This chapter discusses the difficulties associated with developing a social justice ally identity and provides practical suggestions to overcome them.

Issues and Strategies for Social Justice Allies (and the Student Affairs Professionals Who Hope to Encourage Them)

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As we sat down to draft this chapter, we struggled to determine its focus. Should we focus on ways that student affairs professionals and our students might act as allies, or should we focus on strategies that student affairs professionals might employ to best foster the development of allies? They are, of course, issues with considerable overlap. If ally work can be conceptualized, as Ellen has done previously (Broido, 2000b), as possessing three components (inspiring and educating dominant group members, creating institutional and cultural change, and supporting target group members), then developing the next generation of allies is indeed a key constituent of ally work.

We also spent considerable time discussing where self-understanding fits into this three-component model. A great deal of progress on social justice issues has come from people with limited self-understanding: dominant group members who lack self-awareness have been responsible for much social good. Self-understanding thus is not a prerequisite for ally action. However, we believe that effective and sustainable ally behavior requires a solid foundation of self-understanding—that is, understanding based on continuous critical reflection into the roles of power and privilege in one’s life and relationships.

We begin this chapter with a discussion of self-understanding. We then explore each of the three components of ally work, including strategies to further each component. Rather than an exhaustive how-to list, however,
we hope the strategies we present start a conversation that readers continue based on their circumstances and contexts. Finally, we highlight several obstacles and difficulties associated with being a social justice ally. Throughout this volume, we have maintained that a social justice ally identity is a difficult identity; this chapter explores some of those difficulties. We offer this final chapter as our best judgment, and the judgment of many of the authors from whom we have learned, how to overcome those difficulties and be effective social justice allies.

Self-Understanding

A critical understanding of one’s role as a member of one or more dominant groups is not required for social justice ally action. Self-understanding, however, does provide the foundation on which sustainable ally identity and actions are built. Maintaining the motivation to act in the light of the difficulties that social justice allies face requires a degree of confidence and clarity of purpose that comes through critical reflection and a sense of moral imperative, both of which arise through understanding (Bishop, 2002). Ellen’s own work (Broido, 2000a) reinforces the relationship between understanding of self, confidence in one’s attitudes and abilities, and social justice actions. Recall also Howard’s admonition (1999) that “you can’t teach what you don’t know.” Teaching others about power, privilege, oppression, and the actions to counteract them requires a thorough understanding of the role these constructs play in one’s own daily life.

We offer the following list of possible strategies as ways to enhance the critical self-awareness we are describing. We also see justice-cognizant identity as the goal of this process. A justice-cognizant identity, similar to but broader than Bailey’s concept (1998) of the privilege-cognizant identity, requires a critical awareness of how one’s behaviors, attitudes, actions, and lack of actions support justice for everyone. A constant awareness of one’s position-related dominant and target group membership, a sensitivity to the effect of those positions on daily interactions, and recognition of the impact of one’s actions are required of a justice-cognizant ally identity:

- Continue to read about and study issues of social justice, building an intellectual understanding of power, privilege, and oppression.
- Identify the multiple identities you possess, recognizing their interaction, the ways in which those identities may shift over your lifetime, and how their meaning may shift depending on context.
- Critically examine the role of your power, privilege, and oppression in your daily life, moving these three abstractions into concrete understandings.
- Avoid impulsive actions in favor of actions based in reflection, contemplation, and compassion, avoiding the “guilty liberal” impulse to action (Dass and Gorman, 1985; Tatum, 2003).
• Take time to struggle through the inevitable cognitive and affective dissonance created when good people recognize the realities of living within societal structures that reinforce inequality.
• Recognize and weigh the consequences (positive and negative) you may encounter in assuming a social justice ally identity. Are the possible positive outcomes worth the difficulties you may face?
• Be able to articulate why you do this work. What motivates you? How does this work fit with your own values, spiritual beliefs, and life purposes?
• Identify your own benefit in doing this work. Having a clear understanding of how your life would be better in the absence of oppression will help you withstand challenges to the work. Bowser and Hunt’s *The Impacts of Racism on White Americans* (1996), while specific to racism, is an excellent resource on this topic.
• Know your own strengths and limits. Some of us are gifted teachers but less comfortable in more politicized situations. Some of us excel at organizing large groups of people; some of us can communicate in ways that are heard well by those with formal power. Few of us are equally effective in all arenas; knowing our talents will maximize our ability to create social change.

**Ally Actions**

Ally work can be conceptualized as three concurrent processes. Ellen (Broido, 2000b) originally developed this framework speaking to lesbian, gay, and bisexual allies, but it is easily expanded to all areas of social justice ally action (MacKinnon, Broido, and Wilson, 2004). There is, of course, considerable overlap in these areas. For example, allies can provide support to target members through their work in advocating for change in institutional policies. Nevertheless, it is useful to delineate these components separately in order to address each more fully.

