

Social Work as a Path to Diversity Work

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Abstract: We are in an exciting time in our country as we navigate racial tensions and resolve to make our organizations better places for everyone to work and live. One way to do so is professionally as administrative leaders dedicated to this cause (often called chief diversity officers or directors of an office of diversity). Social workers are taught a skill set that is conducive to work in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This skill set includes brokering, strategic planning, evaluation, and research. Here, I focus on three essential skills that have been particularly helpful in helping to lead an organization in areas of equity and inclusion: communication, resource-gathering, and self-care. As context for the conversation, I share my journey to leadership. This article ends with implications for research and a call for willing social workers to consider entering this work at any level desirable.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, career, skills

Introduction

As a social work educator, I have been called on to lead in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. Interestingly, it is a smooth transition from traditional social work to this work. We know that social work often lends itself to work beyond generalist practice and possibly into other fields. I'm curious (as some of our graduates move on to law and policymaking) what it is about social work that serves as such a robust foundation. This piece explores my journey into the work of equity and inclusion. Although I hold to my first love, I have had the privilege of doing this work in a higher education setting at a time when meeting the need for equity and inclusion continues to emerge as challenging and necessary. Here, I share my experience and the insights that have emerged.

My Path to DEI Work

As a young social worker, I had not considered being called on or even known to be one to join a public discourse on race and diversity. My whole focus was serving clients in the beautiful hills of West Virginia and then a large Texas city. Upon returning to school to prepare for a career shift to higher education, my eyes were opened to race—my own and that of others. I wanted to learn all I could. During my first years of teaching, I participated in committees, teams, and student organizations that revolved around race. I began reading, listening, and researching in areas of race. I taught (and I continue to teach) a diversity class that made me more curious. I became intrigued with American history and how color has been excluded and included inaccurately. I continue to love learning the truth about our history.

In 2016, our university president began to finalize our strategic plan. Within the plan he created five facets that were to be explored by task forces, who would develop recommendations on future implementation for the cabinet. Four of these facets included academic innovation, spiritual formation (as it is a faith-based university), experiential learning, and educational

programs. The fifth facet the administration invited me to chair: the Diversity Task Force. I was honored to be asked. The team and I conducted qualitative and quantitative research, training, and readings. We spoke to various groups on campus and met with entities that served students in multiple ways. We hired a consultant. We submitted recommendations to the cabinet after two years and intermittent task force reports. Among them was an office of diversity of sorts and a chief diversity officer. The following year, the administration invited me to lead that effort. Again, I was honored but did not think I could do it justice. I was likely a logical choice. I studied race. Moreover, I was on campus already—I knew the environment and its members. I was already a critical lover of the university and wanted to see it improved in all ways possible, particularly regarding diversity and inclusion. I am a female and part of the Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community (see Paluch & Shum, 2023, for research on the theoretical foundation of the “non-White standard”).

Like many universities, ours is a predominantly white institution (PWI) growing in students of color (Espinosa et al., 2019). Amid traditions that feel like identity, we want to succeed in inclusion. We want to experience the benefits of full participation and diverse experiences and thoughts. We want every student to feel a sense of belonging and to thrive. However, some of the school’s traditions do not resonate with the lived experiences of over 40 percent of the student body. As stated, we are a faith-based institution in the southwestern region of the United States. When I was a student here, roughly 20 years before returning to work for the university, I was among only a few Black students who were not athletes. Today, we are over 40 percent students of color, 20-plus percent of which are Hispanic/Latinx. It is a good school, and we are still growing.

My experience as a DEI leader¹ was not uncommon. I had interest, passion, knowledge, and (I believe) the respect of the faculty and staff. My appointment was a logical choice. However, I am a social worker, not a professional equity specialist. I could see my shortcomings clearly but understood the need for a person to pave the way for change. So, I agreed to serve for two years in a half-time role. It was a fulfilling two years and much work. We learned a great deal about our school. One of the lessons learned was that we need a full-time professional DEI leader in this role: someone who is trained to do this work, who can be strategic, who can be out in front, who can devote all their time to this vital work, and who can hold the university accountable for a collaborative sea change (Holcombe et al., 2023). I recall telling an interviewer that our school is a special place and students, faculty, and staff *deserve* a full-time equity professional.

