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Teaching Note—Infusing Social Justice Into Doctoral Programs of Social Welfare: An Incremental Approach

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Abstract: This article describes an effort to further infuse social justice education into doctoral programs in social welfare. It articulates the rationale and tactical approaches for aligning mission statements with the operational realities of university contexts. Within 1 school of social work, doctoral students with diverse orientations to social justice came together to articulate a vision for social justice education that expanded the educational contract between students and the institution by enhancing their respective opportunities and responsibilities in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and service. This article shares 30 learning objectives emergent from an incremental change process for enhancing social justice education at the doctoral level and reflects on the strengths and limitations of this approach to advancing social justice priorities.

The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (CID) recently released a report on their efforts to rethink doctoral education for the 21st century (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). The volume suggested that in addition to the development of a specialized knowledge base, doctoral education involves socialization into the moral commitments, obligations, and opportunities of the professorate. The authors claimed that “there are aspects of graduate education that faculty must pass along to graduate students ...but the development of professional identity...is ultimately a process that students themselves must shape and direct” (p. 9). This assertion underscores the critical role of doctoral students in shaping their own education. The CID report on doctoral education, which did not include the study of departments or schools of social welfare, did, however, inspire a group of doctoral students in social welfare to channel the intellectual and moral commitments that fuel their scholarship, teaching, and service into a process to enhance their doctoral studies.

The student-led pursuit of changes to doctoral education in social welfare was also informed by the work of the Council for Social Work Education’s (CSWE’s) visiting scholar, Jeane Anastas, who opened her 2012 report by claiming, “In the early 21st century, social work is experiencing a crisis in doctoral education” (p. 3). This crisis reflects longstanding concerns about the competing—and sometimes conflicting—demands on research-oriented doctoral programs to prepare rigorous scholars, train effective teachers of practitioners, provide funding for students, and maintain a diverse and sizable student body (Khinduka, 2002; Orme, 2003; Valentine et al., 1998). Claims that doctoral education in social welfare is in a state of crisis have been repeated for several decades—an assertion that conveys the need for an urgent response but perhaps undermines the chronicity of the asserted problems (Lindsey & Kirk, 1992). Despite a prolonged “crisis” in doctoral education, the field of social work has been careful not to endorse a one-size-fits-all framework or accredit or otherwise regulate doctoral programs (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work [GADE], 2003). GADE has strongly affirmed “university control of the quality of doctoral programs and, concomitantly, that doctoral education should develop within the philosophy of the host institution” (p. 2). Therefore, the improvement of doctoral programs in social welfare is dependent on innovations within individual university settings and the presentation of

successful innovations for additional scrutiny, refinement, application, and testing (Thyer, 2002). Internally driven change efforts, widely shared, may be the primary path to crisis resolution in social work doctoral education.

Bachelor and master's programs of social work have an accreditation process that is far more directive. In regard to these educational programs, there has been considerable discourse around how to recruit and retain a diverse student body, create an equitable and inclusive learning environment, and infuse diversity content into the curriculum in a way that enables social workers to form professional identities and perform their professional responsibilities in a way that promotes social justice (see Lee & Greene, 2004; Nagda & Derr, 2004; Reed & Lehning, 2014; Van Soest, 1995). Many have suggested a pathway to improving bachelor and master's programs through the improvement of doctoral education (Anastas & Congress, 1999; Funge, 2011; Lubben & Harootyan, 2003). Although the 2003 GADE guidelines suggest that doctoral programs have diverse student bodies and doctoral faculties and should cover diversity content in the curriculum, strategies for how to recruit and retain diverse student and faculty bodies and support diverse doctoral students in forming their professional identities and performing their professional responsibilities in a way that promotes social justice in scholarship, teaching, and service have been relatively absent (GADE, 2003; Schiele & Wilson, 2001).

Doctoral students will shortly become the academic leaders of our profession. Therefore, PhD programs in social work and social welfare are important sites for preparing future social work scholars and educators to engage with issues and processes of social justice in their professional roles. Doctoral program graduates with an education emphasizing social justice will be in a better position to conduct socially just scholarship, teach diversity content, create inclusive and equitable classrooms, and engage in anti-oppressive social and community service (Funge, 2011).

Anastas (2012) did not include any questions about diversity content or social justice in her national study of doctoral education in social work, and she reported that students voiced concerns over this omission. Because this is the only contemporary and comprehensive study of doctoral programs of social work, this missed opportunity leaves us without any systematically collected data on the status of social justice education in doctoral programs. On the other hand, the comments she received in response to open-ended questions about doctoral education led Anastas to conclude, "It would seem urgent that diversity issues be discussed with respect to doctoral education in social work" (p. 113).