**Inspiring and Educating Dominant Group Members.** One critical component of ally work is working with members of dominant social groups. That work can take many forms, but the most obvious of these is educating dominant group members about issues of social justice. Kivel (2002) reminds us that most people do not want to be agents of oppression, but that they lack the awareness that they are being oppressive, or information about how to act differently. Gaining information was a critical aspect of students’ development as allies in Ellen’s study (Broido, 2000a; see Chapter Two, this volume, for a more comprehensive discussion of types of information). Dass and Gorman (1985) highlighted the power of providing information when they wrote, “Sometimes it’s enough just to share information with others. . . . We trust these situations to speak for themselves. Injustice will strike others as injustice has struck us. We’re appealing to collective understanding and compassion” (p. 187).
Dass and Gorman (1985) also raise an important caution to our work as educators: they warn against using information to reinscribe our own power, to coerce rather than build collective consciousness and shared engagement:

But much of the time we come into social action . . . and we’re just a little self-righteous. We’re convinced we’ve got something to say, something we’re “correct” about. We’ve got our ideology and our scenario: here’s how the situation really is, and the facts to back it up. . . . But at some level what we’re communicating is the feeling that we know, others don’t, and we’ve got to Change Minds. . . . There’s often an air of superiority in what we say. People instinctively back off. They feel like they’re being told, being “should” upon. Social action, they understand intuitively, ought to be fully voluntary if it’s to have power and endurance [pp. 157–158].

In addition to educating dominant group members, another critical component is drawing allies into action by inspiring them, recruiting them, and making such actions expected. Allies in Ellen’s study (Broido, 2000a) were drawn into social justice advocacy when they were expected to because of roles they held, or when they were invited into the work by others. Similar findings emerged from research Bob has completed (Reason, Roosa Millar, and Scales, 2004). Many students are reluctant to take action without encouragement and invitation, and student affairs professionals often are in positions to make such invitations. Our suggestions for inspiring, educating, and engaging dominant group members include the following:

- Engage with dominant group members in discussions about power, privilege, and oppressions of all types, even when such discussion may make others less comfortable. Incorporate those discussions into all facets of your work; social justice issues arise as much in talking about budget priorities as in programs focused specifically on oppression.
- Recognize and point out instances of power and privilege differentials during interactions with others. Do so to raise awareness.
- Study the history of social justice movements and the roles of dominant group members in those histories (Kivel, 2002). Talk with other dominant group members about what you learn. Challenge the myth that dominant group members cannot effect change.
- Confront inappropriate comments and behaviors in ways that educate rather than demean or embarrass.
- Develop confrontation skills that alleviate defensive reactions from other dominant group members. Johnson’s book (2000) is a wonderful resource to assist in this endeavor.
- Create environments where ally behavior is expected. Incorporate expectations of ally behavior into guidelines for resident assistants, peer educators, orientation leaders, and other student leadership roles. Explicitly
invite students into ally behavior by asking them to join you and other student in ally actions.

- Persevere. Overcome initial defensiveness of dominant group members through prolonged engagement.

**Creating Institutional and Cultural Change.** Although everyone has a responsibility to challenge unjust policies, student affairs professionals, especially those in upper levels of the administration, have some level of influence that students do not share (although we often underestimate the power of an organized group of students to influence campus politics). These student affairs professionals share a responsibility to influence change on their campuses (Evans and Reason, 2001)—not only to intervene at the individual student level, but also to create environments in which all students, including social justice allies, can flourish. We offer the following suggestions for institution-level action:

- Support the recruitment and retention of diverse students, faculty, and staff. While most researchers have concluded that structural diversity is insufficient to enhance learning, it is necessary to create the diverse interpersonal interactions necessary for learning.
- Study and improve campus climates. One must feel safe in order to learn and grow.
- Advocate for social justice course work. If social justice courses are not currently available, advocate for their development; if courses exist, encourage students to enroll in them. Nothing indicates institutional support on a college campus more than inclusion in the curriculum as a for-credit course.
- Advocate for inclusion of social justice issues across the curriculum and cocurriculum. Specific social justice courses are not enough; a social justice perspective should permeate the campus climate.
- Work to change unjust policies, practices, and laws. Identify where groups are treated unjustly (for example, lack of partner benefits for lesbian and gay employees), and lobby for change. Expand your influence beyond campus to local, state, and federal governments.
- Know and use institutional decision-making structures strategically (von Destinon, Evans, and Wall, 2000). Student and faculty groups often have considerable power to enact change and can serve as partners in change.
- Frequent institutions that support justice; boycott institutions that do not. Educate others about both types of institutions.
- Persevere. Institutional change occurs slowly, but that must not dissuade action.

