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Inclusion and Social Justice as Peacemaking within Higher Education

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The Journal of Social Encounters has been described as “a venue in which we can encounter one other and build the common good together” (Okumu & Pagnucco, 2017, p. ii). In many ways, this description of the Journal mirrors what we endeavor to accomplish in higher education in the United States in general, and in Catholic higher education in particular. While our mission statements vary, and how we achieve the mission will look different on all of our campuses, there is widespread consensus that higher education provides a space wherein people can learn together for the good of supporting our nation and the global community. In other words, education in the United States – both public and private – builds the common good both nationally and globally. There may be rampant disagreement about how one defines common good, but the core of the higher education enterprise in the United States is clear and compelling.

The notion of education for the good of a democracy can be traced back to the earliest leaders in the United States. In 1786, Benjamin Rush, considered one of the “Founding Fathers” of the United States, stated, “Freedom can exist only in the society of knowledge. Without learning, men are incapable of knowing their rights, and where learning is confined to a few people, liberty can be neither equal nor universal” (1798, p. 1). This statement was a reflection of Rush’s beliefs in education for all – including women – his opposition to enslavement, and his advocacy for the enlightenment movement. Rush’s views that real freedom demands an educated citizenry, and his support for the democratization of higher education, remain powerful today.

At a time when dialogue within the United States is increasingly polarized and conversations among countries are primarily self-interested and self-serving, education also plays a critical role in promoting, maintaining, and sustaining peace. It is well documented that “the most effective forms of peace education go beyond interpersonal and intergroup encounter, but also address underlying causes and structural inequalities that can fuel conflict within societies” (Smith, 2011, p. 31). As I think about my work as a leader in higher education and the mission and goals of the institution I am privileged to lead, I can say that creating a more peaceful, just, and compassionate world is critical to our work of supporting the common good by addressing structural inequalities.

Adding the work of peacebuilding or addressing structural inequalities to an already complex mission and challenging daily experience of a leader is daunting. And yet, as a leader, there is no way that I can turn away from that compelling call. It is widely agreed in research and practice that

Education is perhaps the most important tool for human development and the eradication of poverty. It is the means by which successive generations develop the values, knowledge and skills for personal health and safety and for future political,

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economic, social and cultural development (Smith, 2011, p. 17).

For me, as an American woman of color, the work of justice, the work of peace and the work of education are linked inextricably.

My own perspective as a leader has been shaped and fashioned based on my experience. I cannot attest to an understanding of what it means to grow up in the midst of war or ongoing violent conflict. However, I can readily understand and have been witness to what it means to grow up in the face of injustice and inequity. In my U.S. context, education has long been the greatest force to dismantling injustice, to opening up opportunity, and to crafting a way forward even in the most desperate of times. Yet it has also been dispensed unevenly and unjustly, and sometimes withheld, to the social, personal, and economic peril of those impacted.

Upon their arrival on U.S. soil, peoples of African descent routinely were denied access to education. The lack of formal education supported systematic disenfranchisement of people of African descent. As a result of this denial, however, education became highly valued and prized among the enslaved. Learning to read, often teaching oneself or identifying others in the community to assist, was conducted in secret to avoid harsh, life-threatening penalty. As the enslaved evolved communal priorities, education was chief among them and the intellectual capacity of the enslaved was evident as they built transformative and lasting structures like the historically black church, initially a religion without letters to reflect the lack of formal education among the enslaved (Hinton, 2011). Over time, however, African Americans were able to access education and began to build schools and the revolutionary system of historically black colleges and universities. Throughout the 20th century, much of the struggle in the U.S. around civil rights centered on access to education and full and equal participation in the education system.

This desire for education, and the powerful recognition of its capacity to affirm one's humanity, provide transformative opportunity and liberate the mind and body, has been a compelling legacy within the African American community.

This ancestral legacy as well as my lived experience means that I am eager to find ways to use our work, our mission, and our call from the Catholic Church toward justice, to remove structural inequities and give everyone an opportunity to succeed. According to this Journal's editors,

Peacebuilding involves many different activities and projects that address the causes of intergroup tensions, conflict and violence, both structural and direct, and that seek to establish both negative and positive peace, the absence of violence and/or the presence of social justice (Okumu & Pagnucco, 2017, p. i).

Thus, social justice is critical to peacebuilding.

At the College of Saint Benedict (CSB), our long involvement in the work toward social justice – or toward transformational inclusion – is our contribution to peacebuilding. In 1913,

the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict founded CSB to educate the daughters of the German immigrants. The college was founded on the premise that women deserve a full college education, an act of justice in and of itself. According to Sister Dolores Super, a former Dean of the College and Board of Trustees Member:

St. Benedict's Academy opened in 1882 with a 5-year course. The upper levels comprised "higher education" available to women at the time. CSB is a direct descendant of the Academy. The philosophy as stated in its first catalog—to educate the whole person—heart and soul; mind and hand. By the early 1900s, requests for sisters to teach in parish schools were growing. Sisters teaching in the Academy "hounded" the prioress, Mother Cecilia Kapsner, to establish a college for women by adding years to the academy. Their argument: We owe it to our sisters needed as teachers in the new schools. *We owe it to lay women deserving of a full college education.* (personal communication)

Yet such a commitment required the college to stretch and expand its reach, which it did at every opportunity. In one example from 1938,

Kathleen Yanes Waynes '42 and Gertrude Danavall '42 – the first two African-American women to matriculate at Saint Ben's – arrived on campus. The St. Paul chapter of the alumnae association objected. Some alums even threatened to withdraw their support of the college. But Sister Claire Lynch '30 [Dean of the College] replied with confidence:

Saint Benedict's professes to be a Catholic college. As such it tries to inculcate and live the teachings of the Church, which condemn racial discrimination as unjust, immoral, and unchristian.... We would be failing utterly to abide by Catholic principles were we to reject these young women who are living members of the Mystical Body of Christ.... In conclusion, I can only say that we are even more eager than our alumnae that our College retain its present prestige, but we are certain that our status as a Catholic college will be but improved by an act which is, after all, only outward evidence of our belief in Christian—not to say Catholic principles (quoted in Skoog, 2016, p. 22).