One major challenge of infusing social justice into doctoral education is the inherent tensions and contradictions that emerge within the competitive contexts of the contemporary research university (Gering, [2003](#)). As the social work profession has sought to enhance its status among the disciplines of the academy through the rigor and the effect of its scholarship, the degree to which social justice is emphasized in the explicit and implicit curricula of social work doctoral programs has varied. Students are admitted with a broad range of relationships to social justice, often based on their previous work, educational background, personal history, and other lived experiences. In addition, students are mentored by an interdisciplinary faculty with varying levels of identification with the profession of social work and its stated values (National Association of Social Workers, [2008](#)). Thus, the balance struck between professional identity development and the development of skills necessary for excelling in a scholarly marketplace is also quite varied at the doctoral level (Anastas, [2012](#)). Many doctoral programs within Carnegie-classified research extensive universities have emphasized the skills necessary for crafting a research agenda, publishing manuscripts, and seeking external funding more than the professional identity development that enables students with diverse epistemological orientations to authentically carry out these tasks or find meaning and satisfaction in them. A failure within many institutions to face this challenge, articulate a balanced response to the tensions shaping their doctoral programs, and, ultimately, to progress simultaneous commitments to social science and social justice inhibits the thoughtful use and expansion of social justice frameworks for the next generation of social work scholarship, teaching, service, and professional practice.

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THE PROCESS OF INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Concerns about the state of social justice education in doctoral programs mirrored the sentiments of students in the University of Washington's social welfare doctoral program, which provided the impetus for a student-led initiative to further infuse social justice education into their program of study. The student-led effort described here occurred in the context of a long, nonlinear history of efforts to make the academy a more inclusive and just institution. There is a rich history of student-led initiatives and student-faculty partnerships for the sake of promoting social justice at the University of Washington's School of Social Work, as there likely is in other institutions. Diverse approaches to change-making are a part of this history and include student-led protests, community and school-wide dialogue, and formal multilevel assessments for social justice concerns. The change efforts described in this article relied on an incremental, institutionalized approach to improve the alignment between the mission talk and organizational walk common in social work doctoral programs. Whereas more radical and progressive efforts to adopt and sustain policies and procedures within an academic institution exist (De Maria, 1992), this effort used strategic planning and critical dialogue among faculty, students, and administrators as primary change mechanisms.

The work described in this article represents one specific effort for reform during one moment in the school's institutional history. When this specific effort began within this school of social work, frustrations were

high in response to the wide gap between the stated priorities for social justice in the doctoral program and the lack of curricular alignment and institutional support for social justice education in various program elements. Over several years students boldly provided evidence of this gap, ultimately moving the dean and program director to create space for programmatic solution-building.

A Social Justice Committee (SJC) was created as a standing committee of the PhD steering committee, the governing body of the doctoral program. The role of the SJC was to investigate and recommend paths to achieve greater consistency between the emphasis on social justice articulated in the program mission and its actual structural opportunities, processes, and outcomes. The SJC developed its mission to “make real and vibrant the social work profession’s commitments to social justice within the University of Washington’s School of Social Work doctoral program” (SJC, [2009](#)). The SJC comprised a diverse body of student and faculty representatives, thriving largely due to the recruitment and retention of members who collectively offered a range of ideas based on their identity, positionality, and educational experiences; student energy and willingness to reconcile the highly competitive context of doctoral education with the advancement of a collective, transformative agenda; and motivation and the strong commitment of the doctoral program chair and other faculty allies. The work of the SJC encouraged the governing faculty to openly acknowledge and validate the inconsistencies between the school’s social justice mission and the students’ experiences of the doctoral program; illuminate the historical roots of those complex contradictions and inconsistencies; and create a supportive, permanent space within the doctoral program in which students could do transformative work in earnest. Students and faculty partnered together to respond to Jacobson’s ([2009](#)) call for more opportunities “to locate and address the contradictions that may emerge among the efforts of social work educators, the norms and practices of the institution, and the broader social justice mission of the profession” (as cited in Funge, [2011](#), p. 76). The SJC divided into three interrelated, yet independent, workgroups, which became the infrastructure used to initiate and sustain a comprehensive and close examination of social justice in the university’s doctoral program in social welfare. One workgroup, the Curriculum Taskforce (CT), was charged with proposing, implementing, and monitoring structural changes to the doctoral program, which began with defining the desired outcomes of social justice education at the doctoral level.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL JUSTICE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Social justice learning objectives (SJLOs) were conceived as a means for the doctoral program to be held accountable to its intention to provide opportunities and resources for students to receive a social justice-oriented education; for students to articulate and be held responsible for social justice-oriented educational goals; and to celebrate the ways in which students and faculty continue to embody their commitment to social justice. The doctoral program's preexisting program description stated, "The principal goal of the program is to prepare students to promote social justice by contributing to the advancement of knowledge and practice in the field of social welfare and the profession of social work" (Morrison, 2014). The CT recognized that with social justice already being prioritized as the primary goal of the program, the challenge was not to revise the goal but to honor it. Thus, the CT created the SJLOs directly from this goal and other preexisting program objectives. Specifically, the program's objective of preparing students for the three domains of the professorate (i.e., scholarship, teaching, and service) was intersected with the three additional doctoral program objectives (i.e., developing a broad understanding of the major policy and practice trends and issues in the field of social welfare and the profession of social work, substantive knowledge of a field of social welfare, and competence to conduct rigorous research) to create a 3 × 3 matrix designed to provide a framework for conveying diverse areas of competence.

