CONTESTED ISSUES IN TROUBLED TIMES

Student Affairs Dialogues on Equity, Civility, and Safety

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PREFACE

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How do graduate preparation program faculty prepare future student affairs educators to address the complexities of higher education? What kinds of continuing education opportunities do divisions of student affairs offer in the interest of optimizing student learning and staff success? In 2011 we contributed as coeditors and/or authors to *Contested Issues in Student Affairs: Diverse Perspectives and Respectful Dialogue*, a collection of essays by faculty, administrators, and graduate students that offered diverse responses to these complex professional questions. The contested issues examined in the original book are as relevant today as they were in 2011. Student affairs practice continues to be complicated by competing values, structural inequalities, and polarizing discourses. With the aim of continuing to foster productive dialogue on complex issues framing the work of student affairs educators, we offer this companion book, *Contested Issues in Troubled Times: Student Affairs Dialogues on Equity, Civility, and Safety.* In this new volume, we invited a new set of contributors to explore new questions which foreground issues of equity, civility, and safety—themes dominating higher education headlines and campus conversations.

The overarching question that *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* attempts to answer is: How can student affairs educators create an equitable climate conducive to learning in a dynamic environment fraught with complexity and a sociopolitical context characterized by escalating intolerance, incivility, and overt discrimination? The book includes 24 contemporary, critical, and contentious questions (e.g., How do student affairs educators navigate the tension between the First Amendment right to free speech and the expression of ideas that create a hostile campus climate?). Primary and response essayists in each chapter introduce diverse ideological and political conceptualizations of these 24 questions. Writing in the style of op-ed commentaries, authors are not seeking to offer readers absolute truths and

definitive solutions to these persistent and messy issues. Rather, contributors are role modeling productive dialogue across differences, illustrating the possibilities and promise of acknowledging multiple approaches to addressing contentious issues, articulating a persuasive argument anchored in professional judgment, listening attentively to others for points of connection as well as divergence, and drawing on new ways of thinking to foster safe and inclusive campuses. In the interest of extending the dialogue beyond the pages of the text, readers are invited to contemplate and share their reactions to the essays by posting comments on book-sponsored social media venues.

Political Contexts Shaping Dialogues Across Difference

The need to address inequities and facilitate learning-centered civil discourse to ensure safe campuses has never been greater. In 2018, Giridharadas[1] noted threats to this goal:

> In a moment when America faces great big questions about who we are and what we wish to become, we are turning into a society so perpetually offended by one another that we are less and less capable of actually arguing about our future. And citizens who cannot argue are begging to be ruled.

These troubling dynamics are unmistakably present in American higher education. Quests to ameliorate inequities and injustices in the academy (e.g., victimization of transgender and gender-nonconforming students) have spawned multiple and competing visions for higher education. Often we base these visions on our life experiences, which influence what we see, how we interpret, and how we act. Subsequent contentious and polarizing rhetoric often "offends" rather than educates the other, which is a threat to democracy—a bedrock foundation of American higher education.

Few opportunities on campuses exist for individuals to pose and thoughtfully listen to and critique others' arguments about politically charged issues such as institutional racism, sexual assault, White privilege, gender discrimination, guns on campus, and freedom of speech, decreasing the probability of collaborative problem-solving and establishing equitable and safe campuses. Our goal is to explicitly discuss issues of *equity*, *civility*, and *safety* in the interest of opening up, rather than shutting down conversations. As the contributors to this volume have done, we encourage student affairs educators to engage in civil dialogue across difference with the intention of changing conditions that perpetuate discrimination within and beyond college campuses and creating inclusive campus climates conducive to learning.

Several contributors raise questions and share diverse interpretations of *civility* (particularly from the perspective of those groups that have been historically marginalized). For some, calls for civility are coded demands that oppressed individuals and groups remain silent or express their outrage respectfully when confronting those in power who unconsciously or knowingly perpetuate discrimination and create dangerous communities.[2] Protest cannot and should not always be quiet; there are times when demands for change must be bold and loud to call attention to injustice and imagine a new reality. However, within the context of higher education institutions broadly and the student affairs profession specifically, conversations centered on the complex and controversial issues of equity and safety could benefit from greater civility. The vision of civility[3] that frames this book encourages deep and meaningful dialogue about differences. Rather than ending tough conversations by acknowledging trivial points of agreement and/or politely "agreeing to disagree," our vision of civility demands that individuals must engage in the "hard work of staying present even with those with whom they have deep-rooted and fierce disagreements."[4] Contributors to *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* role model the promise and practice of engaging in civil dialogues across difference, articulating diverse approaches to addressing 24 contested issues in student affairs. On some points the authors agree, highlighting points of convergence and shared reasoning. On other matters, contributors respectfully disagree, drawing upon different identities, values and principles, professional knowledge, and/or evidence to support their arguments. Sometimes the differences of perspective are moderate; in other cases, the contrasts are starker. In all cases, however, the dialogues are civil, respectfully engaging with the ideas of those with whom they are in community.

