

Democracy's College

Episode 6: Scholar Activism and Self-Care

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Chaddrick Gallaway from OCCRL talks with Dr. Stephen John Quaye, an associate professor in the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Miami University in Ohio, about scholar activism and self-care.

Chaddrick Gallaway: A great deal of your scholarly work has focused on student identity development/engagement across diverse learners in higher education. In particular, the experiences of students of color and fostering inclusion on a predominantly white campus cut across your research. Do you feel there has been a greater alignment between institutional rhetoric on commitment to diversity and the lived realities of students of color?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: I would say yes and no. I definitely think we are in an era where more institutions are thinking that they need to do a better job of not only espousing diversity and inclusion values but actually enacting them. So, I think of my own campus, Miami University, where we have a diversity mission statement. I think for many students they are wondering: What does that look like in practice? We have a new president who I think is trying to concretize some of those ideals. I think it often still feels like rhetoric for students because we know about how the outcomes among students of color in particular are different than that of their white peers. We see that they are having different experiences with campus climate that are still oppressive toward their identities. We see that trans-identified students are also experiencing high rates of murder in our society. I think when you look at the lived and day-to-day realities of people's lives, some of that rhetoric is not in practice. There is still more work to be done in that area. I think some of the ways in which we can do that is by listening to students and responding to what they need. For example, student activists have been telling us for decades that they need their institutions to align better with their values, their identities, and who they are. Yet they are still not that in practice. It is incumbent on us to just listen to what students have to say and try and create the campus environments that are better supportive to their various intersected identities.

Chaddrick Gallaway: How can individual departments move from that rhetoric to practice piece?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: When I think of faculty, one of the ways in which tenure-track faculty are rewarded is through the promotion and tenure processes. I think one way in which to do that is to be more explicit in aligning our reward mechanisms to the work that faculty are doing to better meet those students' needs. I think rewarding in better ways would help with some of that. That is one important way in which to do that. I also think about our curriculum in our classrooms, like aligning our practices with the readings that we choose. Are we looking at readings from people of color and other minoritized identities? Are we doing our own work as faculty and educators in reading work that is from women of color, people of color, and trans-folks? I think some of that happens in that way too.

Chaddrick Gallaway: Across many college campuses, over the past few years, there has been increasing unrest as racial tensions deepen. In your work you assert that including student voice is connected to higher education as public good. More specifically, can you speak about contemporary student activism on college campuses post-Ferguson and share details on any of your recent work on student activism?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: My colleague Chris Lender and I have embarked on this study around trying to understand what student activists say they need from administrators to feel supported in their activism. A lot of students/student activists say that administrators are often more resistant towards the more public, bold, more disruptive protests, that they are more easily able to reward things like community service, service learning, and Chris Lender has a piece that is under review and that I think speaks to this element. For me, I think the way in which I hear student activists say some of the things that they say to me seem so easy. They want administrators to just show up, and when administrators showed up to some of the things that they were doing, it meant a lot to them. I think that is one. I also just think getting out of the way, not creating red tape or bureaucratic processes that stand in the way of what student activists are trying to do, is another thing. We have to look at the identities of these activists. On the one hand, and I mentioned in this in my talk earlier, you have black student activists and then you have sexual violence prevention activists who both engage in activism but often are moving in parallel movements. To what extent do they intersect and cross in the work that they do? I understand that history has largely excluded people of color from sexual violence activism. So I know why it happens, and at the same time, Chris and I are interested in understanding: What is the intersection between these two movements? Are there ways that they can connect to build more coalitions that can tackle the intersected issues that they are addressing, jointly?

Chaddrick Gallaway: In your first response, you stated that faculty and admin need to do a better job of listening to students on college campuses. In terms of activism, do you feel student activists and their wants and needs and their form of activism is different? Or how is it different than what administrators or the faculty may want or code as activism?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Student activists have created these lists of demands for administrators. One of the things that resonates most with me is this need for having more counselors of color, for example. That is an instance where I can see some of the needs are emerging. To use a concept from critical race theory, interest convergence. It is in the best interests of institutions to have generally more counselors. [For example,] mental health issues, I do not know that it's on the rise per se, but I think the stigma attached to mental health is not as strong as it used to be. So I think people are more okay seeking help for mental health issues. To me, because we know that is happening, this is a case where I think the interests can converge, where institutions know that they need this, students of color are saying they need more counselors of color, and I think it behooves an institution's campus administrators to do what they are saying. Ultimately, having more counselors of color will enable student activists to feel that they can actually take care of themselves in the midst of activism, which will ultimately then increase their outcomes, and then they will then persist on college campuses ultimately toward graduation.

