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A dissertation overview:
Exploring the effect of addressing social injustices as a student affairs professional
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DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

The sidewalks were strewn with hate as the October morning sun shattered through the clouds. Hate-filled words in chalk exclaimed violence against lesbians and gays on my undergraduate campus. Obscene phrases like "Get a gun and shoot them," "Kill the fags," and "Gays must die" were sketched hastily over the 10% Society's (a lesbian and gay student organization) National Coming Out Day celebratory words.

From 1987-1992, my undergraduate campus was my home away from home and my friends and I were violated by these hurtful phrases chalked on the cold concrete sidewalks. This written violence became a significant event prompting my personal journey towards social justice. It would not be the last time I would feel frustration about biased actions on a campus.

I was, then, an over-involved undergraduate student leader at a Midwestern public institution of higher learning. Campus was close to home and my new found family included both students and student affairs staff. Those staff members (parental in their actions) helped me as I worked through my personal frustrations with these hateful words and actions. Each staff member played a significant role in guiding me by providing me with opportunities and

challenges. My respect for the wisdom they shared with me is still an integral part of my ethical

palette of practice. Little did I know when one of these advisers introduced me to a profession in

which I would be involved for over a decade. I failed to recognize then that these student affairs

professionals may have experienced a multitude of unique emotions while helping me, the

student, as I dealt with my angst.

Problem

Student affairs professionals cannot be fully prepared for the multiple roles they have to

juggle in their efforts to create an equitable and conducive living and learning environment for

their diverse student population. They are held accountable for supporting the current policies,

procedures and programs, while adapting to the myriad new demands on campus with

continually decreasing resources. Student affairs professionals are a part of a university's power

structure and are uniquely positioned to advocate for students within the constructs of the

centuries-old higher education systems of practice (Chang, 2002). Because of this power

structure, the role of the student affairs staff member may be rich with diverse experiences and

complexities associated with the informal out-of-classroom interactions between students and

student affairs professionals.

As a student affairs professional, I was often stretched between policy, people, and

purpose while working towards creating an equitable campus environment. I refused to lose

focus on the needs of students, and the incessant political and social pressures took a toll on me,

both professionally and personally. During my training to be a student affairs professional and

subsequent career experience I was not taught how to handle difficult situations involving unjust

treatment of people on campus. Instead, there seemed to be an expectation that I would just

"know" how to cope with these challenges during my 13 years as a student affairs professional. I did not understand the extent to which helping students would affect my personal well-being. Figley (2002) defined compassion fatigue as "resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized person" (p. xiv). Identifying the cost of caring as a personal issue and determining how to cope with this symptomatic characteristic of compassion fatigue presents a difficult challenge for professionals (Figley 1995a, 1995b, 2002); it was certainly a difficult challenge for me.

Purpose

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to explore my personal knowledge of social injustices on a university campus by sharing stories that affected me personally and professionally.

Research Questions

My personal analysis of my experiences as a student affairs professional committed to working towards eradicating social injustices explored the following questions:

1. Upon reflection, how did I respond to social injustices and oppression of students on campus?

2. What hurdles did I face in striving to cultivate an equitable campus environment?

3. What effects did working to address social injustice in higher education have on me, both professionally and holistically?

4. What are the implications of my experiences for other student affairs professionals?

Theoretical Perspectives

Transformative learning theory and social justice theory served as the foundational theoretical perspectives for my study. Using both of these theories guided my research questions.

Transformative Learning Theory. My highly personal story served as a foundation from which I explored the dimensions of knowing, understanding of oneself, and creating a more inclusive campus environment. Mezirow (2000) stated,

> The justification for much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded. We make meaning with different dimensions of awareness and understanding; in adulthood we may more clearly understand our experience when we know under what conditions an expressed idea is true or justified. (p. 4)

Social Justice Theory. Social justice in education is more than educating students about injustices; essentially it is a commitment to work towards creating equity both locally and globally (Kincheloe, 2004). It is recognizing that education is not neutral (Ng, 2003). Social justice means going against the grain and traditions of an institution. It is a collaborative partnership between learner and educator where the hierarchy of titles can be shed and individuals can learn from one another.

Methodology

My epistemological framework for this autoethnography was subjectivism. I sought to understand my knowledge by interpreting the meaning through my stories, and from the interview responses from key higher education members about social justice in higher education (Crotty, 2003).

Significance of the Study

The intention of this study was to share my personal journey as a student affairs staff member, and my personal and professional transformation resulting from advocating for social justice within the field of higher education. I explored the potential relationships among empathic distress, compassion fatigue, and my work as a student affairs professional. The telling of my story may offer insights for others about taking care of oneself while handling difficult situations in student affairs that result in emotional strain.

Implications

I hope my research and story inspires student affairs colleagues and incoming new student affairs professionals:

• to enable them to develop healthy characteristics that allow them to enhance campus communities by creating a sustainable climate in which social justice may flourish (Figley, 2002).

• to encourage graduate preparation programs to better prepare incoming professionals by helping them gain an understanding of how working towards social justice may affect a student affairs professional's daily life (Reason, Broido, Davis, & Evans, 2005).

Limitations

As an autoethnography, the use of myself as the primary source of data may be questioned (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sparkes, 2000). The study was limited to my knowledge of my career in student affairs, and to the interview responses collected from three higher education members with whom I have worked. I recognize that there may have been some things I am unable to explain, not even for myself, out of, for example, self-preservation.

However, I intended to focus on the hope I have that my story and research will provide inspiration to others.