The task force engaged in a deeply reflective process to fill the cells of the matrix with SJLOs. The CT leveraged the energy of student volunteers with widely varying viewpoints. At every stage of the process, the CT circulated updates, held town hall meetings, conducted focus groups, and collected feedback through individual interviews to arrive at a product that broadly represented the diversity of the stakeholders in the doctoral program. In the end, the PhD Steering Committee voted unanimously to approve the refined SJLOs as an official document of the doctoral program (see [Table 1](#)). The doctoral program plans to use the SJLOs to revise the directives for and evaluations of the programmatic milestones that define the pathway to a doctoral degree in social welfare (e.g., yearly advising checklist, candidacy exam, dissertation prospectus). The matrix will also be used to conduct ongoing assessment, using the SJLOs as indicators to measure the degree to which faculty and students

subjectively, yet collectively, perceive learning opportunities to be present and learning objectives to be attained over time. The SJLOs are shared here in hopes of prompting scrutiny, refinement, application, or testing of this innovation by others engaged in processes of social justice integration into doctoral education at other universities.

LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on the process that yielded the SJLOs, the CT offers a series of experience-based recommendations for consideration by anyone using an incremental, institutionalized strategy to enhance social justice education within social work doctoral programs.

Lesson 1: Simultaneously Seize the Moment for Change and Think Beyond the Moment

The committee benefited greatly from the energy of the historical moment that motivated the commitment of volunteers to the work of the SJC. Yet the committee also found long-term progress hindered when the work was tied too intimately to a single historical moment and the specific events that created it. Subsequent cohorts of doctoral students did not fully understand the problem and felt detached from its resolution. On the other hand, students in cohorts that applied to the program since the matrix was formally adopted and disseminated in recruitment and program materials have begun their own initiatives to enhance social justice education using the matrix as leverage for the pursuit of their own goals. This suggests seizing the energy and change-readiness of a specific moment to reach a concrete and lasting achievement but also connecting that energy and to a larger change agenda, building a sustainable process for ongoing change.

Lesson 2: Formalize a Permanent Workgroup Within the Existing Governance Structure

Having a permanent structure for justice-oriented work provided cohesion, coordination, and space for ongoing dialogue. It also allowed for increased preservation of institutional memory and served as a means of retaining momentum and vision over several years. In addition, the

permanence of the workgroup built organizational capacity for pursuing new initiatives. The limitations of embedding a change effort within the formal structures of the institution are discussed in Lesso

TABLE 1
Social Justice Learning Objectives (SJLOs) for Doctoral Programs in Social

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Scholarship (Publications, Presentations, Grants, Professional Dissemination)</i>	<i>Teaching (Instruction, Training, Mentoring, Supervising)</i>	<i>University, Professional & Community Service (Boards, Committees, Consultation, Practice, Advocacy, Peer Review)</i>
Broad understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Cultivate a working knowledge of major theories of social justice (across disciplines, historical contexts, and communities) and their implications for social welfare scholarship. (2) Develop capacity to assess and communicate how social welfare research, policies, and practices can both empower and oppress communities they are purported to serve. (3) Develop reflective practices to understand self as a scholar given positionality in the context of power dynamics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Demonstrate a commitment to integrating diverse teaching and mentoring methods. (2) Understand how historical and contemporary education policies have shaped social work education in ways that oppress, liberate, and transform the classroom and the profession. (3) Articulate teaching philosophy that reflects social justice values. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Articulate approaches to building and engaging in just partnerships. (2) Reflect on the effect of identity, power, and the privilege of the academy in service work. (3) Advocate for an institutional definition of service that values work both within and outside the academy.
Substantive area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) In chosen area of interest, understand dominant paradigms and critiques that center social justice across multiple levels of investigation, translation, and dissemination. (2) Identify and articulate social justice goals and implications of individual research program and applications for the profession. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Incorporate social justice content into instruction within teaching specialty. (2) Gain and develop a working knowledge of positionality, biases, and beliefs that may influence teaching, mentoring, or supervising to improve capacity to work effectively across 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Know systems and structures in area of interest and confront associated disparities and injustices that perpetuate oppression and marginalization. (2) Build and maintain constructive relationships with communities in area of interest to bridge gap between research and practice. (3) Honor community priorities and wisdom in the academy and use appropriate academy resources to catalyze community goals.
Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Demonstrate and apply critical inquiry into uses and misuses of research methods and articulation of just methodology. (2) Seek out, identify, and work to enhance transformative potential of chosen research tools. (3) Understand social justice implications and issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Design learning objectives and implement instructional strategies that promote critical thinking. (2) Create instructional spaces that are engaging, inclusive, responsive, liberatory, and nonoppressive. (3) Solicit student feedback and strive to continuously improve instruction from a social justice perspective. (4) Effectively facilitate group dynamics around issues of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Learn strategies for collegial and responsible engagement. (2) Assume leadership roles with humility and thoughtfulness. (3) Participate in public discourse (i.e., alternative media, popular press, local speaking). (4) Approach and engage people with awareness of your own positionality and cultural lens.

