2018

Modify and Adjust: Senior Inquiry as a Transformative Whole-School Program for Race and Social Justice

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Citation Details

Kulak, A., Dougher, S., Lupro, M. M., & Taylor, S. (2018). Modify and Adjust: Senior Inquiry as a Transformative Whole-School Program for Race and Social Justice. The Journal of General Education, 67(1), 122-135.
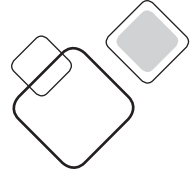
Modify and Adjust: Senior Inquiry as a Transformative Whole-School Program for Race and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT | Senior Inquiry is a dual-credit bridge program partnership between University Studies and regional school districts. The partnerships with Portland Public Schools have prioritized serving first-generation students and other underserved populations. As the program has grown, equity concerns among the collaborative teaching teams prompted experimenting with a whole-school model at Jefferson High School Middle College for Advanced Studies while working within the frame of the course theme of Race and Social Justice. This article documents how the Jefferson Senior Inquiry team attempts to authentically address the accumulated systemic inequities encountered by students in our classrooms. Student-centered pedagogy must be modified and adjusted to meet students where they are. Using the example of a summer assignment and engagement with visionary fiction, we show how we implement the inquiry model with our collaborative and iterative planning.

Senior Inquiry (SRINQ) is a dual-credit bridge program partnership between Portland State's University Studies and regional school districts. The partnerships with Portland Public Schools have prioritized serving first-generation students and other underserved populations. This article documents how the Jefferson Senior Inquiry team authentically addresses the accumulated systemic inequities encountered by students in our classrooms through a whole-school model that includes every senior student.

The story of the whole-school model is best understood as a critical engagement with the legacy of institutional racism in public education, its contemporary

manifestations, and our attempt to remedy the resulting educational inequities. Below we share how we co-created inquiry-based curricula through iterative, collaborative planning. We share some details about how we use our summer assignment and engagement with visionary fiction as examples of our pedagogical approach to generating equity. Our goals are to create opportunities for student brilliance to shine while at the same time addressing the *institutional* barriers to student success. We are working in a broken system, but together we created a healthy space for growth within it. We do not think about expanding our work in the sense of forcing it into other communities as a catch-all fix, nor do we wish to codify it into a commodity. We offer reflections on our own practice and our strategies for addressing paths to equity within our classroom while recognizing our shared institutional and systemic barriers in public schools dealing with a legacy of segregation and racism. We share what we have developed, knowing that each community has its own challenges and opportunities, but that without a wholistic challenge to inequity, change cannot happen.

Senior Inquiry for All: The Whole-School Model

Our experiences as the teaching team at Jefferson High School Middle College for Advanced Studies have shown us that by the time underserved or underprivileged students show up in their senior year of high school, assuming they have chosen to stick with a system that has not sufficiently supported them, they have likely internalized the systemic oppressions they have faced, developing negative self-images about their learning capacities. For all the reasons that make our school systems inequitable, the teachers they encounter at this stage are rarely adequately equipped to address the accumulated shortcomings of their educational journey. For example, imagine one of these underserved students has not found a register of communication that they feel comfortable using in a formal classroom environment, or negotiated productive ways of using their authentic voice in a classroom. Perhaps they have not effectively negotiated productive ways of using their authentic voice in a classroom, not having found the right register to be engaged as their whole self. They might show up with a look on their face that the teacher knows well—they have something to say, but there are blocks to feeling comfortable speaking up. If one is committed to educational justice, it is essential to facilitate space for educators and students to surmount those blocks together. Senior Inquiry experiences are structured to intentionally chip away at these blocks, so students can take ownership of their learning and meaningfully reflect on it. The community of educators also reflects on our learning, particularly at the intersection of our privileges and the disadvantages faced by many of our students, and take ownership of how it shows up in the experiences of the student described above.

As minors, high school seniors cannot be held responsible for the conditions that have them believing that they are not capable. Adults with institutional power emplaced those barriers, and that institutional power has historically dis-favored the first-generation and low socioeconomic status students we most need to serve. It is thus incumbent upon adult professionals to meet students wherever they are when they come into the classroom.