I have come to understand that there are exciting implications to my being a social worker in this role. As a social worker, I have a skill set that lends itself to this work (Wilson & Wolfer, 2020). Many other social scientists enjoy this same skill set; however, it appears that social work also provides knowledge of areas of oppression and marginalization that we see as prevalent in this country (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Those two areas combined make social work an excellent fit for inclusion work in many settings.

¹ Although the term “chief diversity officer” or its initialism “CDO” may be expected, this piece will use the terms “DEI worker” or “DEI leader.” Please see Pewewardy (2021) for more information on the avoidance of “chief.”

Social Work Skill Set in Equity Work

Social workers practice a skill set that includes active listening, collaborating, brokering, advocating, interviewing, applying empathy, caring for the needs of others, thinking critically, and practicing self-awareness, among much else (Hepworth et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2021; Wilson & Wolfer, 2020). However, I would like to discuss a few skills that were particularly helpful to me during my time in this role.

Resource-Gathering

Resource-gathering is imperative for this work. DEI work is not accomplished in a vacuum, so we network and research (Hepworth et al., 2023; Porter et al., 2023; Wilson & Wolfer, 2020). We need everyone's insights, expertise, and resources in their settings. From networking, we gain more strategies to put in our knapsack of generalist strategies. Through networking, we locate the trainers, speakers, and reading materials for the courses we teach and the training we provide. Others help us navigate challenging circumstances and help us find innovative solutions. Networking also reminds us that we are not doing this work alone—that we do not need to carry the weight of the BIPOC population and the world on our shoulders. Networking is critical to longevity. A recent conversation with a colleague became an entrée into another relationship that will inform a future research agenda. That conversation provided insights and resources to move forward. In addition to networking, resource-gathering necessitates research. Over several years, we may learn to do many things ourselves, but evidence-based strategies change and improve as time goes by. Therefore, *research* is vital to enacting the most effective practices (Wilson & Wolfer, 2020). Whether we are engaging in our primary study or consuming the research of others, what we find is more precise answers to the challenges before us. We also discover the world's changes and what has worked and has not worked in making positive, sustainable change. Without research, we would continue to do the same things and get the same ineffective results that lead to burnout. Resource-gathering also comes in the form of attending meetings, workshops, and training. These opportunities are now easy to access because of the prevalence of online formats such as Zoom.

Communication

Secondly, I found effective *communication* to be necessary. Those doing equity and inclusion work engage others along the spectrum of acceptance of the work. We interact with those who keep their backpack ready for a march, those who do not know or care about inclusion issues, and everyone in between. These conversations might be draining or energizing, but they are always available. Communicating with diverse people while maintaining an even temper is challenging! Social workers are trained to engage in all types of communication, depending on the circumstance (Hepworth et al., 2023; Katz et al., 2021). For example, I recall in practice (and many have had this same experience) getting a phone call from an angry relative of a client that ultimately ended with that individual apologizing and acknowledging their own need for counseling. This was not done by sorcery on my part but through strategies such as listening beyond the words, responding with empathy, providing a non-anxious presence, and accepting

the person where they were. We employ these types of strategies as we engage people in expressing sadness, fear, anger, discouragement, shame, joy, and peace. This work includes the same array of interactions. It is essential to be heard without judgment. I recall an email exchange with an individual who called me a fascist because of the equity work we were doing. I responded with assertiveness, empathy, and kindness. Of course, the individual softened and apologized. We often converse with those eager to act, and we must temper their excitement to make their action effective. People generally have mental clarity within themselves, and it takes the correct responses in those conversations to bring their internal awareness to the fore. Good communication involves engaged listening—even when the content is hard to hear. This type of listening is necessary to advocate, solve problems, resolve conflict, encourage, and advise (Hepworth et al., 2023). I am certainly not arguing that we communicate well every time! However, experiential practice results in doing better each time. Honest, open, brave communication creates trust and hope and is vital to the work of necessary change.

