



Fall 2021 Newsletter

Centering Social Justice in the Learning Experience Across Disciplines

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Social justice, institutional identities, and the academic mission. Advancing campus-wide efforts that cultivate equity and social justice in the learning experience is critical and daunting, particularly at large, research-intensive institutions. We have heard and issued the critiques: such efforts should not be merely performative. What's more, centering social justice and equity need not be tangential to the core academic mission.

In our leadership roles at the University of Arizona, as director of the Center for University Education Scholarship and Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Development, respectively, we maintain such efforts should be strategically and meaningfully elicited within the learning experience by design. And, as faculty, we value that such efforts be grounded on academic freedom and be recognized through faculty reward structures. Centering equity and social justice by design means crafting learning experiences that mean to do that, rather than seem to have done that upon disaggregating outcomes by race/ethnicity. For example, an active learning course may close achievement gaps for Black or Latinx students yet not be deliberately structured to enact socially just classroom interactions. The "by design" aspect refers to deliberate intent.

It is encouraging that the University of Arizona, one of only 16 R1 Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), is living its HSI designation and land-grant mission by institutionalizing programs and curricula that center civic engagement, service learning, and cultural responsiveness through a social justice lens, across disciplines.

How do we advance faculty knowledge, innovation, and scholarship on pressing cross-cutting educational challenges? How do we do so by design, in ways that are both validating and institutionally recognized? Our article introduces three programmatic efforts created to address such questions: Mapping Educational Challenges (MECha) Workshops and the Spanning Boundaries Grant (both offered by the Center for University Education Scholarship), and the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Development Institute (sponsored by the university's Faculty Affairs and HSI Initiatives). These efforts, offered to faculty across disciplines, invest in actualizing university education and advancing institutional commitments from an equity-

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minded lens; they build capacity to explore content, pedagogy, and assessment that center social justice, servingness, and aspects of liberal arts education at research-oriented HSI.

Structures for critical agency: affirming faculty investments in the learning experience. The three initiatives central to this article shared key intents, including actualizing the learning experience for a rapidly changing student demographic and centering critical institutional identities, particularly our HSI and land-grant identities. Most notably, the initiatives were instances of broader efforts designed to enhance, support, and affirm faculty’s agency in the learning experience—not just increase faculty knowledge and awareness. Thus, aiming beyond traditional professional development engagement, these initiatives centered faculty intellectual freedom and critical agency (Baez, 2000) with attention to support structures around time, compensation, and funding.

Critical agency refers to ways faculty “redefine institutional structures, further social justice, and initiate social change” (Baez, 2000, p. 284). The broader term *critical agency networks* (Kiyama, Lee, & Rhoades, 2012) refers to cross-disciplinary social justice efforts that work towards organizational, equity-based change. We view the efforts described here as examples of new and reimagined possibilities for structures of critical agency networks—networks (co)designed by faculty and aligned with the mission and designation of the institution. These networks offer the time, resources, and recognition structures for equitable and visible faculty and staff participation.

Civic Engagement and Service Learning (CE & SL) across disciplines. As an AAU institution, an HSI, and a land-grant university, the University of Arizona is uniquely positioned to develop programming at the intersection of these identities. If they are not informed by our commitments to servingness (Garcia, 2019a) and the land we occupy, the university’s investments in education and scholarship dangerously shortchange the student demographics we increasingly embrace.

Over 2021 and into 2022, the theme of CE & SL has woven across three major events organized by CUES, the Center for University Education Scholarship at the University of Arizona: a dual [keynote address](#) (Feb 2021), a two-day workshop (Jun 2021), and a cross-disciplinary grant (2022). At its core, [CUES](#) centers the university learning experience. Through programming, faculty fellowships, and grants, the center “catalyzes the practice of innovation and scholarship in teaching and learning” on our campus. Yet a relevant, actualized learning experience necessitates attention to critical themes that intersect with it, including equity, social justice, civic engagement, and service learning. Indeed, there is a tangible and urgent intersection between advancing the scholarship of university teaching and learning and viewing civic engagement and service learning as central to curriculum and course content, not just pedagogy (Pollack, 2014).

Aided by generous funding, CUES offers opportunities for advancing cross-disciplinary faculty agency aligned with the center’s mission and broader institutional identities. One such mechanism is a new pairing of workshops and grants centered from year to year on a different educational challenge: CE & SL across disciplines is the 2021-22 theme. The workshop gathers cross-college faculty and staff to envision transformation around the chosen challenge (and hence bears the name Mapping Educational Challenges, or MECha Workshop). The [grant](#), which

follows roughly a year later, selects and funds a cross-disciplinary faculty team that visions and delivers transformation on the year's theme, informed by MECha workshop recommendations. In tandem, the pairing of workshops and grants (Lozano, 2020) enables faculty to move from mapping to action, aligned with the CUES mission.