Dual-credit programs can serve as a bridge in two specific ways. First, providing an experience that familiarizes students with college culture and expectations helps students access the cultural and social capital needed to transition from high school to college. Second, in awarding college credit, dual-credit programs provide a track record for students that builds confidence in their ability to achieve college-level success. Senior Inquiry gets at these goals by mentoring and educating students so that they understand available resources and logistics involved in navigating college curriculum, as well as providing 15 credits upon completion of transferable general education credits. The Senior Inquiry Program aspires to counter the effects of systemic, institutionalized racism through student-centered collaborative learning in a supportive environment where the voices and histories of traditionally marginalized students are honored and emphasized within the curriculum.

This effort should also be understood in the specific historical context of Jefferson High School within Portland Public Schools and the City of Portland. Ethan Johnson and Felicia Williams (2010) document the former while Leanne Serbulo and Karen Gibson (2013) the latter in the *Oregon Historical Quarterly*. The presence of Portland's African American community has historically been constrained to the neighborhoods surrounding Jefferson High School and as such the school has long played a central role in the local black community. Calls to close Jefferson and subsequent disinvestment began in the aftermath of student activism in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Johnson & Williams, 2010) and intermittently persisted until the Middle College for Advanced Studies was put in place, and enrollment and graduation numbers began to rise significantly. At the same time, the surrounding neighborhoods began to undergo rapid gentrification (Serbulo & Gibson 2013), greatly exacerbating the economic inequalities experienced by many in the Jefferson community. It is in this context that the whole-school model was developed to serve every senior at Jefferson.

Before implementing the whole-school model, we used admitting criteria such as attendance, GPA, disciplinary data, and teacher feedback, which are traditionally thought of as indicators of future success. The seeming objectivity of attendance and GPA data can belie systemic impediments to student success; the apparent subjectivity of disciplinary data and teacher feedback could exclude students who might have blossomed in a course like Senior Inquiry.

When we made the shift to the whole-school model, we began to use this data as a means to balance the different sections of the class rather than as mechanisms of gatekeeping. In other words, we know that students who have experienced barriers to success in our classrooms should not all be grouped together; by ensuring even distribution across sections, we make it easier for each of them to connect with our learning community.

Senior Inquiry at Jefferson involves the entire school community. The building-wide efforts to give every student the opportunity to earn college credit (including a Freshman Academy, interventions from community-development organization Self Enhancement Inc., and the opportunity to take courses at Portland Community College) has dramatically improved the preparedness of incoming senior students, especially in their writing and growth mindset. Senior Inquiry, in turn, has been successfully serving as a capstone to the Jefferson Middle College experience by providing opportunities for collaborative action–based student projects rooted in collective inquiry. What happens in our classroom on any given day is also part of a temporal continuum that extends beyond the school day and year, acknowledging and engaging communities where students feel belonging. Meaningful student engagement in community is connected to their understanding of themselves as contributors who have something important to give back.

Background: Balancing Educational Equity with Expanding Dual-Credit Opportunity

Senior Inquiry is PSU/UNST's Freshman Inquiry (FRINQ) program adapted to the high school context. SRINQ has been a critical partnership between PSU and local K-12 districts from the beginning of the University Studies program in 1995 (Traver et al., 2003). Each SRINQ team is composed of two high school teachers and one PSU faculty member. The program currently serves students in six schools across four districts and is steadily growing in the number of students served (nearly 600 in the 2018–2019 academic year). Not until recently was the program offered to all seniors in any of our partner schools.

Our move toward a whole-school model at Jefferson started with our Race and Social Justice students' dissatisfaction with the fact that the demographics in the class did not match the demographics in the building. In this, they demonstrated their capacity to ask questions about the world and find answers, in part through showing what they already knew. Students who would be ideal candidates for the program had developed a belief that the opportunity was not for them.

Historically underserved students of color, individually capable but marginalized young black men, were opting out of Senior Inquiry. In order to make

good on our commitment to Senior Inquiry for All, we faced the challenge of creating a program for students who had internalized the idea that they were not the kind of person who could succeed in a college-level program, or could even harbor those dreams of success. We knew we needed to offer the opportunity not only to those students who had navigated the inequalities of the system in a way that conformed to dominant definitions of college readiness, but to students who had the human capacity to succeed in our program, that is, everyone. As we saw Senior Inquiry expand to more schools under the auspices of expanding interdisciplinary inquiry-based dual credit opportunities to underserved populations, we knew we had to first address the underserved constituents in the buildings where we were already present.

