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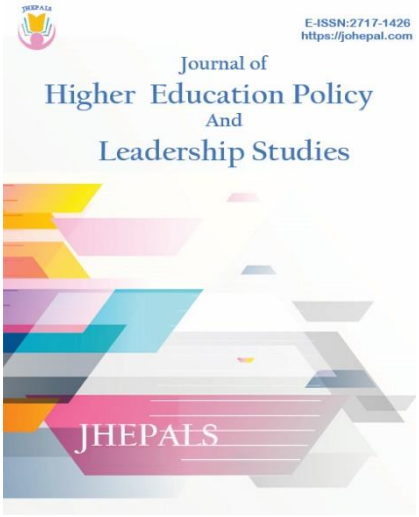
Social Justice and Its Role in Mission Statements: Voicing Commitments to Social Justice and Implications for Student Affairs Professionals



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Social Justice and Its Role in Mission Statements: Voicing Commitments to Social Justice and Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

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Abstract

Upon reviewing the mission statements of over 6,500 institutions of higher education in the United States, 40 institutions were isolated for their inclusion of the words "social justice." The research team analyzed the use of the term through qualitative content analysis. In this conventional content analysis, open, inductive coding was used to explore how social justice is included in mission statements and its relevant context. Using content analysis, the research team developed a framework of four value types present in mission statements: foundational values, espoused values, instilled values, and pursued values. The findings explore what each of these values mean for practice. Finally, we conclude with implications for practice, specifically for new professionals and institutions engaging in this work. As new professionals enter the student affairs profession, these implications for practice can help them understand how their personal values and pursuits for social justice fit into their institution's mission statements and actions taken for social justice.

Keywords: Mission Statements; Social Justice; Higher Education; Content Analysis; Student Affairs

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Introduction

Increasingly, higher education and student affairs has explicitly communicated their commitment to social justice within our field and institutions. The National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) have developed multiple statements on diversity, equity, and inclusion, including a page dedicated to resources for learning about social justice and competencies on diversity and inclusion (NACA, n.d.). In 2016, ACPA created their Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization and NASPA reaffirmed their own Commitment to Equity, Inclusion, And Social Justice (ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d.). With the increase of expressed commitment to social justice, our team turned to institutional guiding documents across the country and found that only 40 institutions use the words "social justice" in their mission statements. Within those statements, it was evident social justice was a value of the institution. This study explores the ways in which social justice shows up in institutional mission statements and the implications for our findings.

Literature Review

Social justice, as a term and concept, holds an important history, with its nuanced significance evolving from its original meaning to present day. Originally coined as *la giustizia sociale* by two Italian Catholic priests, Antonia Rosmini Serbati and Taparelli d'Azeglio, the term described the habits, duties, and responsibilities assigned to different social groups (Promisel, 2021). Fr. Taparelli's definition of social justice gained the most popularity, for he emphasized the individual pursuit of happiness while maintaining social stratification. Promisel (2021) stated social justice then became a central teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and it was soon adopted by political figures in the early 20th century.

The religious heritage of social justice became widely recognized in mainstream American politics during the 1930s. During his campaign in 1932, FDR endorsed social justice as a central value to his practice by quoting the papal encyclical (Promisel, 2021). The popularity of social justice continued to grow as progressives introduced the term into secular politics following World War II (Promisel, 2021). However, it was not until the 1970s that social justice began to emerge in academic discussion, perhaps due to John Rawl's publication of *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawl (1971) claimed there are two principles of social justice: 1) every person has the right to basic liberties and 2) social and economic inequalities should be to everyone's benefit and associated with social positions and offices available to all.

Social Justice in Higher Education

We must define social justice before we practice it as student affairs professionals. Our current definition of social justice is informed by Catholic heritage and John Rawl's (1971) principles. We expand upon the preceding definition of social justice by applying a critical lens to the following shared principles derived from the work of Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017), acknowledging that each person exists as an individual and within a social group and that there are inherent rights and freedoms belonging to every human being. Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017) also named that life should help promote the common good, helping advance growth at the individual and collective levels. As we see in the findings explored below, higher

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education is viewing this work in many ways, but all are rooted in social justice as a value of the institution.

Leadership for Social Justice

Higher education institutions play an important role in cultivating student leaders as social justice advocates. As student affairs professionals within these institutions, we can support students in their development as leaders for social justice by providing leadership tools, including intergroup dialogue skills and student activism. Specifically, professionals within student activities can promote leadership development through tools learned from student activism, including organizing a group, engaging in social media, and negotiating social capital (Martin et al., 2019). The shift to leadership education grounded in social responsibility and change "is a response to social and institutional pressures to produce leaders who are ready, willing, and able to engage complex societal issues" (Chunoo et al., 2019, p. 87).