Delimitations

Because this study only involved myself, it challenged the norms of scholarly discourse (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). My primary focus was to provide the audience with my autobiographical story, which "displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Definitions

For the benefit of this autoethnographic study, the following definitions apply:

• Autoethnography: A highly personalized genre of writing and research where the author uses personal experience to extend understanding of a particular sociocultural context (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

• Compassion fatigue: Compassion fatigue consists of the intuitive actions and emotions resulting from knowing or learning about a person's experiencing a secondary response to an unjust or traumatic event, and the connections between caring for the individual, and little for oneself (Figley, 1995, 2002).

• Diversity: A Eurocentric word used to describe many groups and categories of underrepresented people. The word diversity will be used in my research as a descriptive word. I use this word, with hesitation, due to research examining how the word "diversity" minimizes the continued oppression of communities of color and issues of racism in the United States (Cobham & Parker, 2007).

- Empathic distress: A vicarious emotional effect based on the apprehension or comprehension of the emotional experiences of others; indistinguishable to what the other person or group is feeling or would be expected to feel (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000).

- Eurocentric: a perspective considered to be the universal truth that fails to take into account the plurality of cultures or a world of multiculturalism (Jung, 2009).

- Social justice: a perspective that strives to include appreciating viewpoints and social responsibility of all, equity in procedural systems, access to and sharing of resources, and a feeling of being safe and protected (Goodman, 2001; Reason, et al., 2005).

- Social justice allies: Brown (2006) explained, "They [social justice allies] challenge exclusion, isolation, and marginalization of the stranger; respond to oppression with courage; empower the powerless; and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (p. 711).

- Transformative learning: "The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8).

Excerpts from

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

> In 2005, I sat in my car and cried, not an ordinary cry, this was a cataclysmic episode of tears streaming down my face. The tension of each drop pressurized as it would be weighted down by another tear. Each tear pooling on my coat. You would have thought I had lost a friend or family member. Instead, it was the culmination of work-related stress. Perhaps, in some ways, this sadness I felt was like losing a family member. (personal communication, December 5, 2009)

As Freire (2006) stated, "... reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51). I recognized, as I conducted this research, that it provided a foundation for me to discover, heal, and share my story to help transform future student affairs practice.

Regardless, we are about students

My findings begin with advice from student affairs professionals that helped guide my experiences as a staff member. As a student affairs professional, I looked to my supervisors, role models and colleagues hon ow to interact with upper administrators, and students. Whether it was sharing information with students, supporting administrators, and learning when to advocate. The people I respected as my role models were my teachers. When I asked the question, "How do you view the role of social justice on campus?" of the university community members Stan stated,

> And one of the fundamental ways to create a positive learning environment is to
> make sure it's one that is just, to make sure it is one that acknowledges everyone
> and helps them know about, celebrate and take advantage of the success that their
> multiple identities bring to a college campus. And there probably isn't – there
> probably isn't a role on campus more responsible for that than student affairs,
> save perhaps, ideally the president, who should be establishing that as a priority
> for any college campus.
>
> But, you know, in some ways, I see student affairs as being both the
> conscience and the social worker of a college campus. And again, we – because
> of that, we can't be absolved from our responsibility to advocate – to be advocates
> for all students, regardless of their background, regardless of their identities,

regardless of what challenges they bring or what gifts they have. And if there's

any place that it belongs on a college campus, it's within the field of student

affairs. (transcribed interview, August 4, 2011)

When I asked Gina the same question, she said,

I think that's really their whole purpose, I want to say. I mean in whatever

function area or whatever job you're in, you should still be working toward

making sure every student has a just experience or feels at home and welcome in

the place, like even it's in housing, if it's in financial aid. I mean everybody

should be working to be sure that this is happening, that social justice is occurring

(transcribed interview, September 28, 2011)

Mina explained her answer,

Well, because it's student affairs professional, our fundamental purpose in being

on college campuses is students, so the role of a student affairs professional is to

be that social justice advocate for students. And it might be for an issue that

visibly we can see students need help with, or it might be something that students

don't know anything about. It could be that policies and procedures from a

student affairs professional's prospective are problematic. It's our role at student

affairs professionals to identify, criticize in a constructive way, and correct it. So

whether the student knows about it or not, we should be advocating from a social

justice framework constantly. Because we're about students! Not just what

students raise their hand and say the need – what we can recognize.

Administratively we need to be providing. So as student affairs professional will

be a voice for students on behalf of students as well as with students. (transcribed

interview, August 5, 2011)

On several instances as an undergraduate, I would learn about potential conflict long before the

upper administration had planned to share it with us, the students. My instructors provided me

with words informed what I would do and say as a professional. The advice was a foundation for

the steps I would take past my role as a programmer, as Evans and Reason (2001) stated, "In

addition to being service providers and educators, to truly be effective, student affairs

professionals must explicitly embrace the roles of student advocate and social activist" (p. 376).

Mina stated during her interview,

There's a handful of experiences where I've been asked, "Are you a professional

or are you an advocate?" And my answer was always, "Yes." So for me it was a

student affairs professional is an advocate of students, and there are many

opportunities to teach others that have been in the field longer than me. That's the

way it needs to be. That's the way it always needed to be. (transcribed interview,

August 5, 2011)

The following sections will illustrate the positives and negatives of choosing to be an advocate

for students. I initiated myself as an advocate for students, even when the role of advocate

would tarnish my spirit - I knew that I was trying to make a difference.

With my own understanding of social justice theory I am able to link my empathic

response to students with inequities in a campus environment. In my research, I have learned

that if the culture of an organization or institution embodies a social justice atmosphere where the

existing attitudes, perceptions and expectations are presented as "structural (faculty/staff/

student), psychological (racialized perceptions), and behavioral (social and academic engagement) climate" (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton, & Allen, 1999, p. 19) inclusive and desegregated, it will provide a welcoming and supportive environment for underrepresented students an to thrive in. One person cannot make it happen on their own.

