

Social Justice Education In Higher Education: A Conversation With Dr. Susana Muñoz

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Abstract

The following is an interview with Dr. Susana Muñoz, an Assistant professor of Higher Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her dissertation, entitled “Understanding college persistence issues for undocumented Mexican immigrant women from the New Latino Diaspora: A case study,” was funded through the Association for the Study of Higher Education/Lumina Foundation dissertation fellowship. She was also awarded the Iowa State Research Excellence award for her dissertation research. Through this interview she shared how she came to doing social justice work, and specifically how her work in student affairs drove her research interest on the experiences of undocumented Latino/a students and how they navigate higher education. Through this conversation Dr. Muñoz argues that Higher Education policy makers and administrators could/should be doing more to influence federal and state policy regarding undocumented students.

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Interview Conducted by: Andres Lopez

Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis (JCTP): Can you think of the salient experience that guided you to the work you are currently doing?

Dr. Muñoz: I was working in student affairs and I got a phone call from a friend about a student who needed assistance. My friend went on to explain that the student she wanted to refer to me was undocumented. Because I was working for a federally funded program, I knew I couldn't assist this student in an official capacity, but told my friend that I would be glad to assist and made an appointment to meet with the student. The student never showed up to our meeting. This experience caused me to ask myself, how do undocumented students navigate college campuses and the resources available to them? As a Mexican immigrant, I never thought about the many privileges, which my legal status affords me. So I began to question more specifically how colleges and universities are structured in ways that disallow undocumented students and other minoritized populations from fully embracing their many social identities.

JCTP: How would you describe the current state of immigration issues in higher education?

Dr. Muñoz: Fast paced, it is changing everyday. While there are certainly a number of colleges and universities deemed "DREAMer friendly," I would argue that higher education can do more to influence federal and state policies impacting undocumented students. Student affairs administrators, faculty, students, and college presidents should all be enraged by what is happening in states like Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, that have outright banned undocumented students from attending college. In many ways, these states are essentially "resegregating" the South by excluding undocumented students from obtaining a higher education degree. These students did not choose to be undocumented, just like you and I did not choose our ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Yet, students who just want to continue their education are punished, excluded, and shamed for not having nine digit numbers associated with their name. If we don't stand up and speak out in support of these individuals, our inactions,

our silence has grave implications for the future of higher education. Higher education can no longer afford to be a bystander in this conversation; we either believe in equity or we don't.

Last summer, President Obama signed an executive order entitled Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which allows eligible youth to defer deportation for two years and obtain a work permit. As more and more college students receive their DACA card, I'm also wondering what colleges and universities are doing (if anything) to proactively support these students during their job searches. I've heard stories from DACA recipients who don't feel comfortable accessing Career Services because they perceive this office as inept to address their needs. It frustrates me when I don't see colleges and universities proactive about societal issues like this one. As an idealist at heart, I would love career counselors to convene together to address this issue, to ask what resources and strategies can be provided in order for DACA recipients to successfully navigate employment, and ask how Career Services can provide education to their top employing agencies. If this is happening, great! If not, then I hope it only takes one DACA recipient to ask these questions which will result in change and action.

In reflecting upon my work with undocumented youth, I do feel like we have made some strides in higher education thanks to the activism and organizing conducted by youth, community members, and allies. We celebrate the small victories like in-state tuition policies in 14 states. Immigration youth activist groups have sprouted in states like Arkansas, Kentucky, and Hawaii, and Freedom University in Athens, GA was created as a form of resistance to the anti-immigrant policies passed by the Georgia Board of Regents. However, I do not think we have done anything radical to examine the structures of higher education, which perpetuates systems of inequity. Higher education should be at the forefront in addressing these societal issues.

JCTP: In the last ten years, what changes (both good and bad) have you witnessed in social justice work? In the next ten years, what do you consider to be of utmost importance in social justice work?