Chaddrick Gallaway: Thank you. We are going to shift gears just a little bit, but not too much. One of my areas of research is intergroup dialogues. Your research in this area has noted a very nuanced area, especially as white students respond differently to these discussions when facilitated by members of their own race. As such, what do you consider the best strategies for preparing dialogues along racial

realities? Why is it critical for white faculty to learn how to facilitate exchanges about race among learners in their course?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: The reality is that students are coming to our campuses with the need to engage these issues. Our world is such that there is a lot of pain and hurt that is happening in our society, and so people/students need the space to process that. I think we often, as dialogue facilitators or faculty, we underestimate the level of preparation that is needed to engage in these dialogues. I cannot tell you how many of my colleagues say I have no idea what to do when a student brings up a topic of race, or transphobia, or Islamophobia, but they are so woefully underprepared. It is because we are not trained as faculty to teach, but we are trained as researchers. For me, [one] of the things that I have learned from my research that is important to preparing is one, doing our own work in this area, reflecting on our identities, our subordinated identities, our dominate identities, the areas in which we experience privilege and marginalization. Thinking about how who we are influences our ability to facilitate these dialogues. Thinking of the readings that we use in our courses: Who are the authors, and what identities do they hold? Structuring racial caucus groups or caucus groups of other identities [when] there are times that people need to be in community and space with people who identify similarly as them, before you bring them across different dialogues. Also, thinking about our stories and how our stories are intimately connected to what we are experiencing in the dialogue space. More often than not white students are not going to see their place in racial dialogues because they have been socialized to think they do not have a race. We have to do some work to help them see that white is a race and what is their role in these dialogues. That is why it is important to link to the second part of your question: Why white faculty, in particular, need to facilitate these dialogues. Because they are able to connect with white students in a way that people of color can't. It also helps remove some of the extra labor and onus that is placed on people of color for being the ones to engage issues of diversity. By white folks doing it, I think they are able to talk about whiteness and race in ways that white students hear, because they share a similar race system. That is why it is also important that they participate.

Chaddrick Gallaway: As the new president of the American College Personnel Association, during the March convention, you recently unveiled a strategic initiative on racial justice. ACPA has long been known as an association that values social justice and even has the tagline of social-justice educators. Can you share more about the new strategic initiative on racial justice, in terms of next steps?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Yes. For me, one of the biggest next steps is in collaboration with ASHE, the Association for the Study of Higher Education, [with] President Shaun R. Harper, we are offering a racial justice presidential symposium in September. I think it will be one of the first ways in which to unveil and make some of these steps around a strategic imperative on racial justice concrete and tangible. That will be a space in which to do that. I have had conversations with Shaun too, as well as having some healing and self-care sort of like work, during the symposium as well. That is one immediate next step. I also just think as far as next steps go, it is important that people know that we are choosing to focus on racial justice at this time in our association because race matters and because we are centering the experiences of people of color at the intersections of their other identities. We believe strongly in the importance of how people of color need their voice and their stories to be centered. It is okay to focus on that, and it doesn't mean that other identities do not also matter at the same time. Inherently, when you choose to focus on something, you prioritize it. The backlash is that: Well what about X, Y, and Z? And the reality is to me it is not an "either or," it is a "both and." We can center certain people for right now and also still continue to do the work in other areas too. To me that is another immediate step.

Knowing that we are centering these people of color experiences and also trying to figure out what it is that they need, what it is that we need, in order to feel like we can live as full members in our bodies. To me that is like another place. And then lastly, I would say I think thinking about our members and our governing board, and what their needs and skill sets are around engaging in racial justice. As members of society, I think race is one of those topics that we still struggle with to talk about openly. There is a lot of fear and hesitancy around it. I think we are going to have to do some work around helping people understand what their role is in this. Where do they see racial justice fitting in into their day-to-day work? How do they develop in this area? I think sometimes we focus a lot on skill development, when in reality we need to focus on who we are as people. Doing our own work and understanding the ways in which we are limited and might perpetuate the very systems that we try to dismantle. I think some of that self-work is also going to be critical in this imperative.

Chaddrick Gallaway: I guess I am just intrigued. I do not know if you have the answer to this question. How do we get people to do that self-work?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Yep.