How naive. This autoethnography allowed me to examine and acknowledge where I found my role with social justice. The act of self-reflection has proven to be critical when learning how my personal beliefs were connected to my public behaviors; which in turn helped inform my future actions when striving for social justice (Brown, 2006).   One of the lessons I learned as an undergraduate was that underrepresented people get treated like... shit. Perhaps some of these feelings were acknowledging how privileged I was, and am, by being a female White heterosexual Christian student in the Midwest. When I was an undergraduate, I didn't know what privileged was - because - to be honest - everything around me seemed somewhat fair as a teenager. But, I was lucky to live where I lived, and go to school in a good high school, and have people around me who cared about me and my well-being. I didn't have much to hide, other than being a moody teenager who attempted live a normal life. Going to college, I believed it would always be that way. I knew nothing different, so - why would my world change? How very naive of me.

Recognizing that social injustices are happening on campus was one of the steps to understanding how underrepresented students are experiencing campus in and outside of the classroom. As demographics continue to change so will the need to be proactive at creating and enhancing the environment to meet the needs of a new student population, and not just a heterogeneous one (Woodard, 1998). I had to make the conscious choice to engage in knowing

and understanding who I was as a professional and how my actions and leadership impacted the campus environment.

The beginnings of an advocate. While working at an institution, I received an award deemed the [name of person] Ally Award. I was surprised for a few reasons to be receiving it. First off, it was the inaugural year and I had never heard of the award prior to 2000; second, who would have thought I would receive such an honor to be the first recipient of this institution's [name of person] Ally Award. The person who recommended me wrote in the nomination letter, "... Laura lives and breathes the term 'ally'. It is part of who she is. Whether it's attending a program or developing individual relationships with students, Laura works hard to support and empower all" (personal communication, January, 2000). The invitation to the award ceremony stated, "[Name of institution] is very fortunate to have you on staff. Your efforts have made a difference to the LGBT community" (invitation letter, January 18, 2000). I later learned it was my supervisor at the time, I was honored to be recognized as an advocate for our students.

The Emotional State

Stan said, "But I can imagine if I'd stayed in places where it was really like a voice crying in the wilderness, it could be – it could get pretty difficult emotionally" (transcribed interview, August 4, 2011).

- Empathy has been defined as the intuitive awareness of another person's emotional states, and the vicarious affective response to another person (Hoffman, 2001).

- Empathic distress intensifies with the extent of a victims' own distress, but empathic distress can become so intense that one's personal distress shifts from the needs of the victim to oneself (Hoffman , 2001).

- My experience was drawn from a number of compelling events shared with students, faculty, staff, and parents while I was a student affairs professional. These events seemed to create an unspoken bond between myself and those involved in the critical incidents. Being brave enough to advocate for students was one thing, but being prepared emotionally to cope with the wide-range of feelings that accompanies it was another thing.

- Hoffman (2001) stated, "Empathy can be aroused when observers imagine or read about victims, discuss or argue about victims..." (p. 12232).

       Being the messenger. It is about the actual event, and how I, a student affairs professional responded to it, followed by how this one incident paralyzed me. It is a precursor to how I began to directly handle incidents that were detrimental to a student, a group of students, the campus, and eventually my spirit as a professional. The way in which I remember this event would be considered critical reflection.

- Critical reflection questions prior learning through reasoning and established beliefs (Mezirow, 1990; van Halen-Faber, 1997). Critical self-reflection could arguably be said to be based on "knowing the inside of people's minds" (Foucault, 1982, p. 214) since its explicit intent is to externalize people's innermost reflections.

- Critical reflection enhances a persons' ability to use their own knowledge to interpret what they are learning (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1990) explained, "The more intense the emotional context of learning and the more it is reinforced, the more deeply embedded and intractable to change are the habits of expectation that constitute our meaning perspectives" (p. 3).

Recognizing it was eight years ago, the following critical reflection was transcribed as my personal story about this incident:

I started serving as a primary response person for any traumatic event that would

happen on campus. And one of the good and bad parts of that kind of role is not

knowing what to do sometimes. And one afternoon, it was a Saturday afternoon, I

got a call. It was about 2:00 p.m. and I was dispatched to campus where the

campus police office is and once I got there they decided they would dispatch me

to the hospital. What had occurred allegedly was a student was in a pickup truck

near one of the residence halls with a shotgun and was threatening to kill himself.

So I knew that much. And somehow the parents had already gotten called

that this was occurring or had occurred and I later would find out that the brother

actually had arrived on the scene because he saw the student's truck and he saw

— anyway so they dispatched me to the hospital. I go to the hospital and my rule

is to be kind of the person, that student affairs person that is there for the parents

and I am the messenger from campus. So when something happens or they hear

more information, I'm supposed to share it with the family. So I get there and in

the hospital there is this very small room, it's probably maybe eight feet by ten

feet, maybe. And it's darkly lit, which I like darkly lit things.

And I knocked on the door — well I think I was greeted by the hospital

social worker and I knocked on the door and I go in and there's a mother, a father

and then one brother and someone who was younger than me but the parents were

older than me, or I assume they were older than me. And they're crying and I sit

down and I'm concerned because I am there for the parents and I wasn't trained to

do that. Nobody is trained to be there for parents when their child could have

killed himself. And so I'm in there and every so often I get a call on the student

affairs 24 response phone and so I'd go out and I'd hear something more and then

I'd have to go in and just be there for the parents. And I'm not crying, and I am

sad as heck inside of my body. I am feeling the same feelings that I did — in

retrospect I'm able to recognize that.