When it comes to educational attainment, some research suggests that the group most negatively impacted by institutionalized racism are African American males (Noguera, 2003; Sutton, Langencamp, Muller, & Schiller, 2018). Although the gender of which students fare worse varies depending on specific context (Sutton et al., 2018), the societal challenges such as higher infant-mortality rate (Noguera, 2003; Wallace, Green, Richardson, Theall, & Crear-Perry, 2017), disproportionate levels of incarceration (Noguera, 2003; Han, 2018; Taylor, Miller, Mouzon, Keith, & Chatters, 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2018), and higher rates of unemployment (Noguera 2003; Taylor et al., 2018) certainly accentuate the possibility that African American boys are less likely to thrive in an academic environment where the curriculum silences their experience. Notably, scholars find that social class does not protect African American males from the impact of institutionalized racism in education (Noguera, 2003; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). In contrast, other nations show that socioeconomic variables equalize testing scores (Rocha and Nascimento, 2018), suggesting that the racism experienced by students in the United States is particularly virulent.

The motivation for educational reform has been driven by the stated goal of increasing equity in learning opportunities (Vasquez Heilig, Brown & Brown, 2012; Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Brown & Brown, 2010; Journell, 2009). Findings of these analyses suggest that educational reforms thus far have only created the "illusion of inclusion" (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012). For example, references to historical figures of color are trivialized, marginalized and seen as "optional" for standardized testing (Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012; Anderson & Metzger, 2011; Brown & Brown, 2010; Journell, 2009). This "illusion of inclusion" could lead to a disparity in standardized test scores, since how students of color are represented in the curriculum matters and directly impacts their engagement and learning (Osborne, 1997).

Despite programs such as affirmative action, our system of higher education has systematically perpetuated discrimination and marginalization of students of color, in part because colleges and universities depend on standardized test

scores to rank and select students for admission to their institution (Kane, 1998; Walpole et al., 2005; Knoester & Au, 2017). Critically, reliance on standardized test scores reinforces the narrative that students of color, and specifically, African American males face when transitioning from high school to college—the curriculum has pushed them to the side, and they are excluded from the opportunities provided by a college education. However, one study followed a cohort of "borderline" students who were admitted to college and found that after the second semester they were actually performing better than average (Covarrubias, Gallimore, & Okagaki, 2018). The confidence provided by acceptance and support appears to help a great deal with academic achievement as students matriculate through college. Building confidence is also an essential aspect of the cultural and social capital shown to make a difference in retention and educational attainment (DiMaggio, 1982; Ashtiani & Feliciano, 2018).

Building confidence to navigate educational systems in someone whose very being has been consistently undermined by that same system requires culturally inclusive approaches in both college and high school. The same system that puts the onus of conforming performance on children is also resistant to adult efforts to create different spaces. To sum up the core principles in our approach:

> We believe that all seniors at Jefferson can learn actively at the college level through challenging and differentiated instruction that builds on their strengths as readers, writers, thinkers, and speakers;
> We believe that by actively collaborating as a teaching team, and by keeping student inquiry at the center of teaching and learning, we can respond directly to ongoing intellectual and social challenges faced by our students and our broader communities;
> We believe that our interdisciplinary curriculum on race and social justice centers the experiences of the majority of our students and sets them up to connect with local, national and international conversations about the nature of power and justice;
> We believe that this class creates opportunities for practicing self-advocacy, active engagement in community life, and the academic skills required in post-secondary education and work.

Be the Change We Want to See (in the Classroom): Teaming, Collaboration, and Inquiry

To start Fall 2018, we offered a guiding phrase from the Zapatista movement to our students for their consideration: "Queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos [In the world we want, many worlds fit]" (Marcos & EZLN, 2002). In addition to being an inspiring introduction to the vision of autonomy

and revolution embodied in the Zapatista movement, it told our students *you belong here* and reiterated our own place of belonging as teachers. Our buildings, rooms, and culture are not spaces where belonging is inherent for students or teachers, and we wanted to signal that we are intentionally fostering this belonging. The image of the solitary teacher in a classroom is ubiquitous: when things get overwhelming, it is not uncommon to hear the "I'm just going to close my door and teach" mantra. In our Senior Inquiry model, the door is held open, especially when things get overwhelming. We know that together we are stronger, and so we have to make sure our spaces foster the co-construction of the many worlds our students can make possible.