When framing our vision of respectful dialogue across difference, we also felt it was important to acknowledge that civility is a political act, necessitating that individuals negotiate interpersonal and institutional power while "claiming and caring for one's identity, needs, and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process."[5] Accordingly, choosing to engage in authentic dialogue about differences requires participants to take risks that can have real consequences for one's well-being and professional success. To help readers understand and negotiate the political dimensions of participating in efforts to discuss and address contested issues of equity, civility, and safety, contributors to this volume share their personal stories of and/or strategies for navigating the politics of this work. We thank them for their candor and productive insight.

As noted earlier, although the premise for this book is similar to *Contested Issues in Student Affairs* (i.e., the student affairs profession and institutions of

higher education benefit from meaningful dialogue on complex issues that shape the learning environment), contributors to this volume were asked to consider 24 new contentious questions framing the work of contemporary student affairs educators. New tensions and challenges have gained prominence in the last eight years, capturing the attention of students, campus administrators, and the media. While free speech controversies and student demands for racial justice and gender inclusive campuses are not new, the political context within which student affairs professionals practice has shifted dramatically in recent years. The emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, the adoption and subsequent repeal of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy, legislative mandates regarding campus carry and transgender rights, and physical clashes over the presence of White supremacist speakers on campus have altered the higher education landscape and placed student affairs educators at the center of many contentious campus conversations. *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* is situated within these turbulent times and perpetually shifting political contexts. The 24 questions posed in this book are far from settled, with new campus policy, legislative actions, and legal precedent established daily. Indeed, since the inception of this book project in May 2017, DACA has undergone a series of legal challenges, leaving both students and student affairs professionals in limbo. Although we cannot know what the future holds for DACA recipients, the contested question of how campuses should support undocumented students in an era of political uncertainty and open hostility is a prime example of the need for student affairs educators to cultivate the capacity to engage in tough conversations characterized by diverse ideological principles and priorities.

Book Format

The 24 contested questions featured in this book are organized into 4 parts. Part One serves as the introduction. In this preface we establish the context for the book's purpose and the climate in which it evolved. The essays in Part One set the stage for the volume by exploring the challenges inherent in fostering equitable learning environments in student affairs and the complexity of dialoging across difference. Part Two: Cultivating Inclusive Learning Environments: Equity, Civility, and Safety, raises questions and tensions in multiple arenas that affect learning environments. These essays include campus racial climate, social class, political activism, the definition of *student success*, and the tension between free speech and creating hostile environments. They also address the role of campus sexual violence and trauma in student learning. Multiple essays address

creating equitable learning environments for students with marginalized identities; given the current political climate, specific attention is focused on students from historically underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, transgender students, and undocumented students. Considering the current sociopolitical climate, the last essay addresses tensions among legislative action, institutional roles, and public policy advocacy. How can or should student affairs educators respond when legislative mandates conflict with personal values? Part Three: Cultivating Professional Capacities to Foster Inclusive Learning Environments shifts focus. In this section, contributors reflect on the professional skills, knowledge, and/or dispositions needed to thrive and facilitate systemic change in contemporary higher education organizations. This section includes multiple essays that examine diverse professional development contexts, including graduate preparation programs and professional organization engagement. What are the possibilities for addressing racism in student affairs graduate preparation classrooms? What support is needed to help graduate students navigate the tensions inherent in their dual roles as students and professional staff? What types of professional development opportunities are essential for cultivating the capacity to make good decisions when faced with the unknown? These are questions nearly all student affairs educators will confront at one point or another in their careers, and these essays provide a foundation for productive dialogue across different perspectives. Additional essays explore research, assessment, and the conceptualization of a personal learning design approach in developing professional capacities to foster equitable learning environments. Essays also address managing personal and professional identities via social media and the nature of self-care for professionals in complex work settings. The essays in Part Three illustrate the political nature of student affairs work and offer insights on navigating these tensions with integrity. Part Four: Epilogue, examines the promise and potential for student affairs educators to create equitable learning environments. In this final chapter, the essayists issue calls to action, encouraging student affairs educators to exhibit the moral courage needed to critically examine routine practices that (un)knowingly perpetuate inequity and enact the foundational values and principles upon which the student affairs profession was founded.