But I don't know what to say, I don't know what to feel, and the parents

are in there. And the son who was at the scene shows up and then shortly

thereafter I am to tell the parents — oh no, prior to the son joining up I was given

the permission to tell the parents that they've discovered a brown pickup truck,

the person in it is white of this age and that's all we have at this point. And the

body had been just transferred to the hospital and the parents had had their church

pastors come down to identify the body. And then the son shows up and during

this whole time the mother is not showing emotion, I don't see that happening.

And the father is crying, and the father is a big man, he's a big just Midwestern

big man who has three sons and this son comes in and neither one of them get up

to hug him.

Nobody hugs this student [the brother], and all I'm thinking — yeah he

happened to also be a student — and all I'm thinking in my head was I want to

hug this person but I shouldn't because I have to have this role and not that role

and so I'm very conflicted. And then the pastors come in because they're about to

go identify the body and there's hugs there, so it's very strange. They didn't hug

their child but they hugged the pastors, which was fine and very heartfelt. That

was when I started really feeling sick actually and not knowing how to feel. I

knew it was the student but I wasn't able to say that, that was not my job to say

that it was the student. Anyway the pastors go with the social worker and they

identify the body and they come back and they you know yes it's him, it's him

and crying so on and so forth.

It's a difficult situation for me because I just want to cry but I'm supposed

to be there and be the strong person. And so a few moments later a nurse comes

in and they have a little Tupperware thing, this little clear Tupperware thing and

they hand it to the parents and the parents look and it's the watch and it's the

wallet and keys from this young man and it's just in a clear Tupperware, here you

go, and I mean she didn't say it like this you know, we found this with the body.

And all I think about is this is just a clear Tupperware thing holding the artifacts

from your child. And the father takes it and he just looks at it and he says, "We

have to get rid of the vehicle," like that's the first thing that he kept on saying.

And all I'm thinking about was we just lost this person and I mean it just

was so bizarre. Finally, a couple upper administrators come to the hospital and

I've been there the whole time, which is fine. I'm kind of middle, you know at

this point in my career I'm mid-level professional and maybe mid-level and so it

was a lot for me to handle. And I just remember seeing one of my role models

and just being exhausted and so happy that they're there to help support. So

someone from the campus police comes as well and we all go into this chapel and

we talk about what happened and that this person was threatening to kill himself,

police got to the scene.

And so I'm hearing all this, I didn't have any of this information, like the

details. But I appreciate that they're being realistic and they're telling me and

telling the family exactly what happened. And then we find out that there's a

receipt in the car that this student went to one of the local department store chains

and was able to purchase a gun and bullets without any waiting period, 44

minutes later he had killed himself. All of this in 44 minutes and then take his

own life and change everybody else's life around him just from his decision.

And it impacted me greatly because after we were in this room and we

were in kind of like this circle and I'm standing in the back and the police person

is telling the family this and I'm in the back with my mentor who happened to

also be a supervisor. And I remember just being overwhelmed and not showing

the emotion and having to be you know in the role of student affairs or the role

that was taught to us. Not that there's ever a role taught to you - but you're kind

of taught by watching others - because of the professions that you went to school

with or went to grad school with, they didn't show those emotions so you didn't

show those emotions. I mean that's what it felt like. (transcribed personal

recording, August 21, 2011)

I felt powerless from the experience. I worked with various upper administrators to develop

effective practices for the involved staff to meet and reflect upon the traumatic event. Mezirow

(1990) stated, "When the experience is too strange or threatening to the way we think or learn,

we tend to block it out or resort to psychological defense mechanisms to provide a more

compatible interpretation" (p. 4). For me, the challenge would continue to be how I would use

this experience to become aware of my raw emotion directly associated with different aspects of

my profession. Specifically, how I coped with this traumatic event informed me how I would

react to stressful situations that were out of my control. My frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997)

continued to point back to how I handled or mishandled my emotions during this experience.

Evolving from Compassion Fatigue to Transformational Learning

Following an intensive social justice experience with a group of students Mina shared this story,

> So that was a time when I tried to take a stand and help students understand how
>
> much power they have and how much influence they have. The young women
>
> said, "they would never do that again, they thought it was a horrific experience."
>
> That broke my heart because I couldn't control that for them. And afterwards I
>
> felt just beaten up. Didn't feel like we were successful and it was probably mid-
>
> semester the next semester when I asked my supervisor and we were reflecting on
>
> it and he asked me what I would do differently. I had a few things that I would
>
> probably do differently now but not much.
>
> And he asked me how I felt about it and I said, "I just feel defeated." And
>
> he very adamantly responded with, "Are you kidding? What do you think would
>
> happen if the Department of Residence had another mural or poster or a flyer
>
> come up in the res house? Do you think that they wouldn't respond right now if
>
> another one came up?" And I went, "Oh, no. They would probably take care of it
>
> wouldn't they." And he said, "That's what you did."

Oh. I didn't feel good about it because it didn't feel good for the students.

Yeah, okay, so the Department of Residence is going to check themselves now,

but the resolution for the students, from the learning experience for those students

was not good. So that didn't feel good to me. But that was a big one. (transcribed

interview, August 5, 2011)

As I critically reflected upon my student affairs experience for my research I was

assessing my own ideas and beliefs through self-reflection (Mezirow, 1997).   I recorded and

transcribed my story for my research, I evolved through my words. The act of writing this

autoethnography was a form of transformational learning. Transformative learning as Mezirow

(2000) defined,

... refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of

reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more

inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so

that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified

to guide action. (p. 8)

My professional life became a disorientating dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) with one incident after

another creating patterns of pain, empathy, and compassion so unbearable my professional and

personal life took critical turns to combat it. Many years ago while I was in a course, I learned

about transformational learning. I became fascinated by it - because I truly believed that I was a

living example of transformational learning. You may ask, "why are you talking about it in the

empathy and compassion section of your results?" Because, when I experienced these critical

events my body and spirit created new ways of defending itself against any additional harm.

