erroneous virtue signaling and superficial ego-centric posturing, undermines collective efforts for change. Notably, she states, "by turning on each other, we actively break down our own communities and harm the very justice goals we claim to value above all else" (p. 69). Case strategically outlined what to look for in other people who may be engaging in social justice cannibalism and provided a set of key recommendations to avoid being the perpetrator.

Administrative Undercutting

In chapter 10, Ruma Sen and Paula Straile-Costa described the sneaky administrator tactics used to undermine faculty-initiated DEI efforts, which included creating an administrative-led DEI task force without faculty input and engaging in key DEI-related activities over the summer when faculty are less organized and positioned to support such efforts. Sen and Straile-Costa suggested that pushing activism efforts forward quietly and steadily toward meaningful change, empowering activists to take the lead in social efforts to lead public

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discourse, and creating indirect change by empowering non-direct action among community members via voting and attending key events, challenge administrative leaders who seek to leave faculty behind during unilateral decision-making processes.

Lina Ricon described the challenges of being an activist as both a faculty member and administrator in chapter 11. While faculty who serve in administrative roles occupy a distinct position on campus and hold institutional power not afforded to other faculty members, these activists may be put into complex scenarios. Ricon described how administrators responsible for DEI efforts were often the perpetrators of social injustices. As such, activism can pose a barrier for both administrators and faculty members, necessitating the latter to develop the structures to operate independently from the institution.

In chapter 13, Rebecca Covarrubias and Katherine N. Quinteros described how constructing counter-stories amid institutional cuts reflects a form of activism aimed at changing institutional systems. Creating counter-stories reveals the activist labor and deconstructs the systems of social injustice quietly upheld within the hierarchical tiers of higher education. Successfully challenging organizational systems hinges on cooperation and collective action, necessitating a "faculty activist commons" to share best practices, discuss shortcomings, strategize next steps, reflect on social justice engagement, and propel campus activism forward.

Final Thoughts

Through Case and Warner's edited work, we can examine in real time how the faculty activism commons are operationalized. Highlighted through the brave activism and commitment to social justice that faculty relayed through their thought-provoking stories, academic publishing is one outlet for the faculty activism commons to unfold. This publication serves as a guidebook for empowering more faculty to participate in cultivating these collective spaces. In light of the current political threats to DEI on U.S. college and university campuses, having these tools at our disposal is not only timely but necessary toward uplifting and advancing social justice efforts.

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Book Review

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