Our obligation to the women we serve today is no less than it was 100 years ago. The college's current mission remains faithful to the earliest vision of the Sisters: The mission of the College of Saint Benedict is to provide for women the best residential liberal arts education in the Catholic and Benedictine traditions. The college fosters integrated learning, exceptional leadership for change and wisdom for a lifetime.

We owe all of the 1,900 women we educate a full college education, within and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, we retain and enhance our prestige when we live, daily, our Christian and Catholic commitment condemning all forms of injustice and working towards equity. Eighty years ago, Sister Claire Lynch staked our claim as an inclusive community committed toward social justice and the common good. Today we are actively reclaiming that commitment.

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At this moment in time we are focusing on ensuring that every student at the College of Saint Benedict feels as if this is her home; that she belongs; that she has a voice; that she has a right to be here and a right to the full education we offer. Our Benedictine call to dwell in community enhances our obligation to be an inclusive community [see the Rule of St. Benedict <http://www.osb.org/rb/>.] Inclusion is not simply adding more students from a variety of demographic groups or economic levels. It means being willing to be transformed by the students who comprise our community. It means exploring our programs and policies and practices with an eye toward inclusive excellence.

Every young woman we serve and every professional who works at the College of Saint Benedict desires and deserves to be included in this community: to have a voice, to be treated with respect, to be valued, and to be included. It is our greatest opportunity, and a Benedictine imperative, that we respond accordingly.

The work of inclusion must be comprehensive, and it demands that we look at multiple dimensions and perspectives when we think about our campus and the students we serve. Certainly, economic diversity is and will remain a key consideration, as will race and ethnicity. Yet it is not enough to limit our gaze to those visible and/or easily quantifiable metrics. When we think and speak of inclusion, we need to think about geographic, spiritual and ability diversity. Sexual orientation and gender identity, along with diversity of thought and perspective equally merits our attention. If we commit to all having a voice in our community then it is essential that we think through the variety of people we serve and what they add, and expect from, our community.

To do the work of inclusion and social justice requires a number of partners and points of influence. Clearly, work in the classroom and outside of the classroom is critically important. Much of this work is underway on our campus, with faculty playing a leadership role in crafting an inclusive curriculum and equity-minded pedagogical practices. We continue to challenge ourselves to ensure we are nurturing a community that is culturally competent and striving toward inclusive excellence. We are actively exploring our programs, policies and practices to ensure they support inclusion.

A key partner and source of inspiration for this work at the College of Saint Benedict is our monastic community. How do we partner with them to think through and move this work forward? And, how do we engage with our partners who are external to our campus? One example of such engagement is the involvement of some of our faculty and students in a nonprofit that works with Somali refugees in our local community as they try to integrate into American society. A student's experience may be primarily on campus but by no means is it exclusively on campus. So, how do we engage with and support dialogue with our local and regional partners?

As we implement a new inclusion and justice oriented initiative, *BECOMING Community*, we will design and intentionally undertake a practice of ongoing community formation based on transformative inclusion [(for more information on *BECOMING Community* initiative see <http://www.csbsju.edu/news/mellon-2018>)]. Our goal for *BECOMING Community* is to

prepare and enable our students, faculty and staff to become agents of change by preparing them to dismantle oppression rather than simply learning about oppression. The subject matter will not be social oppression, but the processes of transforming oppression. We seek to make a substantive shift from the narrative of critique to the narrative of dynamic action. We seek the work of justice, to build peace among and beyond ourselves and our community.

BECOMING Community will enable us to move our institution into an intersection of fields, involving explicit anti-racism work as well as conflict resolution and community mobilizing work. This will allow us to include local community partners to ensure that our impact extends beyond our campuses. We will leverage our strength and history as a strong liberal arts institution to demonstrate the value of critical and creative thinking, problem solving, and asking and finding solutions to complex problems as we seek to create a free and educated citizenry [(for more information on BECOMING Community initiative see <http://www.csbsju.edu/news/mellon-2018>)] .

We do this work because we know that our internal successes exist within a complex and tumultuous world. No matter how well things are going internally we have to help our students understand and navigate the world around them. That is part of what we promise them when we say we offer an inclusive, transformative, Catholic and Benedictine, liberal arts education. Our work is not to insulate our students from the happenings of the world, but to help them learn how to encounter, respond to, and, when needed, transform those realities. We know that this work is influenced heavily by the world around us and that our work in preparing students is changing.

The work of peace, inclusion and justice is at the heart of education. Our work to ensure sustainable models in each of these areas is of the highest importance and a source of our purpose as educators. I find hope in the knowledge that things can change. I am the daughter of a woman who has never had a birth certificate because when she was born in North Carolina 89 years ago black births were not systematically recorded as they were not perceived as having value to the world. I am also the president of the College of Saint Benedict, a Catholic liberal arts women's college in central Minnesota. I reconcile and embrace those extremes every day and endeavor to ensure every young person who chooses can thrive because of her full inclusion in educational opportunity and success.

*The College of St. Benedict, a Benedictine women's college, has a unique coordinate relationship with St. John's University, a Benedictine men's college. Both schools share all academic programs. Each college has its own president, Board of Trustees and distinctive characteristics. For more information on this unique relationship between the two schools, see College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University "Coordinate Mission, Values and Vision," <http://www.csbsju.edu/academics/2017-2018-catalog/mission>.

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