The disorienting dilemma. One of the most dramatic alterations of my meaning perspectives was initiated by a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1981, p. 7) accompanied by, as Taylor (1997) explained, "... a series of learning strategies involving critical reflection, exploration of different roles and options, and negotiation and re-negotiation of relationships" (p. 51). My disorienting dilemma was reignited on June 28, 2010 when I received my daily email from *Inside Higher Education.* One of the *Inside Higher Education* (2010) headlines read, "Extra: Anti-Bias Rules Upheld" and it summarized, "The Supreme Court ruled today, 5-to-4, that public colleges and universities may require religious organizations seeking recognition or funds as campus groups to comply with anti-bias rules" (2010). I remember I started to cry, and I emailed my major professor, and my best friend stating, "I could still have my student affairs job if this existed back in 2006." You may ask, "why?"

During my last position as a student affairs professional, I was charged with developing a student organization recognition system based upon a committee's recommendations. This process took approximately three years of research, writing of policy, public forums, and dealing legal issues. The primary legal issue, on my campus, surrounded religious organizations who insisted their religions did not permit gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender students as members. Had the Supreme Court ruling from Christian Legal Society Chapter of the University of California, Hastings College of the Law, aka Hastings Christian Fellowship v. Martinez et al. U.S. 561 (2010) been in place in 2006, I could still be a student affairs professional. While I will never know if this legal ruling would have changed my fate, it may have changed the outcomes for the students who fought for their rights, and my experience watching them cope with these personal stressors. Then again, maybe it wouldn't. This passage examines the story behind the

development of a policy, and my reactions to a similar incident between religious organizations,

and lesbian, gay, bisexual students on my campus:

And so we had a – we pulled a group of students together and not many staff

members I believe that may have just been me and my supervisor at that time who

serve on this committee and the graduate assistant and then student leaders from

all different types of student organizations sat in on this committee and took those

recommendations to develop the policy. And the policy – it took some time,

we've had to take these recommendations and make different types of

organizations that were based on [name of institution] profile and – if you have

these things then you get this status, if you have these things you get this status.

And one of the things that happened during this process was I emailed the

[upper administrator] at that time. And said "I'm concerned that some of our

unrepresented groups like our historically black groups or our students of color

groups, they are not going to be illegible for this because we do not have a staff

member who's dedicated to advising those particular student groups. It's not in

their job descriptions and that's one of the things the criteria to be a part of this

upper echelon group. So to me it was discriminating and the vice president said

"Oh, no it's fine, everything is fine. It's not discriminating, it's fine." And I just

remember not knowing what I was doing but in my head I was like this just

doesn't make sense, it's not fair.

I don't think it's fair to create hierarchy when there is no need to have

hierarchy. All student groups should be treated the same, but that was my

opinion. And the students opinion, there were students of my committee who were really concerned about that. Anyway, as the policy moved further, we had followed the institutions timeline on holding public forums and getting information and so on and so I'm in a public forum and I have a PowerPoint and I have the PowerPoint up and I'm showing the student groups what the policy is, how the details and kind of what the new form will look like. And on the format has the [name of institution] Non-discrimination policy on it, and that by signing it you are supporting the non-discrimination policy.

Wow -- this is what you need to know, prior to this that same sentence had been on the other registration forms, had been on registration forms prior to me even becoming a part of this campus. And a religious leader came up to me and said "Well, we can't support this because this has sexual orientation and gender on it." And I was like "What?" "Wow, we can't support this because we don't allow gay students into our student organization." And I said, "This has been a part of the policy since I've been here."

And I was able to go back and get that file from that student organization, this religious organization. And pull up and they had signed every single previous registration form. So what I'm learning is that they were actually already breaking the rules, okay. So we have this big meeting and at this particular meeting in it with [legal team members] from campus and our staffs and some other cabinet type of people operative administrators.

And so we're talking about it and basically this is what I remember very clearly is the discussion was – these religious organizations are opposed to this policy, its part of the policies – its part of the [name of institution], this policy supersedes what those religious organizations are therefore if they don't support it, they shouldn't be recognized on our campus. That is the discussion, end of discussion. And the [upper administrator] was "I'm very in favor of this, we have to support this, I mean they should have the right. If someone who is gay wants to be in this organization, they should have the right."

That's the discussion and the [legal team members] like "Yes, yes, yes." And everybody is saying, "yes, yes, yes." So it's very yes, yes, yes oriented. And so I left that meeting feeling good, as if students who were part of our gay and lesbian community were being supported. Even though I would continually bring up that I didn't think that it was fair that underrepresented groups can have this upper recognition, I still felt good because all student groups were being treated fairly and accordingly. Then we held another public forum, then lawyers from the religious groups got involved, then I had to start walking a fine line again and having to be careful how I was advocating and who I was advocating for because these off campus lawyers were now involved.

The non-discrimination policy to me meant a lot, to be on this campus, to be on that campus at that time and having sexual orientation, gender identity in the policy meant a lot to me. It had race, it had ethnicity, it had religion, it had veteran status, it had all these things, all these underrepresented groups on our

campus represented but all of a sudden now we can't support it because religious

lawyers got involved. Now I get the call from whomever and I don't – I could

probably figured it out but it was an [upper administrator] and they said, "We

really have to take a re-look at this, we're going to have to re-think it."