**Supporting Target Group Members.** While student affairs professionals can provide support to large groups of target group members through their work on policy issues, it is important also to provide one-on-one
support, witness, and advocacy. This is not a call to do for students or other target group members what they should be doing for themselves. Rather, in social contexts where target group members are denied access to resources and social power, allies sometimes are able to use their greater social power to call attention to injustice. In addition, allies can provide support by being witnesses to the experiences of target group members. Often target group members’ experiences are rendered invisible, misconstrued, or ignored by society as a whole. Accurately witnessing and listening can be a powerful mechanism of support:

- Listen. Do not assume you are an expert (Kivel, 2002). No matter how long you have been an ally, you have much to learn from members of target groups.
- Diversify your friendship group. Make a point to develop relationships with people who are visibly (and invisibly) different from you. Then be a friend.
- Be visible in your support, being careful that your visibility does not take attention away from target group members. Be visible to and with target group members, not in lieu of them.
- Educate yourself so that you can effectively provide support to target group members. Know the history of target group members, as well as institutional, local, and national resources available to assist and support them.
- Do not expect praise. Target group members may be ambivalent about your support at first (Bishop, 2002).
- Apologize when necessary (von Destinon, Evans, and Wall, 2000). Allies make mistakes; effective allies recognize their mistakes, apologize, and learn from them.
- Persevere. Giving up when the situation becomes difficult sends a message to target group members and reinforces a sense of distrust between groups.

**Difficulties and Obstacles**

“Do something” is a common refrain when encouraging social justice allies. Taking action obviously is a requisite for allies. We recognize, however, that such advice is often easier said than done. An ally identity is a difficult identity to maintain; one need only refer to the biographies of social justice allies to confirm this. Stokes Brown (2002), for example, outlines the losses associated with social justice work for four prominent racial justice allies, including exile from friends and family, loss of income, and imprisonment. Stokes Brown’s social justice allies overcame these obstacles and persevered, but not without struggle and commitment.
Allies negotiate and balance multiple social group memberships with isolation and segregation. They have the privileges of dominant group membership but may be ostracized from the dominant group because of their work on behalf of target groups. Allies often are called “divisive” (Johnson, 2000) or “traitorous” (Bailey, 1998), or they are accused of exacerbating differences and ignoring commonalities (Levine and Cureton, 1998). White or male allies, for example, may even welcome the label of traitor, but must also recognize they cannot ever fully avoid the privileges associated with whiteness or maleness in our society.

Allies are not part of the target group either. Those who attempt to claim target group membership risk being counterproductive, often usurping the voice of target group members. Bishop (2002) wrote of a young man at a rally to memorialize female victims of domestic violence, who assumed an inappropriate level of membership in the women’s movement. She wrote how the young man’s intrusion onto the program of the rally, presumably to show support and solidarity, produced feelings of fear, insecurity, and helplessness in many of the women present at the rally. Bishop’s is a vivid and powerful example of the negative consequences of co-opting group membership. Unfortunately, the balance between supporting and co-opting is not clearly delineated in most instances and must be negotiated by individual allies within the context of social movements.

Renouncing privilege and being ostracized by dominant group members, while purposefully not claiming target group status, may leave allies feeling detached and alone. Throughout this volume, the authors have encouraged allies to find like-minded peers for support. A formal group of like-minded allies also constitutes a powerful influence for social justice on campus. Ally groups support the efforts of target groups, initiate programming, offer visible and institutionalized support, and provide training and modeling for developing social justice allies.

Being an ally is difficult and often requires sacrifice, which makes maintaining motivation equally difficult. It becomes imperative that allies do not quit once a visible role in the justice movement is assumed. Allies who lack the constitution to continue once the work becomes difficult or the sacrifices too great often do more harm than good. Doing nothing is sometimes better than starting a task that goes unfinished (Bishop, 2002). A fair-weather ally, who works only when it is convenient or easy, risks reinforcing the suspicions of target group members through more unfulfilled promises.

Finally, allies need to be gentle and forgiving of themselves, as well as others. Dass and Gorman (1985), in writing about social justice work, asked, “If we are not rooted in compassion, how will our acts contribute to a compassionate world?” (p. 165). That compassion must include people we are working to support, people we are hoping will join us in ally work, and ourselves. Social justice advocacy can be difficult and draining work, although also often fulfilling and sustaining. It is inevitable that engaged allies will
make mistakes, miss opportunities to intervene, and on occasion act in ways incongruent with their values. Mistakes and shortcomings need to be addressed, but we must also recognize that they are inevitable parts of the learning process and that we are transformed as much by our work as is the world we seek to transform. Martin Luther King Jr. (1958) spoke of this in the context of nonviolence, saying, “It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them a new self-respect; it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had” (p. 219).

Finding Your Place at the Table

As the four editors met to plan this volume, our conversation quickly turned to our own social group identities (dominant and target) and our roles as social justice advocates; specifically, we attempted to answer, “What right do we have to do this work?” We began to employ the metaphor of a place at the table as we worked through this conversation. As we stated in the Editors’ Notes, allies must find a precarious balance between knowing when to take a seat at the table of social justice advocacy, joining those who are oppressed at combating oppression; when to speak up; when to be silent in order to listen to the experiences of others; and when to leave the table altogether, so as not to infringe on or usurp the role of target group members in advocating for their own liberation. This chapter is meant to help allies find that balance—their place at the table.

The work of social justice is too important to ignore or abandon because of the precariousness of the ally identity. We agree with Johnson (2000): “As long as we participate in a society that transforms difference into privilege, there is no neutral ground to stand on” (p. 131). Allies play a vital role in social movements. Little will change until those in power recognize the injustice and begin to fight against the structures that maintain their power. Through our work in helping students develop as allies and in our own ally work, we move forward in that struggle.

References


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