Intergroup dialogue (IGD) is a practice in higher education that promotes dialogue across differences. Through this approach to dialogue, students from different social identity groups come together to understand their shared and differing identities, learn about social inequalities, and cultivate social responsibility. For IGD facilitators, this practice serves as a form of building leadership efficacy. Facilitation skills include consciousness raising, fostering relationships across differences, providing positive and constructive feedback, social justice concepts and curricular design (Zúñiga et al., 2007). By hosting IGD programs with student facilitation on campus, higher education institutions can practice a socially just approach to leadership.

Overview of Institutional Mission Statements

In our work to promote the development of student leaders as agents for social justice, institutional mission statements serve as guiding documents and foundation for practice. Meacham (2008) described institutional mission statements as "declarations of a campus's rationale and purpose; its responsibilities toward students and the community; and its vision of student, faculty, and institutional excellence" (para. 1). Institutions and their mission statements should focus on serving the interests of their recipients, rather than the activities of the institutions (Carver, 2000). Taylor and Cantwell (2019) elaborated institutions have an obligation to work to fulfill their institutional mission statement. Finally, Morphew and Hartley (2006) stated that institutions should use mission statements to direct faculty, staff, and students towards the goals and aims of the institutions while also strengthening institutional success.

Methods

In January 2020, 6,583 institutional records were pulled from IPEDS and their mission statements were collected. Of these institutions, 396 did not provide mission statements or their websites were inaccessible, 49 institutions closed, and 1,066 institutions were removed as they were part of institutions with multiple institutions that utilized the same mission statement. This resulted in a list of 5,072 institutional mission statements for analysis. Statements were gathered in NVivo and inductively coded for common themes and

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trends. One common theme across multiple institutions was "social justice". These statements, a total of 40, were isolated for further analysis and coding as described below.

Although we recognize 40 institutions is a small sample size, it is the comprehensive representation of institutions who include the term "social justice" in their mission statements. It is notable that this project has resulted in such a small sample size because very few institutions include social justice into their mission statements. Finally, we recognize that institutions may be incorporating social justice into their work, even if it does not show up in their mission statement. For institutional context, of the 40 institutions analyzed for their use of social justice, 25 are in cities of 100,000 or more, 16 are located in a suburb, and only one is located in a rural location. Additionally, 33 of the institutions are private institutions, with 23 holding a present or historical religious affiliation, 20 of which are Christian in nature.

Data Analysis

After isolating those mission statements that contained social justice, each researcher coded independently. To begin, researchers coded what social justice meant in the context of each statement by reading through the statements as a whole, paying attention to where it was placed within the statement and how it was used. Coding was completed utilizing qualitative content analysis, which is defined as "the process of considering both the participant and context when sorting text into groups of related categories to identify similarities and differences, patterns, and associations, both on the surface and implied within" (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 128). Specifically, we utilized conventional content analysis, summative content analysis, and latent content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kleinheksel et al., 2020).

The data was coded through subjective interpretation, or inference by three separate interpreters (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). During this initial coding process, interpreters coded for common themes across statements and institutions using conventional content analysis. In this process, the data guided the coding, and the interpreters had no preconceived theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This led to different types of codes after the first round of coding. For example, the religious affiliation of the institution, the racial makeup of the student body, or other words commonly found alongside social justice. Other interpreters coded for the type of value share in the mission statement when social justice was discussed. After coming together to review the initial codes as a group, a second round of individual coding was conducted using summative content analysis which the usage of the words in context was utilized to reflect on the accuracy of codes created by other interpreters. Finally, interpreters discussed the types of values present in the mission statements, how each should be coded, and the language used to describe each as a group to conclude on findings.

Throughout the coding process, analysis was centered in latent content analysis, which is a process of interpreting deeper, hidden meanings within content (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Latent content analysis has researchers interpret the meaning of the data and accepts that interpreters' use their theories and previous knowledge to interpret and understand the data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). Throughout the coding process, interpreters used knowledge learned through literature review, previous knowledge, and personal frameworks on social justice and equity work.

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Findings

In our analysis, we found four emergent themes of how social justice as a value was expressed within the mission statement itself: social justice as a foundational value, espoused value, instilled value, and pursued value. This scaffolding of social justice as an institutional value varied based on the perceived expressed commitment from the words and connotations directly expressed in the mission statement itself. The four scaffolded levels of values are shown in Figure 1 and explored more in depth in this section.