I just remember going, how, how am I supposed to support this, how do I

determine what a religious group is? And then the discussion was well the

person, the recognition committee will determine which groups are considered

religious and which ones are not. If you apply as a religious organization you

have to prove in your tenants that you are able to discriminate. In it, I mean to me

it was like, "are you kidding me?"

At the same time on this campus, a group of student and administrators had developed an

institutional diversity document following an institutional evaluation of the campus climate by a

highly regarded research group. This document was to be a way to demonstrate how this

institution promoted an equitable environment for all members of its community. The third ideal

of the Diversity Document (2006) implicitly stated,

Freedom from discrimination: We recognize that we must strive to overcome

historical and divisive biases in our society. Therefore, we commit ourselves to

create and maintain a community in which all students, staff, faculty and

administrators can work together in an atmosphere free from discrimination, and

to respond appropriately to all acts of discrimination.

On one hand, I was having to promote diversity, and the other I was being thrust into going

against my own personal morals, and the Diversity Document that was being adopted at an

institutional level. When doing research for this study, I read an article by Manning and

Coleman-Boatwright's (1999) and it stated,

> Little in history would lead a person to believe that the transformation from one
>
> culture to many cultures occurs through a voluntary relinquishment of the
>
> privileges and prestige of being the dominant culture. Change is resisted on many
>
> levels. Individually, practices that base performance rewards on mastery of a
>
> dominant culture management style recreate a dominant culture structure (p. 371)

I was experiencing having to maintain the "dominant culture management style" and not help the

underrepresented students on campus in public. However, outside of the public eye I was

spending my time advocating for the students. The system itself was not going to change with

just me, one administrator, vocalizing to key upper administrators about the discriminatory

policy we were beginning to put into place. My story continued,

> I'm not talking to students at this point, this is just working with administrators
>
> and the discussion that was happening behind the doors and if the students didn't
>
> know that all this was occurring, students were being treated unfairly. But I had
>
> to support what was happening from an administrative point of view. I had to
>
> support what the administration was doing. I couldn't advocate for the students,
>
> in front of the students. I was advocating for the students behind the close doors.
>
> The [legal team members] helped to rewrite this portion of the policy and then
>
> another open forum happened.
>
> > And a lot of our gay lesbian ally transgender community came forward;
>
> student allies, faculty allies and staff allies came in the room. And I had to

advocate for the policy. The policy that not more than a few weeks ago, the

student affairs crew had supported, had said that the non-discrimination policy is

important and valid and we value our students. And all of a sudden I have to

change my tune, it was beyond difficult because allegedly the Freedom in

Religion was trampling underrepresented students on our campus.

What happened during one of those forums is I remember standing up and

in my gut it was hurting, it was wrenching but I was able to say, "...there's a

reason why the constitution exists and the constitution is important and we have

to validate the importance of the constitution because that's our governing rules

and policies for the United States."   My gut was wrenching inside because that

constitution wasn't meeting the needs of the students that existed on our campus.

That exists on our campus under underrepresented groups, gay and lesbian

students, gender identity, marital status didn't represent them.

But then I had a premonition like, oh my God, if I'm in my gut upset

because religious groups and they weren't many, I need to make sure I state that,

there weren't many religious groups, they had their rights too. And that non-

discrimination policy also was for religion. So how – I couldn't discriminate

against those religious groups even though I did not agree with them, I couldn't

discriminate against them.

My education and the campus Diversity Document did not teach me how to create a systemic

change at the institutional level. The only thing I could do was to continue my personal mission,

and hope the right person would listen to what I was hearing from the underrepresented students,

as well as my concerns about how this proposed policy would inhibit the institutional drive for

an inclusive campus. The campus could write as many documents as it wanted to demonstrate it

was diverse - it could not change the dominant infrastructures.

My role as a student affairs professional, from my understanding, was to help the

institution to be proactive to move towards an inclusive campus (Chang, 2002; Evans & Reason,

2001; Hurtado, et al., 1999; Manning & Coleman-Boatwright, 1999). I believed I was doing just

exactly that. The dominant perspectives, and how it would *look* to people outside of the campus

was outweighing the underrepresented students needs.

> But I was being stretched, then I got called to religious leaders group which is
>
> kind of like the religious leaders from the community and then are gay and lesbian
>
> transgender bisexual advisory committee. I had to go the separate constituencies
>
> and speak on the policy and have to listen to religious group and have to listen to
>
> the gay and lesbian students' community group. And have to be a part of the
>
> conversation and in my gut hurt because these groups were being in particular,
>
> these students – these underrepresented students were being discriminated against
>
> on our campus. On the campus that I believe was safe for our students.
>
> And I had to support the administrative policy, I remember sitting in on the
>
> religious group and talking and listening and hearing them say "We just can't
>
> have those gay people in there." I'm really exaggerating a bit – but that is
>
> essentially what they were saying.   And I had to listen to it, I didn't agree with it
>
> but I had to listen to it. And then going to the lesbian gay group and sitting in on
>
> their meeting, and their fears and concerns.

And having a faculty person who to me is one of the strongest advocates

of underrepresented groups in the United States as far as I'm concerned, really

point at me and angrily (and not hatred), no hate but definitely like, "... how could

you not advocate?" and I said, "...this is a policy and the freedom of religion, the

freedom of organization and association... " I said all this 'stuff.' It was rhetoric.

The administrative talk is the talking point, this is how I'm positioning myself,

these are the things that I was told to say and I agree with everything that person

is saying. I agree with everything, one of those students is saying about how they

should have the right to join those groups. How they should have the same rights

as everybody else, just because they have a different sexual orientation does not

mean they shouldn't be allowed to go to those groups.