Dr. Muñoz: About ten years ago, I was fresh out of my master's program in Student Affairs in Higher Education working on recruitment and retention of students of color at a predominately white campus. While more frameworks have been developed and there is relatively more willingness to discuss issues of diversity and equity, I often feel like we're having the same conversations today that we had ten years ago but maybe repackaged in a different way. Yes, we have made some advances in the last ten years. If we are looking at numerical bodies, we have been successful increasing our enrollment and degree attainment numbers, but I would argue that our campus climate and systems have gone unchanged and unchallenged in many respects. Given the growing number of diverse students on our college campuses, should we be operating under the same system or do we change our ways of teaching, learning, and engagement which centralize diverse populations? Change is tough but necessary for progress. Sometimes my graduate students will make remarks about the fact that I am their first Latina professor/teacher that they've had in their lifetime. It's disheartening to hear this and given what we know about the Latina/o population, this should not be happening...it's unacceptable.

In terms of scholarly work, there has been a growing body of literature, of trends and topics with a more focused social justice lens, leading to more outlets for our work. However, I often question whether we are letting mainstream journals off the hook. We are not challenging them about what they are publishing and are allowing them to reproduce a body of knowledge that is structured around maintaining the status quo.

I also wonder if social justice work is getting into the hands of the right individuals, the ones who are able to influence policy and change. Or are we preaching to the choir?

When I teach about social justice, my graduate students are excited about this body of knowledge but they want to know more about how to put it into practice as future college administrators. In the next ten years we need to ask ourselves, "Knowing what we know, how do we make systemic change?" How does one apply social justice into the everyday work? Where do we start making these changes? How do we make it more

practical, tangible, and hands on for individuals that are Provosts, Admissions Counselors, and Deans of Students? How do we get higher education institutions to say, “we are changing our practice due to this scholarship, and this is how we are doing it?” If we are not making changes in the overall fabric and mission of our institutions to create an inclusive campus culture, then the commitment to social justice is just a façade.

JCTP: Where should we be moving in the field of social justice in higher education? If you had unlimited funds and access to a research team, what projects would you begin working on?

Dr. Muñoz: I would begin by looking at the entire educational pipeline. What do we need to be doing when students are five years old in order to get them to college when they are eighteen? I would construct my own educational pipeline that applies the research we know about the K-12 experience and beyond. Culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and teachers need to be central in how we educate young people. At the higher education level, I would challenge universities to think about diversity, inclusion, and social justice beyond enrollment numbers. The number of culturally diverse bodies on a college campus should not be the sole indicator of success.

I’ve also toyed with the idea (in my ideal world) of making social justice part of the tenure and promotion process. I think myself and my colleagues should be held accountable for creating a welcoming campus climate for students through my research, teaching, and service. If social justice is truly a valued attribute on college campuses, then let’s make everyone accountable for working toward and living this value. So, if I truly had unlimited access to funding and a research team, I would investigate the feasibility of implementing this kind of change in the tenure and promotion process. Besides this idea, I would continue my work with undocumented college students by looking at institutions that are deemed “immigrant friendly.” This has come out in my current research and I really want to know what constitutes as an immigrant friendly college campus.

JCTP: What advice would you give to a new professional in the field who is passionate about doing the work of social justice?

Dr. Muñoz: Patience! This work is hard and you will struggle with yourself and with others around you. Social justice is not just about a lens that you bring to your scholarships but a lifestyle you choose to live – the way you eat, vote, teach, use transportation, etc. There will always be moments where people look at you and think you are crazy; you will be misunderstood. Not everybody is going to embrace and value social justice. So you need to have patience with others and yourself. You will be made to feel as if your lens is not welcome. Have patience with yourself and others.

JCTP: How do you feel that you've grown and changed during your time as a professor?

Dr. Muñoz: One of the things I continue to go back to is how do I use my voice without alienating others, but also use my critical lens and thoughts to create change. In my current institution, junior faculty are expected to contribute at faculty meetings and come ready and prepared with ideas and thoughts. It's a positive space to be in. However, I am not naïve and I know this is a political space/climate and I do need advocates and allies by my side. I have been more cognizant of the political nuances of this position; I have been able to navigate that in a way that does not compromise who I am and what I stand for. I'm growing more confident in my teaching and research abilities as time goes on. Honestly, it's easier to be a professor when your institution validates your research. My research was highlighted on my institution's homepage last fall and while it doesn't really matter in my tenure and promotion packet, that small act made me feel valued in a holistic sense.

JCTP: What has been the biggest challenge for you doing social justice work?