Lesson 3: Incorporate Diverse and Multiple Approaches That Affirm the Collective Importance of Historic and Concurrent Efforts to Promote Equity and Justice Within an Institution

Although an institutional approach allowed for a number of accomplishments, the adverse consequences of working within a structure understood to concurrently perpetrate or bear witnesses to injustices required constant, honest, and open reflection and appraisal. For many individuals committed to promoting social justice, an institutional approach that involved the development of a matrix of learning objectives consistent with the spirit of CSWE's competency-based approach for bachelor and master's education did not resonate with their vision and approach to justice promotion. In response to the CT's call for feedback, one student noted, "My idea of social justice does not fit within a matrix framework," which poignantly illustrates the ontological and epistemological distinctions in potential approaches to progressive social change. Similarly, some students felt that the concerns of students in regard to social justice were coopted through institutionalization, thereby alienating and marginalizing some voices that resist and transform oppressive institutional contexts in other ways. In deep respect for these thoughtful and valid perspectives, the CT suggests an approach that affirms the collective importance of diverse change strategies and strives for mutual support between them.

Lesson 4: Build Consensus for Incremental Change

This work would not have been possible, nor the final product satisfying, had other doctoral students and faculty not lent their time and voices to thoroughly vetting, challenging, and recognizing the work. The CT suggests assembling an ideologically diverse task force, with a commitment to deliberate listening and considerable re-visioning, to work through differences and respond in earnest to feedback from individual interviews, focus groups, and town halls with purposefully distinct stakeholders to build consensus and create a better product. In this case, the SJLOs represented a concrete and noteworthy, though arguably modest, step toward program improvement for the sake of infusing social justice. In other words, this consensus provided the foundation on which programmatic changes could be subsequently advanced.

Lesson 5: Create Solutions From Places of Agreement While Engaging Different Perspectives

The CT created the SJLOs from a matrix of preexisting doctoral program objectives. The decision to start from places of agreement helped the CT to move quickly to solution building. Given the recommended diversity of workgroup members, progress also could have been stalled because of disagreements on the very nature of social justice as a construct and the imperatives implied for doctoral education (Bonnycastle, 2011; Gil, 1998). Acknowledging that ongoing intellectual debates of this nature may reflect resistance, anxiety, or discomfort with social justice–related material and may hinder engagement with the heart of social justice work (Bell, Washington, Weinstein, & Love, 1997; Deal & Hyde, 2004; Fleck-Henderson & Melendez, 2009; Funge, 2011; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Tummala-Narra, 2009), this workgroup decided that an endorsement of a singular definition of social justice was not a prerequisite to doing social justice–centered work. Different and often competing understandings of social justice were incorporated into the plan to meet the needs and desires of diverse student and faculty bodies (Austin, 2014; Granruth, 2009). Rather than being an obstacle to the advancement of social justice in doctoral education, competing definitions of social justice lent vibrancy to its inquiry.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article was to describe one of many efforts put forth by students, with faculty support, to enhance doctoral education in social work. The success of this initial step to infuse social justice education into a doctoral program was dependent on the collective, incremental efforts of a diverse and energized SJC task force, formalized within the institution in a moment seized and supported by responsive faculty and student allies. Negotiating this process surfaced some insights regarding the advantages and limitations of the selected approach to addressing and advancing social justice priorities; some of these are articulated here with the humble hope that these lessons learned may support other efforts to enhance doctoral education for the purpose of

infusing social justice. This article shares the SJLOs as designed within one program to prompt scrutiny, refinement, application, or testing across diverse doctoral programs in a variety of institutional contexts. To the extent that the SJLOs seem widely applicable across diverse institutional contexts, they could be useful in conducting a national study to understand the status of social justice education in social work doctoral programs.

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