To be effective in this work, we have to model our requests of students in our collaborative practice. Our collaboration as a team of teachers begins long before we know who will be in our classes. We spend several days in the summer reviewing past curriculum, developing potential new assignments (which may or may not get used based on student interests and inquiry), building community with each other, and processing information that we receive from our school community—teachers, administrators, community members, and families provide information on the noncognitive contours of our students' lives that allow us to begin building systems of support and the foundation for our classroom communities.

Our administrative team at Jefferson makes it possible for us to convene as a Senior Inquiry team during the summer when we use the criteria mentioned above to balance the classes. We strive to create diverse, heterogeneous learning communities that push back against mechanisms that can develop tracked classes if not deliberately examined. Once class lists are populated we discuss possible resources and texts for the upcoming year. Two weeks before the start of school, we conceive, plan, and consider curriculum.

During the school year we have team planning meetings a minimum of twice a week (supported by the scheduling of common prep periods) in which, through evaluation of what we are learning from student engagement, we iteratively co-create new curricular opportunities. Our work as a team is a relatively high staffing expenditure, but it allows us to (a) cover more bases in intimately assessing responses to student engagement invitations, (b) foster each other's best practices and check each other's residual implicit biases, and (c) make visible the model of collaboration we are inviting them to engage.

When we create a curriculum designed to respond to the needs of students, we make a flexible structure that centers student voice and interest. Students need to know their voices are in the curriculum, so we cannot map out the entire year in any detail until we have met them and get to know them. Also echoed in Zapatismo philosophy, "We make the road by walking; we ask questions while we walk" (Marcos & EZLN, 2002).

We know the changes in framing we want to make. We know the content standards where students need to demonstrate proficiency. However, how we order the changes in framing and proficiency standards depends on many unknowns. In practice, this means staying alert to local (school-community), national, and current international events that impact our students' under-standing of race and social justice, as well as being alert to examples of art and culture that can express beauty and affirm their daily experiences of learn-ing. Our school has had a long-standing relationship with the Oregon Writing Project under the direction of Linda Christensen, thus our students will write—a lot, and in a way that matters to them. Ideally, they will want to write without us there, and in a practical sense, this means showing them the benefits of a variety of stylistic experiments, from academic research to informal letters and creative work. In addition to writing, we want them to read and think and speak and argue and inquire.

Our class meets for 90 minutes every day. When it functions best, students will begin class with their voices. We are there to help facilitate and build equi-table structures so that every student has the opportunity to contribute. One year, students began class with a talk show. Each day a team would be respon-sible for leading the class with their show. Students brought in guest speakers, live music, game show–style community builders, community announcements, and their voices on local and global critical events. While the shows were hap-pening, it allowed the three of us to circulate, welcome, and check in with stu-dents. Often, a topic would be brought up in a talk show that would require us to find materials that would deepen our students' understanding of an issue. We would model how we research before they would begin their own. More often than not, this would lead into some form of academic writing—but sometimes students would find other ways to communicate their understanding. Last year, during our examination of curated art in museums and galleries and art pieces up in public spaces, a student choreographed and filmed a dance piece at the Portland Art Museum. His movement, cinematography, music selection, and critique became an influential text in our classroom that inspired others to share their own "nonacademic" strengths and interests.

Starting Right: The Summer Assignment

We begin our work with the upcoming senior class when they are juniors, by giving them a summer assignment in their last week of school. Since this initial engagement takes place right before final exams, there is potential for the assignment to be met with dread rather than the excitement we hope it stirs. Thus, each year we revise the assignment so that it helps set the tone for the engagement we hope to foster. When this team inherited the program, the

summer assignment was a traditional read-a-novel, write-an-essay project. No matter how excellent the reading selection or how passionately the teacher posed the prompt, we were not generating a sufficiently successful onboarding process or assessment of student interests and writing abilities. We shifted our practice because we wanted to create an invitation that encouraged curiosity, rather than leaving students stuck with worries about merely reading the book and getting the assignment done. Since a summer assignment does not allow for instruction and possible intervention typical during the regular school year, it is either completed by the first day or it is not (by those who need instructional support). For the latter, the first day of class can become shame-filled instead of welcoming and celebratory. We endeavor to find a summer assignment that maintains the opportunity for students to introduce their intellectual selves to their teachers, so we restructured it to reduce the barrier to entry. Although we expect all students to complete the assignment within the first week and contribute to our classroom community, we know that there will be some that are not able get it done without initial support.