Structurally, each chapter begins with a question posed in the title and includes 2 essays: a 4,000-word primary essay written by authors selected for their expertise that offers an in-depth examination of the focal question and a 2,000-word response essay written by another student affairs educator with expertise in the topic. The primary essays situate the focal issues historically in the professional literature, present background information and context, define key terms, summarize the diverse ideological and theoretical approaches

to responding to the question, make explicit the author's perspectives about the question, and discuss political implications. The shorter response essays critique the primary essays, note areas of agreement, introduce and discuss relevant issues not addressed in the primary essay, make explicit the author's perspectives about the question, and discuss the political dimensions of the central argument. Each essay concludes with discussion questions that guide readers in further considering the issue at hand. The questions may be used to spark individual reflection or provide a framework for group dialogue.

The book's focal themes and structure are intended to initiate a sustained conversation within the student affairs profession that allows educators to converse with each other about contentious issues respectfully regardless of ideology. We intentionally focus on difficult dialogues across difference with an emphasis on talking with, not at, one another. This dialogic process is modeled in the coupling of primary and response essays. As noted, individuals were invited to contribute to this volume based on their professional expertise. We attempted to identify authors who would bring unique and informed perspectives to the focal questions.

Although the book aims to role model the process of engaging in conversation with those we disagree, we did not intentionally recruit authors with diametrically opposed views on the selected topics. For example, when choosing authors for Chapter 10, "What Role Should Student Affairs Educators Play in Supporting Undocumented Students in the Current Political Climate?" we did not seek a student affairs professional who opposes institutional support for undocumented students. Rather, we attempted to select student affairs educators who were knowledgeable about the topic of undocumented college students but would likely approach the complex issue from different perspectives, offering diverse interpretations of key considerations and possible actions.

Readers of this book will certainly encounter situations in which they must navigate fierce disagreements in fundamental values and principles; however, it is more common for student affairs educators to enter into dialogue with colleagues who share commitments to broad professional goals (e.g., creating safe campuses) but differ with respect to preferred approaches for achieving shared aims (e.g., programming, policy, advocacy). The goal of this book is not to help student affairs educators hold their own in bombastic ideological and policy arguments like those that dominate 24-hour cable news networks.

The book models dialogue (instead of debate) in order to illustrate for educators the kind of learning partnerships[6] that promote complex thinking about difficult issues. Respecting one another's thoughts and perspectives and sharing authority to make sense of complex issues is essential to address

the contentious issues contained in these pages. We include essays in the introduction that specifically detail dialogic processes.

Finally, it is also important to note that we intentionally selected contributors from a range of professional roles, including graduate students and early career professionals, midlevel and senior administrators, graduate preparation faculty, and staff of national professional development and nonprofit organizations. In addition to professional roles, we also attended to representation of diverse social identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, gender identity) and institutional type (e.g., community college, small liberal arts institutions). While we recognize that attempts to include diverse perspectives will inevitably fall short on one or more dimensions, contributors to this volume represent an impressive range of personal and professional wisdom and we are confident readers will find their insights to be thought-provoking.

Using This Book as a Guide for Professional Development

Contested Issues in Troubled Times was developed with multiple audiences in mind: graduate students and faculty in student affairs professional preparation programs, new professionals and their midcareer supervisors, senior student affairs officers, and the staff of national student affairs organizations. Although these groups represent diverse institutional roles and contexts, they share a commitment to cultivating the student affairs profession's capacity for establishing civil, equitable, and safe higher education institutions. As mentioned previously, our hope is that this book serves as both a call to action and resource for engaging in dialogues across difference that lead to systemic change. For this aim to be realized, readers must not only wrestle with the 24 contentious questions featured in this book but also practice the dialogic process that serves as the book's central premise and structural framework. In the following sections we offer suggestions for using the book to guide individual and collective professional development efforts, including both face-to-face and virtual learning opportunities.