Dr. Muñoz: Fatigue, it is exhausting. Sometimes it is hard not to watch the news and not be like "did you just say that?" or even at meetings, I often find myself being triggered. With my triggers comes this internal conversation about how do I go about addressing these issues or comments in a way that is compassionate yet firm. There are days when I just don't have an ounce of fight in me, and there are days where I can freely express my concerns and facilitate a meaningful dialogue. There are also days where I make mistakes, fail at compassion, and shut down meaningful conversations. It's on

those days where I learn the most and I am reminded that social justice works requires humility and forgiveness. You also have to practice self-care; this work is exhausting. It requires a lot of reflecting and thinking about what social justice means to you.

JCTP: How do you sustain yourself in this work?

Dr. Muñoz: You have to find your support people. There are microaggressions happening everyday, there is racial battle fatigue. You need your people to talk to so you can unload or unpack and ask for guidance. I have my “sista scholars”. This is a small group of young Latina untenured faculty, who are my friends, my sisters, my conference roommates, and essentially, my academic family. There are times where I feel like a complete fraud and I often question if I’m “cut out” for the academy. I usually call up one of my sista scholars and they are quick to give me a nice dose of tough love as they help me work through some my self-doubt issues. One thing we did start this year was to develop a calendar of all of our writing and publishing goals for this semester. This has helped us keep track of who is working on what and I am usually more prone to ask about their progress when I know what manuscripts they are working on. It works for us. These women are my pillars of strength and everyone should have a group of friends in the academy where you can be your most vulnerable and authentic self.

JCTP: Who are some people who inspire you? And what books and scholarship do you revisit time and time again?

Dr. Muñoz: The students who are participants in my research, first and foremost. Their stories and what they go through on a daily basis, makes me realize what a privileged space I live in. I do not want the academy to change me so much that I do not recognize myself and my community does not recognize me. I think my participants have kept me connected to what is going on and attuned to what is happening on the ground level. They inform me about protests and problems at local detention centers – it just blows me away. They really put it all into context. They are willing to give up everything for this movement, to fight for their rights and rights for their family members. I do not think I have that much courage. I am forever changed by their stories.

They don't know this, but my students inspire me to do more with my work. They remind me why I am here, that my work is not really about me but a way to bring change and awareness to better my community. If there is one piece of advice that I can pass down to newly minted professors it is to not change yourself or be somebody you are not to do this job, because it does not honor anybody when you are not who you are in this capacity. This is a privileged space to be in, it is important to be you, your authentic self, while you are in your professor position, or any position for that matter.

As far as scholars who I revisit, Dr. William Perez's work on undocumented students really inspires me. He has really modeled for me what it means to be a public intellectual in terms of taking your work and disseminating to many public arenas. I appreciate his continued mentorship and it nice to have access to a senior scholar who is equally passionate about my research.

I am also a big fan of Tara Yosso's work. I remember reading her work in graduate school and feeling pride and inspiration by her community cultural wealth model. As a former student affairs practitioner, I've always felt some discomfort around the rhetoric we used for first generation students. Because their parents lacked a college education, students are positioned as having this abundance of deficits, which the institution has to fix. Yosso's asset model had a profound impact on my worldview. So when I read her book, *Critical race counterstories along the Chicanos/a in the educational pipeline*, particularly the chapter on college resistance, I was so moved, her work is really powerful. I used her as a framework for my dissertation. It gives voice to my experience and my students; it is empirical but also paints a picture we can understand. I also from time to time revisit Danny Solórzano's work on microaggressions.

JCTP: If you had to pick one memory that represents your philosophy, what would it be and why?

Dr. Muñoz: It is not really one memory. When I participate in a march or some type of activism, I see people that remind me of home, my cousins, they remind me of community. Within my philosophy, I need to keep those voices central to my research and teaching. I need to help and find a way to bridge my research to my people. Keeping

my community in the forefront, making sure that my back is not turned to them, but that they are in fact always walking on this path, through the academy, with me.

JCTP: Is there anything else you want to add, perhaps another pearl of wisdom?

Dr. Muñoz: It is very important that you do your own work on yourself. You must critically examine your own cycle of socialization and truly intellectualize how you came to know social justice. You will be asked why you engage in social justice, and so pinpointing how you arrived to this juncture is crucial. However, knowing yourself and working through your own past learning takes time and reflection. It's easy to help others work through their own biases, privileges, and racism. But you cannot effectively help others through their own struggles if you haven't worked through your own stuff first.

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