

Chapter 24

Developing a Social Justice– Oriented Workforce Diversity Concentration in Human Relations Academic Programs

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ABSTRACT

There are limited human relations [HRL] programs in higher education in the United States, and even fewer that include an integrative concentration of social justice and workforce diversity. The purpose of this chapter will be, first, to identify the need for social justice and workforce diversity perspectives in HRL programs and then provide a philosophical and theoretical rationale for how an integration of these perspectives is critical to the advancement of HRL in praxis. Second, to develop students' awareness of ways that the organizational social culture operates to create social stratification and exclusion. Third, an experiential service learning component will be described as a necessary step for students to experience environments and contexts where social injustice is prevalent. The chapter will conclude with a proposal for a social justice workforce diversity certificate in HRL that recognizes professional competency and skill as a social change agent. This chapter advances the concept of organizational social justice (Byrd, 2012).

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will argue for social justice and workforce diversity perspectives as necessary and key components of a human relations (HRL) program. It should be noted that, for the purposes of this chapter, human relations will be denoted as (HRL) so as not to confuse it with the acronym (HR) most commonly used and associated with human resources. Human relations is a multi-disciplinary study as

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well as a professional practice that combines theoretical perspectives from social sciences, humanities, and organizational studies with the world of work and service (OU Planner, 1970). While the focus will primarily concern integrating social justice and workforce perspectives in the HRL academic program, it should be noted that in today's society where social injustice is persistent, achieving social justice goals is a universal concern in higher education contexts.

The discussion in this chapter should be of interest to program planners, developers, and coordinators who are responsible for developing, planning, implementing, and/or evaluating HRL programs. Program planners, developers, and coordinators are challenged to design content that prepares students to acquire the competencies to meet the challenges of a diverse workforce. Furthermore, social justice perspectives expose students to the realities of social marginalization and remind them that systemic, institutional, and organizational barriers that prevent full and equal participation still exist (Kelly, 2012). Educators looking for more critical content that forces students to think at a deeper level and experience personal growth and change should also find this chapter valuable.

Finally, practitioners and professionals across all industries and professions who are responsible for designing training programs, planning workshops and seminars, and creating professional development continuing education programs should benefit from reading this chapter. Leaders will gain insight on visioning future directions for a social justice-oriented work environment. The chapter will conclude by proposing a social justice workforce diversity certificate in HRL.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVES IN THE HUMAN RELATIONS ACADEMIC PROGRAM

Over two decades ago, a study by the Rand Institute predicted that cognitive and social skills needed to work with a diverse workforce would be included among key skills sought by employers (Gray, Heneghan, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000). The study further revealed that institutions of higher education were challenged in preparing students to develop these skills, to interact in diverse workplaces, and to be open to differing perspectives and worldviews (Hurtado, 2003).

Compounding this challenge is the recognition that some college students may not have had a significant level of prior interaction with some social identity groups, which further limits their skills to interact on a basis of social group understanding and mutual respect. Yet these students will be placed into learning groups and other scenarios where preconceived stereotypes obtained through media and other sources of miscommunication are their only basis of perception. It is disturbing, yet enlightening, that the college students entering academia with an unfamiliarity and lack of social interaction with diverse social groups will be members of the future workforce. Without facilitated dialogue in the learning environment that will help dispel these preconceived notions, students are likely to choose not to interact with diverse social groups; thus transferring this lack of understanding to the workplace.

Students with rigidly held stereotypes about diverse groups will most likely perpetuate these perceptions in the workplace (Hurtado, 2003). Social justice perspectives are needed to prepare students for the realities of dealing with the complex world of difference and to respond morally and respectfully to a multicultural workforce. The goal is to promote students' learning about themselves first as members of a rapidly changing and demographically diverse society and then to develop an intercultural comprehension of what it means to be a professional who provides service in response to the needs of this changing society.

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