Achieving Equity and Social Justice in Higher Education

Justin Rose

Rhodes College, 200 North Parkway, Memphis, TN USA 38112
Corresponding author: jrose@rhodes.edu

Abstract. Achieving equity and social justice within higher education presents the sector with a conundrum. Namely, it often requires great sacrifice and places an undue burden upon those very underrepresented populations already facing significant hardships navigating a career in academia. This is because the impetus for structural change typically stems from the collective action of those most impacted by unjust structures. Though unfair, it is a harsh reality long recognized by those working to combat contemporary forms of structural injustice both inside and outside of the academy. Therefore, my presentation drew upon Martin Luther King, Jr’s theory of political service to give participants a framework for thinking about the sacrifices required of them, and the motivation to achieve equity and social justice within higher education.

The Three Components of Political Service

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Martin Luther King, Jr. is widely recognized as one of the foremost leaders of American structural change in the twentieth century. Therefore, I argue that King provides an example for members of the higher education community when considering structural change within the academy. In my book, *The Drum Major Instinct: Martin Luther King Jr’s Theory of Political Service,* I identify the three central components of King’s theory of political service. First, King began with a configuration of humanity, which posited that all of humanity is tied into an inescapable network of mutuality such that no member of society can fully flourish if there are structural barriers preventing others from flourishing. Second, having acknowledged the existence of structural injustice, King's theory of political service required that Americans cultivate a sense of love and concern for their fellow members of society, which would motivate them to work collectively toward transforming others and structures of injustice. Finally, King contended that all members of society have the responsibility to participate in collective forms of resistance. This meant that even the oppressed were obligated to engage in political service.

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Therefore, marginalized peoples' struggles against injustice were considered an essential aspect of service. Taken together, King's theory of political service calls upon all Americans, but especially black Americans, to engage in other-centered, collective action aimed at transforming themselves, others, and structures of injustice. Throughout my presentation, I demonstrated how these three components can apply to achieving equity and social justice within higher education.

**Cultivating a dangerous altruism**

The first lesson that can be learned from King by those seeking equity and social justice within higher education is to get individuals to recognize the ways in which their fate is connected to others within the academy. In turn, they must cultivate an ethos of love and concern for the plight of others. King called this ethos dangerous altruism. For King, dangerous altruism was epitomized by the protagonist of the Good Samaritan parable. In this biblical story, Jesus tells of a man who is left for dead by a gang of robbers on the side of the very dangerous Jericho road. Despite being on the precipice of death, a priest and a Levite passed him by pretending not to notice his grave condition. However, the third passerby—a Samaritan—not only showed concern by stopping, but he also administered aid and ensured that the man's condition was significantly improved. King speculated that perhaps the others did not stop out of sheer fear. According to King, the fear caused those who passed him by to ask, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” The difference between them and the Good Samaritan was that the Samaritan reversed the question, and asked, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?” King claimed that the Samaritan "was a great man because he had the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism. He was a great man because he could rise above his self-concern to the broader concern of his brother.”

Similarly, I challenged participants to redefine greatness by setting aside their fears, and asking what will happen to their colleagues and students if they do not stop to help them. Thus, in order to achieve equity and social justice, members of the academy must embrace a dangerous altruism.

**Moving beyond Inclusion**

Although admirable, altruism within the academy often results in efforts to create a more diverse and inclusive community. While this is a necessary condition to achieve equity and social justice, it is not sufficient. To illustrate the shortfalls of diversity and inclusion within higher education, I mapped them on to King’s discussions of desegregation and integration. King observed that although “desegregation and integration are often used interchangeably, there is a great deal of difference between the two. In the context of what our national community needs, desegregation alone is empty and shallow. We must always be aware of the fact that our ultimate goal is integration, and that desegregation is only a first step on the road to the good society.”

Oftentimes, inclusion efforts on college campuses resemble King’s definition of integration. King says, “Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed

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3 Ibid.

participation of Negroes into the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal living.” Similarly, many institutions of higher education strive to diversify their campuses and to foster a sense of genuine intergroup and interpersonal living and working spaces. I paused here to give participants an opportunity to reflect on whether this should be the goal of our altruistic efforts, or whether we should be pushing for more fundamental change.

After participants shared out their reflections, I proceeded to explore the evolution of King’s thoughts on these matters. Specifically, I explained how King amended his initial definition of integration to require “the mutual sharing of power.” In this sense, King was building upon his earlier conception of integration. King says, “I cannot see how the Negro will be totally liberated from the crushing weight of poor education, squalid housing and economic strangulation until he is integrated, with power, into every level of American life.” In other words, King began to define true integration as a complete transformation of unjust structures; one in which marginalized populations were not merely accepted, but also empowered. To underscore this point, King critiqued his earlier notion of integration: “I think in the past all too often we did it that way. We talked of integration in romantic and esthetic terms and it ended up as merely adding color to a still predominately white power structure” (King, 1991, 666). The upshot of King’s thoughts on integration is that the goal for institutions of higher education should not be to merely seek to welcome the participation of marginalized populations into unjust structures, but rather, to transform those structures such that they create equitable conditions for all members of the community.

In the last portion of my presentation, I explicated King’s evolution of thought on dangerous altruism. Toward the end of King’s life, he began to call for a “revolution of values.” According to King, “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. We are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be beaten and robbed as they make their journey through life.” King continues, “True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar, it understands that an edifice which produces beggars, needs restructuring.” As King’s thinking evolved, the Jericho road became an analogy for contemporary manifestations of structural injustice. As Iris Marion Young explains, "Structural injustice, then, exists when social processes put large groups of persons under systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities,"; she continues, "at the same time these processes enable others to dominate or to have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising capacities available to them." Thus, the Jericho road is meant to represent those social

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5 Ibid.
6 Martin Luther King, Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 64.
7 Ibid.
8 King, A Testament of Hope, 666.
9 King, Where Do We Go from Here, 188.
10 Iris Marion Young, Responsibility for Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 52
processes that all members of society participate in, which enable some members of society to flourish while simultaneously making others--mostly non-white and poor--more vulnerable to domination and deprivation. As King explained, the wounded man represents "any needy man--on one of the numerous Jericho roads of life."\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to the need to cultivate a dangerous altruism that compels individuals to collectively work to transform structures of injustice, King’s theory also requires marginalized populations to become engaged in this work. Therefore, I concluded my presentation by asking participants to reflect on ways that they can move beyond individualistic acts of altruism aimed at inclusion, to collectively tackling larger structure transforming problems. Some examples include, but are not limited to: disparate outcomes from tenure and promotion decisions; unequal service and advising loads for women and faculty of color; increasing the teaching burdens of non-tenure track faculty; lack of living wages being paid to staff; and, the troubling retention rates for students of color. Although asking marginalized populations to engage in collective action does not evade the conundrum identified at the outset, it also recognizes a harsh reality that power concedes nothing without demand.

\textsuperscript{11} Martin Luther King, \textit{Strength to Love} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 22.