Engaging in Virtual Dialogues

The book's social media companion resources (see "Find Us Online," p. xxxi) offer opportunities for readers to exchange perspectives with educators around the world. We encourage individuals to read and discuss individual essays, which transcend most functional areas, in staff development meetings and discussions and post their perspectives in this book's blog.

We encourage readers to post comments to the accompanying social media sites commenting on and critiquing the essays and responses. Too

often dialogue is limited to people in close geographic proximity. The social media sites provide unique and multiple opportunities to engage in dialogue with professionals in multiple preparation programs, multiple student affairs divisions at diverse institutions, and contexts around the world. It encourages dialogue across disciplines; functional roles; and moral, political, and ideological perspectives. These sites invite professionals, who share an interest in a particular contested issue, to join a sustained conversation about how to navigate the complexities of those issues in various contexts. These online forums also provide emerging and veteran educators with opportunities to share information about their professional career paths.

Graduate Preparation Programs

As was the case with the original volume, *Contested Issues in Student Affairs,* faculty and graduate students in student affairs professional preparation programs will likely find *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* a valuable resource given the nature and scope of questions examined across the 24 chapters. Faculty members teaching a diverse array of courses (e.g., foundations; capstone; research and assessment; practica; seminars that address diversity, equity, and marginalization) may find the book useful with respect to introducing professional themes that transcend functional areas (e.g., public policy, student success, racial justice). Beyond assigning the text as required reading, course assignments designed to foster individual and collective reflection can be framed around the discussion questions posed at the end of each chapter. In addition to individual journaling and/or virtual discussions on course discussion boards, faculty may want to consider inviting students to engage in dialogue with student affairs educators beyond their local contexts via the book's virtual resources or other social media platforms. Additionally, graduate students may be challenged to identify contentious questions not discussed in the book and asked to address these issues via essays and/or presentations that enact the dialogic processes illustrated throughout *Contested Issues in Troubled Times.*

For faculty, the book may also hold value beyond engagement within graduate preparation classrooms. Several chapters speak directly to faculty, challenging them to reconsider conventional approaches to graduate education and higher education research. For example, the essayists in chapter 18 engage in dialogue about addressing discrimination and bias in the graduate classroom. In chapter 19, the essayists wrestle with the question: What is the value of student affairs research as it relates to issues of equity, civility, and safety? In the interest of critically examining and disrupting taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that perpetuate inequitable and unsafe

learning environments, why not suspend the typical monthly faculty meeting agenda and instead participate in an authentic dialogue with colleagues framed by a shared reading of one or more of this book's chapters? Graduate preparation faculty may also find the book's framework and content a useful guide for initiating productive dialogues with campus partners (e.g., assistantship/practicum supervisors) who play a critical role in professional preparation yet may approach this work with different values, priorities, and expectations.

Similarly, graduate students wrestling with specific challenges in their assistantship or practica settings (e.g., supporting students who have experienced trauma) as well as those navigating broader professional dilemmas (e.g., balancing their dual roles as graduate students and professional staff) will benefit from individual reflection and collective dialogue on the contested issues examined in this book. In addition to campus-based peer reading groups or conversations with supervisors framed by the discussion questions of a specific chapter, graduate students may benefit from engaging with the book's social media resources and participating in a virtual dialogue with others who are grappling with similar questions.

Supervision and Professional Development

The dialogic principles and processes as well as specific contentious questions featured in *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* may also serve as a valuable framework for supervision conversations and professional development programming. For example, graduate students/new professionals and their supervisors may find it useful to regularly set aside time during one-on-one meetings to discuss the complex issues examined in the book (e.g., best practices for supporting transgender students, equitable approaches to assessment, integrating personal and professional identities in digital spaces). Framing these conversations as dialogues across difference and utilizing the chapter discussion questions to structure the conversations will facilitate the establishment of learning partnerships in which all participants contribute and benefit.

