Critical Reflection #2: Multiculturalism in Student Affairs

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In my first reflection, I heavily relied on the readings and class discussions to reflect on who I am and what I had gained from the course topics at that point. I discussed things like privilege, facilitating intercultural dialogue, and triggers, which offer broad insight into multiculturalism and its role in the student affairs profession. Now, however, I have learned about different historically marginalized groups and their experience with higher education, making the learning process more emotionally involving and my need to develop my competencies more important. I feel like when I wrote my first reflection, I was grasping new terms and trying to get into the mindset of the course. This reflection has been completely different for me. I would like to share my evolving understanding of who I am, discuss three course topics that really impacted my understanding of the course’s purpose, and share my insights pertaining to multicultural competency in student affairs.

**Who Am I?**

Looking back on my first reflection, I realize how basic my initial “unpacking” really was. I was able to identify the privileged and marginalized identity groups I belong to, but I was not able to reflect on my experiences as a member of those identity groups. I would like to take this opportunity to further unpack and discover who I am, and offer analysis on how that has impacted my behaviors.

One of the marginalized identities I have thought about a lot in different contexts throughout the semester is my gender. I have always considered myself a feminist, but when I really looked at my actions, I realized that I have been conforming to gender norms without even realizing it. For example, when Tiffany, Erika, and I were brainstorming ways to thank the Alpha Sigma Phi’s for allowing us to facilitate the workshop, I suggested things like baking a cake, sending them Cookie Jar, or something similar. During a pause in the conversation, Erika said something along the lines of “what are we really doing by baking them a cake or sending them cookies? Doesn’t that just set us back from all of the things we covered with them in the workshop on gender roles and masculinity?” What Erika pointed out was something I had not consciously thought about before. I might consider myself a feminist, and think I am in touch with my gender identity, but am I really walking the walk or just talking the talk? One of the biggest things I have learned through class readings and discussions is a need to think about how I contribute to the marginalization or privilege of my identities. While gender is just one example, I have also thought about my socioeconomic status, race, and religious identity as well.

In addition to thinking differently about my identities, one thing I did not touch on at all in my first paper was the privilege of the environment I grew up in. Through a combination of discussions in my Environments class and my experience at Terra State Community College during my community mapping project, I have realized that both community and campus environments work in tandem with identity to shape a person’s overall experience and behavior.

Growing up in a large city, I had access to cultural experiences, top-notch health care, camps and daycares, and many other resources my parents took advantage of to create a fun, educational childhood for me. This environment shaped my values and expectations of what my life would be like, and made the transition to a bustling college life very easy. I recognize now that the environment I grew up in has played a large part in who I am and how I enter spaces. When I visited Terra State Community College, I was honestly shocked at the lack of community resources and how far many students had to travel to attend Terra. While I had previously thought about how where someone grows up shapes who they are, I did not really think about how that environment shapes their expectations for their college experience. It is important to not only think about how my identity shapes who I am and how I enter, but how my environment growing up has influenced the way I view myself and others.

**Course Topics**

**Social Systems and Educational Equity**

With many topics we discussed in class, I felt that I already had a solid basis of awareness, but lacked some knowledge and skills. This topic, however, was eye opening because it was the first time I had seen or heard a lot of the statistics that were being discussed. I grew up in a household that was against affirmative action, and I was taught that the reason minority students were struggling was because of actions of members of minority communities. What I realized through Stuhlberg & Weinberg’s chapter on the K-12 pipeline for Black and Latino students, however, was the extent to which structural racism contributes to widening the achievement gap among these students. I learned that it was not that these students were underachieving, but instead that the gaps are attributed to “racial segregation of communities, the concentration of poverty in specific locations, the dependence on local property taxes to fund schools, and White aversion to sending their children to minority schools” (2011, p. 28). Reading and discussing this changed my perspective on my educational and racial privilege because I recognize that overall Black and Latino students do not have the same opportunities as I do because of my race.

After reading the chapters in the book, and then seeing the statistics project during class time, I was further moved by the sheer lack of awareness I had surrounding the issue of systemic inequalities. The discussion about curriculum and standardized testing design challenged me to think about what students were not being served by these practices. I was always a high achieving student, and I attributed this to my personality, but I see now that part of the reason I did so well was because the teaching and testing styles were compatible with my learning styles. This is not true for all students, and my main takeaway from this new awareness is the importance of thinking about the children who are not adequately served by the existing educational structures.

This has implications for my work as a student affairs professional because I need to think about where the students I work with are coming from. As Stuhlberg & Weinberg (2011) wrote, and we discussed in class, more students are coming to college in need of additional coursework to catch up to the standards of the university. The issues in K-12 education have a profound impact on the students that we all work with throughout their college career. While each student is unique, we can use indicators like race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location as indicators for ease of a student’s college transition and academic success. In essence, knowledge of the social systems and inequalities that exist must inform my practice as a student affairs professional.

**Under-resourced Students**

While each of the historically underrepresented and marginalized groups have their own story, the classes we spent talking about under-resourced students had the most profound impact on changing how I view this group of students.

What this really made me think about was my own privileged view of the purpose of higher education. Growing up in an upper middle class family with two parents who attended prestigious private universities, I was told college would be the best years of my life because it is a time to have fun, explore who you are, and experiment with different interests and passions. I see now that this is a very middle class/upper class view of education. As we learned through readings and class discussions, to those in poverty, education is a tool to help them escape and become successful. As a middle class person, I agreed with this view as well. If a poor person can escape their environment and attend college, that is what they need to be successful, right? Our conversation about situational vs. intergenerational poverty showed me that it is not this simple. This was further emphasized in the Pharr article about the different types of oppression. Pharr explains, “…most people in these societies do not regularly participate in making decisions that affect the conditions of their lives and actions, and in this sense most people lack significant power” (1990, p. 32). Learning about the cycle of oppression, and the different types of oppression outlined in this article, I realized that higher education is not a simple fix for under-resourced students.