In October 2006 one of the student government organization representatives wrote a resolution

denouncing the policy which stated, "... the [name of student government organization] implores

the rejection of the pending [name of organization policy], thus opposing the accommodation of

any violation to the [name of institution]'s non-discrimination policy..."(2006-2-22 SR). It was

difficult to learn how the policy I was having to promote was not supported by the students. The

administration had the power, because it held all of the knowledge. Foucault (1980) stated, "The

exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely knowledge constantly induces

effects of power … it is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is

impossible for knowledge not to engender power" (p. 52). It was even more difficult when I

would have to go to forums and meetings about this policy:

I remember sitting there and just squirming and feeling sick in my gut that I

would have to be the person, the person that had to promote this particular policy

that I do not agree with at all. And in sitting through – sitting in different

meetings with [legal team members] about this policy, the [legal team members]

from the institution and then these religious groups and that they won't budge.

Those religious groups would not budge, this is the way it's going to be

and so on and so forth and that's just what's going to happen. And then I mean I

think just having upper administrator say to me that I would have to determine

which religious organizations had the right, the authority to deny access to the

clubs based on the tenets of that group. And I mean seriously how could I

determine what group was considered authorized to discriminate? It was tearing

me up inside. During that time having the religious groups come up to me and

say "I'm going to pray for you", I'm going to pray for you and it remembers of

this particular student groups.

And being Catholic it was like yeah, I might be going to hell because I'm

advocating for these underrepresented groups. But in my head I couldn't

advocate for them. Because I didn't want to lose my job and during a lot of these

one-on-one meetings or with different advisers of the gay and lesbian group,

sitting in these meetings and I actually accidentally said and I said it more than

ones "There's no way I can do this job, if I have to allow this student group to

discriminate against other people." And it's actually a part of their culture that

they're going to discriminate. And that the non-discrimination policy is basically

null and void on campus.

How can I be a part of that? I could not do my job. And sharing with my

friends that the job that I love, that I work my butt off to get this job, I mean I

work so hard to get this point and I love to work with my student and then I

actually would have to discriminate against the students and then I have to

advocate for the administration instead of the students. How fair is that? It isn't

fair, it was wrong, it was wrong to put me in that position. And then sharing with

these staff members that I didn't know if could give the job and then I actually

was sincerely thinking about leaving my job because of this policy. And then I

would have to be the chair of this committee that would be making these

decisions.

It was killing me, I mean I started recognizing that my health like I

couldn't sleep at night. I was depressed, I couldn't sleep at night and I couldn't

stop thinking about were these students that came to me and said, "How can you

do this policy Laura?" I would think how can I do this sitting across with this

nice, young person? The students would ask me, "How can I ever advocate for

this?" and all I wanted to say was all the things that I was trying to do behind the

doors. I was trying so hard to advocate and I couldn't. It was like I was – it was

like I'm stuck in this box, this glass box. And I have the tool to break up but I

couldn't because I didn't want to get caught or didn't want it. I didn't want to

lose my job, my job was so important to me.

I had become a member of student affairs because I cared for students. It was while I was a

student affairs professional that I learned how to be a student advocate and social activist (Evans

& Reason, 2001), and that too had a price. I was burnt out to say the least. I was learning that

there was a toll to pay for empathizing too much (Figley, 1995). Caring professionals who listen

to reports of drastic loss may become inundated with feelings of loss similar to those who are

directly being effected (Rank, 2009). While I know these underrepresented students were not

physically harmed, the idea that the institution I worked for, and the role I had as a professional

was negatively effecting those students to whom I cared for was taking its toll on me. I wanted

to help create positive change, and the only thing I felt was despair. I felt as if I had let the

students down and that I did not "voice" enough of my discontent for what was happening with

the policy. It was this cataclysmic event where I was feeling distress for not only my students,

but for the position I loved:

> My job was my identity, I admit it very openly now when I look back at it. When
>
> sitting with my best friend and be able to say that I can't do this job. If I have to
>
> do this policy it will kill me. And the policy had went into place and then it was
>
> already doing this to me. And then, that the spring or summer having my
>
> supervisors pull me into an office and ask "Have you told people that? Are you
>
> really leaving this position because of this policy?" and in my gut it was like,
>
> "Yes!" But, I didn't say anything - instead I denied it. This is one of the number
>
> one reasons because we aren't supported, those underrepresented groups that
>
> don't have a voice on our campus. But I couldn't say it because I didn't want to
>
> lose my job.

And yeah, maybe I wouldn't have lost my job but I was advocating for this

students all the time, all the time. I was going – I was talking to people who

interacted with the upper administrators hoping that one of them would say "You

know, Laura is right." I just wanted one of them to say it and even the [legal team

members], there was one of the [legal team members] that I think they truly felt

the same way I did. I am almost positive that they did. And that summer I was

wiped out, I was burnt out from a student festival [that I advised]; I was burnt out

from just watching my students be treated like shit. And that the underrepresented

students were not getting voice anymore. It's not fair, it's not fair how I was

treated and it's not fair how the students were treated.

It's not fair how I was treated because my voice the one voice, when I was

advocating for those students no one was really listening. I didn't feel like

anybody was listening. And the people who were listening knew and shared but

when they shared they were like, "Oh, it's going to be fine. Everything is going

to be fine." I was like no, it wasn't fine. It wasn't fine for that student who came

in to me and said "It's not fair how come that's happening to us?" And then have

a religious group come – a religious leader come and tell me that they're going to

pray for me and that this chapel inside of the union. I mean I could go into the

details about how the decorations happen on this – on the campus.