There was one mission statement in the data that did not fall within these four value sets, yet needs to be included in our analysis because the language used in the mission statement comes from deficit language, stating they "offer online degree programs to serve the needs of . . . the underserved (social justice)." If our field operates from a liberatory approach to social justice, deficit language is not appropriate for empowering students, faculty, and staff in this work.

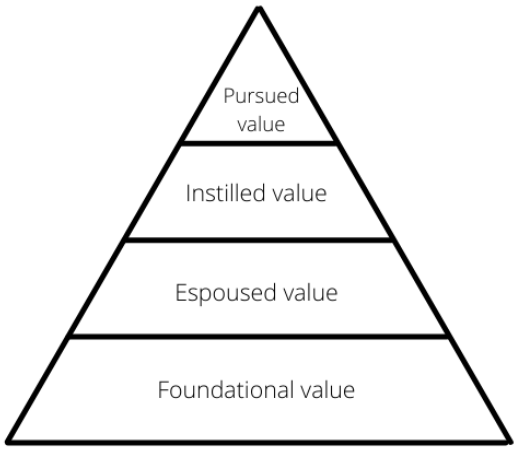

Figure 1. Social Justice as a Value of Institutional Mission Statements

Social Justice as a Foundational Value of the Mission Statement

In this analysis, we understand the concept of social justice as a foundational value to be the denotation of social justice as an underlying basis or principle or fundamental. Social justice is expressed in the mission statement as a guiding principle, a basis for institutional origin and heritage, and a source of grounding and rooting for the institution. Seven of the 40 institutional mission statements expressed social justice as a foundational value. In this theme, examples of social justice as a foundational value include "equity, opportunity and social justice as our guiding principles" and "diverse learning environment rooted in social justice." Around these sentiments were concepts such as community (both local and global) and often institutional specific context, like connections to religious affiliations.

Social Justice as an Espoused Value of the Mission Statement

We understand social justice as an espoused value to mean the adoption or support of a cause, belief, or way of life. Social justice may be expressed in the mission statement as being promoted by the institution, important to the institution, affirmed by the institution, or that the institution is committed to it. 19 of the 40 institutional mission statements stated

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an espoused value of social justice. Examples of language used in these mission statements include, "a commitment to social justice and service" and "embraces a vision for social justice and educates students in mind, body and spirit to prepare them personally and professionally to make a difference in the global community." These mission statements went beyond a perceived foundational commitment in their connection to diversity work in social justice pursuits.

Social Justice as an Instilled Value of the Mission Statement

In this context, an instilled value of social justice can be showing or explaining how to act. Social justice can be expressed in the mission statement as a value the institution attempts to teach to their students, leading to graduates who value and pursue social justice. Originally labeled "taught value" in our analysis, we determined that in our current scope of this project, we cannot guarantee that social justice is being operationally taught by the faculty, staff, and students, but rather can only assumed the institution is instilling social justice as a value based on their writing. 13 of the 40 institutional mission statements expressed social justice as an instilled value. Examples of language used in instilled value statements include "encourage and model lifelong commitment to thinking critically, making ethical decisions, pursuing social justice and finding God in all things" and "develops practices of mind and body that foster intellectual and academic excellence, social justice, and compassionate wisdom." These statements often alluded to a sense of integrity and ethics in social justice work.

Social Justice as a Pursued Value of the Mission Statement

A pursued value of social justice in institutional mission statements encompasses the fact or process of doing something to achieve an aim. Social justice is expressed in the mission statement as a value that the institution is hoping to find, grow in, or advance in. In our original analysis, this theme was called "enacted value" as the language implication action towards social justice, but as similarly expressed above, we cannot guarantee in the scope of this data that action is stemming from the institution based on the language of their mission statement. Only two of the 40 institutional mission statements stated a pursued value of social justice. Language in these mission statements include, "the quest for social justice" and "graduating socially responsible practitioners, engaging communities, and advancing social justice." The context around these statements often expressed commitments to other action-based concepts like pursuing service and leadership.

Implications for Practice

The findings show 19 schools use the term social justice in their mission statements as an espoused value as opposed to an enacted, instilled, or foundational value. In our analysis from this study, we perceived schools that use social justice as an espoused value believe in and support social justice, but may not necessarily want to actively engage in the pursuit of social justice from the language used in their mission statements. Several institutions also specified they are teaching social justice as a value to their students. Creating socially just minded students and world citizens as a common theme amongst these institutions takes away some urgency for the school as well. If an institution states that it supports social justice and wants to foster that value in its students, it does not necessarily need to take

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further action or change practices. These types of mission statements seem to put most of the responsibility of social justice, equity, and ethics onto the students who are being shaped to become world leaders.