In addition to looking at under-resources student success in higher education differently, I also learned about the structure of higher education and how it is not necessarily designed to serve these students. As a student affairs professional, I think it is often tempting to place the college experience on a pedestal because we want to believe that coming to college, getting involved, and working hard in classes is a powerful experience that can transform a life. While middle or upper class students who have been around adults who went to college, this might be an easy concept to buy into. However, there are many assumptions and hidden rules that go along with these ideas. Becker, Krodel, & Tucker point out higher education’s “‘hidden rules’ cueing mechanisms that are not deliberately taught by parents nor are they deliberately taught in college; they are modeled and implied” (2009, p. 3). For a student like me who had parents in college who taught them what the “ideal” college experience should be like, these rules are easy to adapt to and embody. For a first generation student living in poverty, these rules and practices are often difficult to grasp because they did not grow up with this view of college life. As a student affairs professional, I have to be aware of my own privilege and ensure that I do not blindly reinforce the middle class norms associated with higher education.

**Current Trends in Higher Education**

This topic encouraged me to think about the different minority groups at an institution, and the readings and class discussions provided insight into the experiences of groups that we did not address previously.

During the class that focused on these chapters, we were charged with writing specific challenges that affect traditionally and/or historically underrepresented and marginalized groups. This exercise caused me to look at these groups holistically and see common threads between all of them. It was fairly easy to think about issues that impact all of these groups: media portrayal, campus services and resources, degree completion, etc. which makes me think about my approach as a student affairs professional. While it is important to develop an understanding of the unique identity group, a lot of institutional changes can be made to positively impact members of all marginalized groups, in turn bettering the experience for all.

The “Conservative Critics and Conservative College Students” chapter stood out to me, mainly because I do not usually think of political identity as a privileged or marginalized group on a college campus. The authors of the chapter articulated my thoughts when they explained “And while scholars benefit from a growing academic literature on students’ sexual lives, social lives, and religious lives, we simply do not know what it feels like to be a self-labeled political conservative on campus, and what the academic and extracurricular experiences of these students look like” (Stuhlberg & Weinberg, 2011, p. 166). Political affiliation is a choice, and therefore I think it is easy to overlook these students and assume the campus environment is conducive to their voices being heard.

Thinking about conservative college students, and the other groups we discussed in class, broadened my understanding of varied student experiences prior to and during college. It also made me wonder about the identity groups that were not explicitly discussed in the section of the text or in class. Similar to student development theories, it is difficult to apply multicultural practices to students based on an identity group they belong to. While learning about the history of these identities informs my practice as a professional, I must always look at the whole student and adjust my advising style accordingly.

**Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs**

As I mentioned in my first reflection, one of the things I have struggled with throughout my time in higher education is how to navigate a situation in which I disagree with the views of a student, supervisor, or peer. As a student affairs practitioner, how can I have a developmental conversation with someone and help them in their multicultural competence if I do not agree with where they stand on an issue? After reading the Stewart (2008) article in which she discusses how she built trust with her students even though their views were not in line with her own or even the class literature, I realized the importance of engaging these students in conversations about diversity and inclusion regardless of beliefs. “Multicultural competence requires that we embrace the feasibility of multiple possibilities of truth, reality, and justice along with multiple avenues of reaching those goals” (Stewart, 2008, p. 17). I thought about this quote in terms of my office environment, the topics I discuss with students, and the visual way I express my different identities. Do I actively embrace the idea of multiple truths and encourage my students to explore these even if I do not agree with them? This made me think of the importance of creating a safe and inclusive space for all students, and as a student affairs professional, I have the responsibility to do this.

One of the concerns I brought up in my first reflection was discomfort around facilitating intercultural dialogues. I was worried that my privilege and lack of knowledge would prevent me from being able to help others develop their multicultural competency. While this class has certainly taught me that the more I know, the more I know that I do not know, it has also given me the confidence to engage in and even lead conversations about power, privilege, and difference. This newfound confidence is a result of readings, discussions, and facilitating the workshop with Erika and Tiffany. The Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller chapter on Multicultural Competence in Advising and Helping specifically addresses some of the concerns I expressed throughout my first reflection. “A student affairs professional recognizes that she needs more experience working with and advising diverse student groups” (2004, p. 95). Essentially, the book goes on to explain that while these situations may be challenging, they help the professional grow.

This was further emphasized when Tiffany, Erika, and I facilitated our workshop as a component of our final project. While at first I was nervous I would be asked questions I did know the answer to, or say something wrong, it was really comforting having two other “learners” facilitating by my side. It hit me half way through the presentation that just because I did not know everything there is to know about multicultural awareness and inclusion did not mean I was incapable of helping others grow in that area. After reviewing the feedback from the students and putting together out final report, it further confirmed how much I had learned and developed from completing this project. I will carry this experience with me, and stress to other student affairs professionals the importance working with different groups to develop their multicultural competence, even if they initially lack the confidence to do so.

**Conclusion**

While I have learned a lot about where and how I enter, current multicultural issues in higher education, and the implications of this information for the student affairs profession, my biggest take away is the importance of engaging in and facilitating dialogue about these topics. I learned more from class discussions, visiting a community college, and facilitating a workshop than I ever thought possible, and I recognize the importance of continuing to pursue these types of opportunities.

References

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