In the local student newspaper one student shared their opinion in a letter to the editor. It was as

if all the work I had put into developing connections with students on campus was being

shredded from my soul. The letter continued as [name of student] (2006) wrote,

If religious organizations are allowed to practice selective membership, why

should other organizations be denied the privilege on the basis of race, religion or

any other protected class? It sets an unhealthy precedent based on weak

argument that discriminatory practices should be recognized, while discrimination

of these practices should not. (local student newspaper)

Diversity is no longer only about understanding and appreciating differences, breaking down

stereotypes, or providing access to a wider range of students, it is also about confronting systems

that privilege some groups and challenging the defensive reactions to the dismantling of those

systems (Pope, Mueller, & Reynolds, 2009. p. 645).

And it all goes back to those certain upper administrators or role models saying to

me "You need to support the people you're working for even if you don't agree

with them."

I didn't want to disappoint people, I didn't want to disappoint these

students, and I didn't want to disappoint the staff or this institution I work for. I

loved my job and I felt like I lost everything when I lost that job. And I didn't

lose it but my body and my spirit did. Social justice was so new to me and I

didn't know it was important, like I didn't know what I was doing.   But I was

advocating without knowing it. It hurts a lot but what I can tell you, kind of the

good part of the story is prior all to all this happening I studied, I tried to do a

qualitative research actually, it was kind of quantitative, qualitative and I did a

survey of some staff members in student affairs who – to find out how they dealt

with stress and I ended up learning about compassion fatigues.

So all the funny thing is since I was learning about compassion fatigue thinking, it was trauma, only trauma focused and a lot of ways its empathic focused. And because I was feeling for those students and the way they were being treated it was causing so much anxiety and stress and my personal being it was destroying who I was as a professional. And I was personally, I was sick, I was emotional a wreck. I couldn't sleep and I had to be there for the students though, just like I was on 9/11. Just like I was for those parents, I had to be there because that was my job, is to be there, to be supportive.

It was my job. The good thing that happened last year I think it was last year, been here before was when I look it up and have been annotated in those blah, blah was the supreme court strapped down a policy that basically says religious groups can – they don't have to follow non-discrimination policy. I mean had that been in place. I could still have my job. I could still have the job where I got to work with students and be there for students and interact with this great, young people who are going to make so much difference in the world and now I don't have that. I love working with my students; I just couldn't do it anymore. It wasn't fair; it wasn't fair for me to have to put in place policies that I couldn't be supportive of. Wow, this [the act of recording the story] is very good experience. (transcribed personal recording, August 21, 2011)

Each one of my stories ended with a form of grieving. I had to let go of something precious to me in order to see from a new vantage point. Each experience was transformed me to who I am now, and and built upon how I was then. Transforming my life, and my spirit.

Metamorphosis. While these stories may seem as an exaggerated incident, I lived it. It felt as if I was watching these social injustices happen on television, over and over again, and I was unable to do anything directly about it. I believe Scott (1997) stated it best,

> We incorporate the world into our Self. When we grieve we glimpse that we are
>
> grieving not only individually for what we have lost personally but for what we
>
> are losing globally. We sob for the world; the emptiness we feel is being
>
> experienced globally among all people everywhere. That is why it is so painful to
>
> grieve... (p. 49)

When a person is met with an incident that cannot be acclimated into a personal meaning perspective, the incident must be discarded or a person's perspective must be adapted to accommodate the new knowledge (Taylor, 1994). I concluded my narrative,

> When I think about how it all happened and where I'm at now compared to five
>
> years ago or ten years ago, it is exhausting. And the reason why is because it was
>
> too late to stop what was happening to me and I wasn't able to recognize what
>
> was happening. And when I think back about it, I can actually pinpoint those
>
> certain moments that changed me. And I wish I could say it was easier than that.
>
> I wish I could say that I had you know this brilliant thing come to my mind and I
>
> had all the answers but I didn't have that. And so this is what I can say, "There
>
> are many comparisons between what I experienced as someone watching a
>
> traumatic event on television or having to help a student or parents deal with a
>
> traumatic event comparatively to seeing students or a student being treated poorly
>
> on campus by the institution that should be caring for them. A change must be

made to take better care of our students, and ourselves (transcribed personal

recording, August 21, 2011)

By taking time to reflect critically upon my own experience I discovered that explaining and

exploring critical incidents was in itself a way of knowing.

Conclusion

This autoethnography provided a way for me to tell my story through critical reflection

which focused on me finding my own voice (McGregor, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). People who find

their voice begin to recognize themselves not only from their previous knowledge but from

critically reflecting on those previous life experiences. Therefore, I was able to begin to

understand why I am who I am and imagine how, if I choose, to be some other way (Taylor,

2000).

Exploring the data connected the importance of establishing an honest statement to

support advocacy for social justice in higher education. This includes training current student

affairs professionals on the true expectations of equity for students on campus, training graduate

students on the perils of student advocacy, and developing means to better support professionals

who develop empathic distress and compassion fatigue.

While my discontent for how students were treated during these events continues, I have

recognized my activism for social justice was strengthened by my experience. I know my story

was unique enough that those involved in the events may recognize themselves by words, not

name, will understand my intention was not to defame nor vilify the people - it was merely to

explore my social justice activism. My story was general enough that both new and seasoned

professionals are able to relate to my "self" as the author while providing a deeper sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2002) of the student affairs culture.

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Professional Quality of Life Scale

If you are interested in taking the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) test go to:

http://www.proqol.org/ Following the test, if you have any concerns, you should discuss them

with a physical or mental health professional