Social Media Activism is Not Just for Students

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Facebook and Instagram now have live platforms where users can communicate in real
time with their favorite people. Youtube encourages channel owners to do quirky and interactive
activities on their channel to further engage users and let them into their personal lives. Snapchat
allows people to see into the everyday lives of their followers. Social media has become such a
powerful tool in society. Within recent years, we have seen the power of social media organize
people around a variety of causes and conflicts, especially within the realm of education.

There are national and global conversations that have sparked changed on many different
levels and many different topics with the influence on online engagement. Students have taken
on #blacklivesmatter vs #alllivesmatter in a public forum that has engaged many people across
the country. Student leaders brought national attention to the Fisher vs. Texas affirmative
action case with the hashtag #staymadabby. Black students challenged the narrative that they are
seen as a threat or harmful to police and society by sharing photos with the hashtag
#dangerousblackkids after the death of Jordan Davis. Undocumented students shared their
stories of the necessity of DACA with hashtags #WithDACA and #DefendDACA. Student
activism is a historical thread within the university experience, as it is students who often shaped
“local educational reform, transformed national political structures, and in more than a few
instances spurred coups d’etat,” (Boren, 2001, p. 3).
Social media activism is not merely posts on a website, but this form of engagement allows for the mobilization of a variety of voices to be heard to influence change; this is shown time and time again. However, social media activism is not just for students or individuals with no association to professional institutions. What about the professionals who support students in their efforts of reshaping the world? Realistically, the values of educators do not magically disappear when they step foot onto their campus. With the growth of social media activism, institutions are more attentive to the social media accounts and posts of staff and faculty members. There has been a more critical look at what educators post and say on their social media. More now than ever, professionals must weigh the risk of being socially engaged with the possibility of losing their jobs even when social media is used as a “personal” realm of engagement. Global citizenship and social change requires risk. Joel Zylstra states that “student affairs educators must consider their work with students as a means of advocacy rather than simply building awareness about issues” (Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p. 382). Student affairs professionals have a tremendous power in dismantling systems of oppression and they should be supported in their efforts of doing so, not silenced.

Educational leaders must catch up with growing media trends and honor the broad learning opportunities that technology and social media bring to the learning environment. Ana Martinez Aleman speaks to the influence of social media as a tool of learning, stating “Perhaps the real value of social networking media for learning is the extent to which it can complement, extend, and transform cognitive skill sets trained and drawn out by traditional instruction” (as cited in Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p.139). As a profession with core competencies related to diversity and inclusion and technology, higher education institutions must continue to challenge the pervasiveness of institutional racism, harmful professional norms, and silencing behaviors in order to actively listen and influence change within educational spaces.
As the student population gets younger and more diverse, they will want to see their educators advocating on their behalf through social media activism. This cannot happen if higher education professionals are reprimanded for using their voice on social media to advocate for social justice and against systems of oppression that not only impact their students, but also influence their daily lives. In reference to free speech on college campuses, Tobias Uecker argues that, “Administrators of colleges and universities must recognize that acting as free speech regulators or civil discourse referees relinquishes the education power of conversation” (Magolda & Magolda, 2011, p.360). It is ok for diversity education and advocacy to reach beyond the work of the classroom and the multicultural center and into online communities and social media spaces. Embracing “theory to practice” efforts means allowing professionals the ability to use their voice despite the risk.

There are grave implications for advocating for social justice; who gets to decide what is socially just and what topics are worth advocating for? In allowing professionals the space to share their beliefs and engage in social media activism, it also opens the door for professionals to share language or beliefs that are oppressive. This can be assessed holistically with consideration of institutional needs and values as well as student needs.

There is not a definitive definition for the work that higher ed professionals do; the responsibilities and interactions are vast and ever changing. In a complex web of higher education and institutional environments, we are tasked with being one of the many factors in helping students develop. Topics of race, equity, and social justice are unavoidable in the efforts of educators to support students in their growth towards becoming global citizens. In their support of students, educators must also be able to advocate for their own rights and freedoms without fear of being shunned out of the profession or losing their jobs.
References