While shaping students to value social justice is important, institutions should also examine their own practices and programs to determine if they are supporting social justice or otherwise perpetuating systems of oppression as an institution. Out of all the schools that included social justice in their mission statement, only Illinois Wesleyan University explicitly stated a commitment to social justice in their policies, programs, and practices as a pursued value. This implies that Illinois Wesleyan University is the one of the only schools in this dataset that holds itself accountable to their commitment to social justice expressed in their mission statement. This may not be the case, but the findings of these mission statements show that schools are always inwardly promoting social justice, and mostly teaching social justice as a value to its students.

The inclusion of social justice as a pursued value in an institutional mission statement may not necessarily mean that institution is actively pursuing social justice. To revisit the example of Illinois Wesleyan University, their website contains little to no information about social justice efforts even though it is a key component of their mission statement. Their Office of Diversity and Inclusion website does have a strong dedication to activism and features a timeline of famous human rights activists that have visited campus (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2020).

Another contextual piece of these findings is this subsect of mission statements are only a small fraction of mission statements across the country. Out of thousands of mission statements from diverse types of higher education institutions, only 40 use the term social justice. This leads us to one question: Are schools that do not have social justice in their mission statements still working toward social justice? While mission statements can be indicative of what an institution uses its time, money, and resources on, it may not present the full picture. It is also important to note how institutions that include social justice in their mission statements will have differing definitions of it. Our definition of social justice includes equitably supporting *all* social identities.

When coding for institutional type, researchers found that several schools are religiously-affiliated (mainly Christian and Catholic). This is most likely due to the term "social justice" being historically rooted in the Catholic church. While the Catholic church may have coined the term "social justice" and used it throughout history, its definition has historically left out groups that are not accepted by the church. Again, it is important to note that institutions who include social justice in their mission statements may not share our definition.

For student affairs professionals who view social justice as a personal value, it is important to assess how social justice plays a role in your institution and organization. Social justice can play a role in any capacity in higher education and all professionals have the capability to work toward it. However, institutions may not always give student affairs professionals adequate means for this work. Student affairs professionals should think critically about how their institution supports social justice work in their roles.

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Conclusion

Social justice is an important cornerstone to equity in higher education, yet only 40 out of over 6,000 institutions within the dataset included social justice in their mission statements. After analyzing these 40 statements, we found many institutions view social justice as foundational, espoused, or instilled values, but few included social justice as a pursued value. This means the majority of schools using social justice in their mission statement are seeking to instill social justice in their students and the campus community, and only some make it their mission to actively work toward social justice in their policies and practices. The institutions who put the responsibility of social justice on its students and other campus partners may not have the same urgency to use a critical lens on themselves and the use of the term social justice is more performative.

In viewing social justice as a value of an institution, it is exceedingly important for student affairs and student activities professionals to determine what type of value social justice falls under. Is social justice a pursued value at your institution? Does social justice actively come into the policies and practices of your institution? Is your institution using terms like social justice or diversity and inclusion to be performative? While these questions might be hard to answer, they are important to reflect upon as incoming student affairs professionals enter into a new institution.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest to be cited here.

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Human Participants

The present research does not involve human participants.

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Ms. Valerie Arias (she/her) is the daughter of Colombian immigrants and a first - generation college graduate. As a Latina scholar, Valerie works to increase college access, retention, and graduation for historically minoritized students. Currently, she develops and implements bilingual and culturally relevant recruitment strategies to increase the pipeline of Hispanic and Latino students from high school to higher education. In her previous role at Florida State University, Valerie leveraged relationship building to facilitate dialogue across differences in the Social Justice Living Learning Community and Social Change Peer Educator programs. Throughout her career, Valerie aims to advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, and access within higher education to restructure the historically oppressive system. Lastly, outside of work she enjoys eating ice cream and oreos, spending time with her two cats, and dancing to Latino music.

Ms. Olivia Brown is a new professional in the field of student affairs. Originally from Columbus, Ohio, she attended The Ohio State University and received her bachelor's in strategic communication with minors in History and Leadership Studies. As an undergraduate, Olivia found an interest in student affairs as well as leadership development. She pursued this passion with a Graduate Assistantship in the Center for Leadership and Social Change at Florida State University. While at FSU, she obtained a masters in Higher Education and facilitated leadership development and service-learning opportunities for undergraduate students. Olivia currently serves as the Assistant Director in the Center for Leadership at Elon University, where she continues her passions of student development and ensuring leadership is accessible to everyone.

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