Self-Care

Finally, this work is a mental and emotional challenge (Anderson, 2020; Cutter & Weber, 2020). Therefore, *self-care* is one of the most essential values and skills (DeMarchis et al., 2022; Hepworth et al., 2023). A lack of self-care leads quickly to burnout because of the constant onslaught of negative media and news around the subject of race and difference. This includes stories about acts of hate, illustrations of negative and inaccurate stereotypes, and dismal statistics. This is common to anyone paying attention to the world around them. Still, for those of us doing inclusion work, input such as this comes in droves from social media, formal and informal personal contacts, national and world news, the research we read ... you name it. It comes up in conversations because friends and acquaintances know you can explain or relate to their frustration and angst. It comes as being asked to justify or defend the work or field criticism about the changes being introduced in the organization. Moreover, because these instances are often negative, we must develop a way to keep our joy. It is hard work, so we must find ways to continue without the pain of it wearing us down. This can only be done by utilizing self-care strategies such as resting, having fun, enforcing boundaries, releasing the hurtful parts, and engaging in acts of spirituality. What works well is unique to each of us. I have found that keeping hobbies (e.g., painting, gardening, reading for fun), leaving town occasionally, and praying have helped me. I also gained healing insights from reading books or listening to podcasts that have taught me about myself. Self-awareness became self-care. It is not always appropriate to share the challenges with others (particularly with people in the same organization as your work). Therefore, these strategies must go beyond venting and verbal processing unless it is with a professional counselor or coach (highly recommended). Another helpful strategy was spending time with a “team” or “posse” (Anderson, 2020)—those who back and strengthen you with their words of affirmation. These few people remind you of who you are and where your strength comes from. I recall a particular time when I worried about failing my organization. One of my posse members stated that if this work is not practical, “it will be because [the organization] failed you” by not providing me the support and resources needed to be effective. What a gift. There is no substitute for sustainable self-care.

Pathway to Equity Professionalism

More than one social worker, eager to be involved, has asked me how to get into the field of DEI leadership. There is likely not a clear, straightforward answer; however, here are some insights:

- *Start.* Join a team of people working on these issues in your organization or sponsor a marginalized student group and work to advocate for that group. Attend a peaceful protest or join a community group. Begin networking with those who are already in the club.
- *Learn.* Consume information. Excellent books on the market teach us much about the historical and current challenges of difference in America. If I begin to recommend them, I will leave out some of the best! Attend meetings, participate in conferences, and listen to podcasts. Look up pertinent policies in your area. The key is to begin learning because the more we know, the more we understand that we cannot know all of it.
- *Act.* Look for opportunities to act more significantly on the knowledge you are gaining. Be available to participate and then lead when the time is right. This may involve vulnerability, risks, and even what feels like setbacks, but that is OK!
- *Keep learning!* Be open to continued learning (Jemal, 2020). I highly recommend seeking the formal higher education you need, understanding that some degree programs are more specialized than others. The program you choose largely depends on the setting where you are interested in working.

Conclusion

To understand my own and others' journeys from traditional social work practice to DEI work, research needs to be conducted to address it. The study will inform possible pathways for social workers pursuing this work. Research into developing DEI will help build a clearer understanding of the skills needed, the barriers to doing this work, and the skills and strategies needed to be successful. I can foresee a qualitative study seeking to understand how and why social workers become DEI leaders or one that examines the perceptions of their work for those in the DEI field. Not everyone's journey will be like mine—this is one journey. I also hope that more professionals will be engaged in justice work, as we need to be present (Jemal, 2020); our Code of Ethics calls us to it (National Association of Social Workers, 2021), and because more and more individuals, leaders, and organizations are looking for ways to grow in these areas of inclusion. Perhaps a desire to go deeper in or shift your career from traditional social work practice to full-time equity and inclusion work will lead you on a path that is challenging, fulfilling, and needed.

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