

A Seat at the Table that I Set: Beyond Social Justice Allies

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A few years ago, I was a part of a work group convened at Penn State University to develop a multicultural certificate program. As is the case when any necessary and important idea is being acted upon, excitement was in the air. As the discussion began to focus on the overall outcome that we were seeking through this experience, the conversation turned to encouraging the idea of social justice allies. At the time, the idea of social justice allies had become one of the prevailing and fresh new trends in higher education. At the next meeting, colleagues distributed articles and books that provided more information on social justice and racial allies and momentum continued to build. However, the more I read, the more unsettled I became. I value allies—I am an ally in many areas of my life. But I had to think critically about broad educational experiences like the one that we were developing and *how* we were working to ensure that all student experiences and perspectives were being included. I didn't feel that the process was critical enough. Were we truly exploring all options in developing the learning outcomes

for this experience? What bothered me most was that I didn't hear anyone advancing the conversation beyond this one, very specific orientation of being an "ally." And so, rather than going back to my office and complaining to others whom I knew would agree with me, I went home and thought-deeply. I turned to my collection of civil rights texts and read, and re-read, many of them incessantly.

Here is the issue as I see it, in a nutshell. An ally, as defined in Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, is "a person, group, or nation that is associated with others for some common cause or purpose." Therefore, "allies" are people whose orientation is *outside* of the oppressed group. An ally is often a person that recognizes her privileges and works in alliance with members of oppressed groups to stand against oppression. We all agree that allies are important and need to be developed. But what about those of us—students, educators, citizens—who are not only allies but also members of oppressed groups? Is there a place at the table of social justice for those of us who work to create social change by and for the communities to which we belong? And so, at these meetings, I began to advance the idea of three social justice orientations—advocates, agents, and allies. These are terms that those that have been working on community and educational change for years have always used. But as this recent commitment to developing social justice allies within higher education begins to take a very one dimensional approach, I think it is important for us to look both within and beyond higher education to create space for other perspectives and conceptualizations of social justice education.

If we do not engage in these critical conversations, the potential problem is that once again the experience of the privileged becomes priority and the oppressed are absent from the discussion. So, not only do the privileged enjoy the spotlight in greater society,

but when we discuss issues of working for social justice they also become the focus of the conversation. We need researchers out there discovering critical knowledge on how to effectively develop social justice allies. And we also need to encourage more research on those student members of oppressed or under-represented communities that work tirelessly within their own communities—planning campus programs, encouraging intra-cultural education and uplift, protesting inequity, and championing the causes that are important to the communities in which they are a very active member. Who are these students? She is the student of color that plans cultural education programs for her cultural community. He is the LGBTQ student leader who works to create initiatives by and for the LGBTQ community. Or they are the group of women leaders that champion women’s rights. These individuals are not allies—they belong to these communities and serve from within. And so I am suggesting that, with regards to creating social justice learning environments in higher education, we add to the table of discussion two additional orientations that students might take: Advocates and Agents. By offering additional roles students can play in social justice, we respect the place that all students hold within and beyond their communities and we acknowledge the varying comfort levels, talents, commitment, backgrounds, and goals of our students. I outline what I see as the differences among these three equally important orientations below:

Ally (Relational) An ally is a relational orientation towards justice. As mentioned above, the word “ally” is defined by Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary in the following way: to develop a friendly association, to unite formally, and to enter into an alliance for some common cause or purpose. As Robert Reason and Ellen Broido point out in their article

in *New Directions for Student Services*, “Issues and Strategies for Social Justice Allies,” allies reside outside of a community or group and may have some of the privileges of the dominant group. Though they are not members of the target group, they actively support the struggles of this group.

There are several examples of allies at Penn State , but one long standing group are the LGBTQ Allies. These students do not necessarily identify as LGBTQ but are committed to working with this community to ensure that their college experience is positive and equitable and that their lifestyle is respected on our campus.

Advocate (Vocal) To be an advocate is to take a vocal orientation towards justice. An advocate is one that argues for a cause; a supporter or defender; a person who pleads for a cause or propounds an idea. Advocates give voice to issues; they may or may not identify with the group, and may or may not take action beyond articulating what needs to be changed.

The PSU campus chapter of the NAACP is a perfect example of an advocacy organization. The group, which is comprised mostly of students of color, works to give voice to campus, local, and national issues affecting people of color. The organization establishes awareness and mobilizes students around important issues. As a national organization, the NAACP has a long history of advocating and influencing crucial policies regarding equal rights, access, and opportunity for people of color.

Agent (Action) Agency represents an action-oriented involvement in social justice issues.

An agent is defined as one that acts or has the power or authority to act. An agent is a means by which something is done and a force that causes change. Agents may or may not identify with the community or group. Agents orient themselves toward action and go beyond developing empathetic relations or vocal oppositions—they work to create change within the dimensions of society in which they may or may not have power.

One of the greatest agents of change on Penn State's campus has been the Black Caucus. This student organization has a 30-year history of not only raising awareness about issues affecting black students on the campus, but also influencing critical administrative changes that address these needs. From creating the Paul Robeson Cultural Center in order to establish a more inclusive campus climate to negotiating the creation of an Africana Research Center and leading the charge in getting the university to dedicate increased scholarship opportunities in order to address retention and access, this group centers their work in action by and for the black student community.

As I argued these points, my colleagues asked me where I was drawing this information from. Did I have any citations that I could reference or articles for them to read? I answered the dictionary, my work with students, and my personal experience as an activist of color. I thank the dictionary, or more importantly many of the texts that I have read in the field of history, sociology, and cultural studies, for giving me a professional vocabulary that stretches beyond the education-focused jargon of the day. I see the need to rethink the language of and points of reference for social justice work as a

prerequisite to making room for new voices and forces in the conversation. After many years of working with many different oppressed communities, under-represented students, and being personally raised by a generation of social change agents, I know for sure that real, substantive change has always come from *within* these communities. The cultural center that I directed at Penn State was put on the campus because students of color demanded it. The citizenship rights that people of color currently exercise were given to us by members of our own community. My experiences have taught me that there are many types of people, beyond allies, that do important work to advance the cause of social justice. It takes all of us, the whole of the society, to create an egalitarian and pluralistic world. These advocates and agents deserve a seat at the social justice table that they, in many ways, helped to set. There were no articles that critically discussed these three orientations—so I have written this one. Hopefully, this is a starting point.

Notes

Reason, R. & Broido, E. (2005). “Issues and strategies for social justice allies (and the student affairs professionals who hope to encourage them)” in *New Directions for Student Services*. Wiley Periodicals, Inc. pg: 81-89.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>