Student affairs educators charged with designing and facilitating professional development programming at the unit, division, or national association level may also find *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* a useful framework and resource. In addition to the facilitation of in-person and virtual reading groups that focus on one or more of the book's chapters, the book's content provides curricula for a diverse array of professional development initiatives, including workshops, panel discussions, webinars, conference sessions, and so on. For example, a divisional professional development committee could

design a monthly professional development series framed by *Contested Issues in Troubled Times.* In the first session, participants could be introduced to the principles and practice of dialogues across difference (chapter 2). Subsequent monthly sessions could focus on one of the featured questions (e.g., ethical approaches to public policy advocacy, self-care in turbulent times, the influence of social class on student learning), providing participants with a chance to enact the principles of meaningful dialogue, identifying points of consensus and disagreement with a focus on deepening their collective understanding and enhancing their capacity to foster equitable, civil, and safe campus communities. Near the end of the series, participants could be organized into teams, tasked with identifying contentious issues most salient to their own campus and developing plans for initiating campus dialogues across diverse stakeholders. A professional development series such as this would not only expand the participants' commitment to engaging in meaningful dialogue across difference but also likely facilitate organizational transformation.

Finally, many of the contested issues examined in *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* closely align with *American College Personnel Association (ACPA)/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators,*[7] including: social justice and inclusion, student learning and development, technology, and personal and ethical foundations. Student affairs educators seeking to advance their professional competence could use the competency rubrics[8] to identify professional learning outcomes of interest and then select relevant chapters from *Contested Issues in Troubled Times* to serve as the foundation of their professional development curricula. For example, a student affairs educator seeking to develop their technology digital identity and citizenship competence (specifically achievement of the intermediate outcome, "proactively cultivate a digital identity presence and reputation that models appropriate online behavior and constructive engagement with others in virtual communities"[9]) could draw on the essays and resources featured in chapter 22 as the foundation for a personalized professional development plan. In addition to reflecting on discussion questions posed at the end of the chapter, the professional might also outline goals for discussing this topic with their supervisor, engaging in virtual dialogue with others exploring this issue on the book's social media platforms, and participating in relevant professional development opportunities sponsored by regional and national professional associations (e.g., webinars or conference sessions sponsored by the NASPA Technology Knowledge Community).

Although we developed this book with multiple target audiences in mind and hope readers will find this volume a valuable professional development resource, ultimately its potential to serve as a guide for individual as well

as organizational reflection, action, and transformation is a function of the reader's willingness to engage in the messy, uncomfortable, and risky work of dialogue across difference. Collaborating with peers near and far to enact the professional development strategies described in this section will likely increase both one's comfort and skill in facilitating conversations on contested issues within the student affairs profession.

Conclusion

The book's overarching goal is for readers to consider the following questions: What is your level of understanding of these moral, ideological, and political issues that student affairs educators regularly encounter? What is your personal responsibility in addressing these issues? What are the rationales behind your decisions? What are the theoretical options you might choose and why? How do your responses compare with those of colleagues?

While the book is situated in a particular moment in history, processes of civil dialogue transcend this particular moment; readers can draw upon the dialogic lessons of the book to address contested issues not featured in this volume. Because higher education is about learning, it is important that difficult dialogues about contested issues be framed not in terms of the abstract ideals but in terms of the concrete goal of creating a challenging and enriching educational experience for the entire campus community. We suspect some of these issues and arguments advanced in this text will make readers uncomfortable. Our hope is that readers will individually and collectively work through the discomfort and engage in actions focused on fostering safe, equitable, and civil learning environments.

Editors' Note

Many contributors use the pronouns they/their/them when referring to an individual to reflect multiple identities. We retain authors' varied usages to honor author preferences.

Notes

1. Giridharadas, A. (2018). What woke America and great America can learn from each other. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/opinion-giridharadas-outrage-america_us_5aaa93b6e4b073bd82929695

2. Smith, N. (2017). When civility really means silence. *Huffpost*. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nadine-smith/when-civility-really-mean_b_9632602.html

3. What is civility. (2018). *Institute for Civility in Government.* Retrieved from https://www.instituteforcivility.org/who-we-are/what-is-civility/

4. Ibid., para. 1.

5. Spath, T., & Dahnke, C. (2018). *Institute for Civility in Government.* Retrieved from https://www.instituteforcivility.org/who-we-are/what-is-civility/

6. Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Learning partnerships model: A framework for promoting self-authorship. In M. B. Baxter Magolda and P. King, Eds., *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (pp. 37–62). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

7. ACPA & NASPA. (2015). *Professional competency areas for student affairs educators.* Washington DC: Authors. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/ACPA_NASPA_Professional_Competencies_FINAL.pdf

8. ACPA & NASPA. (2016). *ACPA & NASPA professional competencies rubrics.* Washington DC: Authors. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/ACPA_NASPA_Professional_Competency_Rubrics_Full.pdf

9. Ibid., p. 33.