Chaddrick Gallaway: We come to the convention once a year, and there might be other major things that go on in between there. In between times of convention this year to next year, to the year after that, and focusing on racial justice, how do we get people to do that critical self-work at their home institutions?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Yes. I do not know. The reality is that: a) they need to be motivated to do it. I think people invest time in things they care about. If I am somebody who as this gender, man, I do not think a lot about gender. Part of my responsibility is to do my own work in that area, which means not relying upon women to tell me about gender. There are a lot of readings at my fingertips that I can read myself and learn about and then show up in places and engage. I think part of that has to be that you have to be motivated to do that own self-work. The other piece is restructuring and thinking differently about conventions. For Houston 2018, we specifically want to do some racial justice work at convention. That might mean not having 50-[minute]- or hour-long proposal sessions, but actually spending three to four hours in a racial justice caucus group or racial justice work, where you are actually engaged in a long process of doing some of this work around racial justice. That is some of the ideas that we have on the table as to what to look for and what convention might look like in the future.

Chaddrick Gallaway: That sounds exciting.

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Yes, I am jazzed about it. We fall into this rut of doing things the same way all the time, and if we want folks to be invested in this, why not create space at convention for people to take some sustained work in this area?

Chaddrick Gallaway: Much of the discourse regarding campus climate, collegiate experiences, making engagement and educational attainment equitable has largely been focused on the four-year college context. Can you talk about the importance of the community college sector relative to diversifying the post-secondary educational pipeline as well as commenting on issues of accountability for providing culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive campus climates, and equitable student outcomes?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: I will start off by saying that I am not going to sit here and pretend that I know enough or a lot about community colleges to give an educated response in this area. It is not something

that I study or spend much time thinking about. Know that my answer comes from that place. I just wanted to own that upfront.

It feels like community colleges are lauded as like this place where any student can have access to. I wonder sometimes if we laud community colleges as this panacea for equity, in that it is open for lots of different people, when in reality to what extent do we fund and resource community colleges to the extent that we do four-year institutions. My guess is that they are not actually given the resources they need to actually do the work that we expect them to do. It feels like this panacea that we are hoping will provide broad educational outcomes, when in reality, because they are so underfunded, I do not know that it actually meets the goals that it sets out to do. I think we place a lot of expectations on community colleges. They are supposed to bring in all of these students, they are supposed to do diversity work, and I wonder if we expect too much and then do not actually give the resources to make those things happen.

Chaddrick Gallaway: What call to action would you like to issue, for those listening today, who want to take an equity-minded approach and produce socially just practices in two- and four-year institutions of higher learning?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: One is to not be a bystander when they see things happening. One of my biggest pet-peeves is when I am sitting in a faculty meeting and somebody says something off the wall that is racist or sexist and I challenge it or I call it out and then after the meeting one of my white colleagues says, "You know what that person said was really messed up. I am glad that you said something, I wanted to say something but I didn't." I am like: Why are you telling me after the meeting? It doesn't do me any good for you to tell me how you noticed that this happened at this meeting but then you chose not to say anything. It is almost like you are searching at that point for points from me. It is like: "Hey, I am a good ally. I saw this happening." The reality is: Let us say something in that meeting. That is one thing, when we see something happening, particularly when we hold more dominant identities, we should say something, in part because it removes the onus from people with minoritized identities from doing all of that work constantly. So that is one call to action, to use our voice to speak out and challenge oppression when we see it happening.

Chaddrick Gallaway: I do not know if we are going to get to this in the context of this question and answering session. For those people, who are in those spaces and who maybe want to speak out, can you speak to how you speak out and how you choose not to be a bystander?

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: I do not know if I would have used these terms at the time that I did it. To some extent there is oppression that is happening, and that at a certain point I chose that I was no longer going to be complicit in my own oppression. For me being complicit in my own oppression means me not speaking out on my behalf when I see things happening. Yes, it could be scary; it could be fearful; I might get backlash; I might get "eye rolls" and all these nonverbals. The reality is I feel worse at times when I do not say anything when I feel like I should have. Nobody is going to save me from anything. If I choose not to speak out, I am still being complicit in my own oppression, because I did not let someone know that what they said was problematic. To me it is when I made the conscious choice of "Other people are going to oppress me, but I am not going to be complicit anymore in my own oppression." That means that I am going to use my voice to challenge things that are happening.

Chaddrick Gallaway: Again, thank you so much for doing this podcast today.

Dr. Stephen John Quaye: Yes, I appreciate it.

For more information about scholar activism and self-care, we recommend that you visit Dr. Stephen John Quaye's [website](#) at Miami University for a list of publications and additional readings. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrl.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occrl. Tune in next month when Dr. Anjalé Welton from OCCRL talks with Dr. Linda Tillman from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill about cultivating the gifts and talents of faculty of color. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.