Over two days last June, 30 faculty and staff representing 12 colleges and 4 non-academic units explored novel, locally relevant questions at the [2021 MECha workshop](#) on CE & SL. What does a university learning experience that centers CE & SL look like for our students, our faculty, and our institution? How do we make our commitment to CE & SL and social justice explicit in the university learning experience (classes, curriculum, modes of engagement, teaching approaches, clinics, required degree work)? Such questions serve to enable critical agency networks around cross-disciplinary consensus and institutionally funded contributions to innovation and scholarship in the learning experience.

Culturally responsive curricula across disciplines. The University of Arizona also has an opportunity to integrate “servingsness” into curriculum and pedagogy as an HSI. Servingsness goes beyond reducing attrition and graduating Latinx students. It encompasses nurturing and affirming Latinx strengths and identities by design and as part of the learning experience—being not just Latinx-producing, but fundamentally Latinx-enhancing. Garcia (2019a) specifically notes that Hispanic and Latinx-enhancing organizations should enact a “social justice curriculum and culturally relevant programs, services, and practices” (p. 116). Likewise, providing curricula grounded in justice and equity is an integral step for reframing practices at HSIs (Garcia, 2019a).

The Culturally Responsive Curriculum Development Institute ([CRCDI](#)) is a week-long, summer immersion focused on training and coaching faculty towards the infusion of culturally responsive practices and pedagogy into existing courses of all modalities. The institute brings together faculty from across the university to thoughtfully redesign existing courses through workshops, discussions, and pedagogical practice. Redesigned courses take account of multiple learning environments and teaching modalities including online, in-person, and HyFlex. They are informed approaches to cultural responsiveness and aspire to embody servingsness.

In June 2021, 22 faculty and instructors representing 11 colleges participated in the inaugural CRCDI. Courses undergoing redesign ranged from small 20-person classes to those with over 500 enrolled students, reaching an anticipated 2,278 students. Topics include English 101, Life After Death, Multicultural Russia, Intro to Music, Nutrition, the Life Cycle and many more.

Efforts like the CRCDI, which intentionally build culturally responsive curricula across the disciplines, respond to calls to action from scholars who suggest that improving the educational outcomes of Latinx students, and underserved students more broadly, requires that faculty play a role in cultivating a sense of belonging (Hurtado, 1997), learning, development (Bensimon, 2007; Ching, 2019).

Telling the story: evaluating success from a social justice and culturally responsive lens. As we have shared here, examples of critical agency networks coming together to center social justice in the learning experience exist, both across disciplines and across organizational silos. While traditional cross-departmental collaborations offer challenges to engagement (exacerbated

by normative faculty reward structures and notions of student success) (Kiyama, Rhoades, & Lee, 2012), the critical agency networks spawned through our initiatives seem to naturally thrive, even within traditional academic norms and structures. Defining and measuring the success of these efforts calls for attention to their broader equity goals and still traditional institutional success measures (for example, promotion guidelines and peer-review process not yet embracing inclusive views of scholarship) along various dimensions of the learning experience, including faculty, students, community, scholarship, and institutional transformation. Inspired by Holland (2014) we might ask:

- What components of, or strategies for, socially just teaching and learning activities lead to successful learning outcomes for all students with attention to place, times, and communities?
- Under what conditions does socially engaged teaching lead faculty to develop new lines of scholarship? And how are faculty rewarded for these new forms of scholarship?
- To what degree should socially just teaching and learning be intentionally woven throughout the institution in a way that makes the land-grant mission and HSI designation pervasive?

Concluding remarks. Deliberate attention to civic engagement, service learning, and culturally affirming curricula in the learning experience is a form of (urgent) social justice. For institutions boasting as many designations and identities as the University of Arizona (a minority-serving, land-grant, and research institution) such attention is an institutional responsibility central to—not tangential to—the core academic mission. We view these as the first steps towards reimagined structures. In her call to institutional leaders at HSIs, Garcia (2019b) suggests structural transformation should occur within curricular offerings, incentive structures, and training and development. Specifically, the programs and grants discussed in this article offer examples of how faculty in university-wide roles may act as agents for structural transformation centering equity and social justice in content, curricula, and scholarship of teaching and learning, across disciplines. Importantly and by design, all three of the efforts we've described leveraged institutional identities and broader institutional commitments to teaching, learning, and equity. And all three efforts were designed to affirm faculty critical agency in the learning experience, at once attending to and challenging normative structures for academic advancement and recognition. Insights on the sustainability, permanence, and long-term impact of efforts of this kind lie critically ahead of us, especially amidst the evolving realities and legacies of the academy.

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