When we assemble for the first day, we focus on our humanity first rather than demanding students turn in evidence of their summer work. We ask: Who are you? How are you? We need to know each other if we are going to learn from each other. We let students know that the assignment is not due until a few days in the future, relieving those that did not walk in with it, and, honestly, frustrating those that did (who often vocalize this). When we flatten that hierarchy on day 1 we are sending a message: we are interested in what *everyone* has to say about this topic. We celebrate those that came in with it to help reframe those that feel frustrated. We get small groups going so that students can begin talking to each other about what they did or what they are thinking.

To begin the 2017–2018 Senior Inquiry cycle, the third year of Senior Inquiry for All, we devised a "Schema of Wonder" centering the question: What is justice? We asked students to capture a moment where they recognized justice (or injustice) in their own experience, and gave them a chance to see examples and plan their own means of presenting their ideas to each other. As a solid corollary to our theme of Race and Social Justice, students had multiple entry points to this question, using the events of the summer as the text to demonstrate their thinking through the creation of a product of their choosing: essay, podcast, presentation, visual art. As we evolved the summer assignment over the years, we were responsive to what students were—and were not—creating. With our most current iteration, we get more summer communication from students asking if it is all right to explore particular topics in risky and unique modes of expressions. Students greeted us with a robust array of their work, from essays to podcasts to slideshows, demonstrating their affinities and the contexts for their interests. Students shared their work during the first days back, centering

their voices in our classroom and establishing the tone of the community we are building.

After the first day of presentations, an English Language Learner (ELL) student who would not have made it into the class before implementation of the whole-school model stopped by for a hallway conversation, "I'm sorry I don't have my summer assignment done. I really wasn't sure what to do. But after today, after seeing these presentations, I have a really good idea now." This interaction lays it plain. The opportunity to take Senior Inquiry would not have been offered to this student based on the previous admission criteria. However, by welcoming them in, providing multiple entry points and examples, and letting them find their way into the work, their voice was activated in our classroom community. We all had the opportunity to learn from them and hear how their voice and experiences contribute to answering the question, "What is justice?"

Envisioning Social Justice: *Octavia's Brood*

We had been experimenting with visionary fiction as a curricular theme for a couple of years. At one point selections from Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown's edited anthology, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Movements* (2015), was the focus of our summer assignment. Because Imarisha is in our community, we knew we wanted to build the opportunity for our students to work with her as professor, writer, and editor. We anticipated the production of powerful pieces of writing because students would be considering representations of possible worlds beyond, and yet based in, the worlds they know. They are asked to read and inhabit imaginative and politically engaged spaces, while at the same time exploring their ideas about utopian and dystopian realities. We wanted students to create their own visionary fiction; we knew we would want to have these express a thematic exploration of our larger frame of race and social justice; we knew we would want these pieces to be used as items that are assessed as part of the process of evaluation for graduation. These ideas guided us in the construction of the unit. What would the day-to-day look like to get us to the products we had in mind? How could we maximize the use of such an exceptional guest in such a short amount of time? How could we leverage the high interest of creative, visionary fiction into usable work samples? If this unit was as successful as we had envisioned, how would we capture the data to show our students' progress in meaningful ways to administrators, parents, and to students themselves?

Before Imarisha joined our class, it was important for students to not only know her work but to have developed a critique of it—we wanted to be sure they were intellectually invested in the anthology. To do this, we modeled one story that had been a success in years past, "Token Superhero" by David Walker

(2015). We assigned the reading, then asked students to apply the University Studies goals as lenses while they read. We asked which lens would best fit this story and why. After reading, students wrote their reactions/connections, then quick-shared in class. From there, they grouped themselves, depending on the goal they thought worked best, to craft arguments. We then discussed as a class. The purpose of this discussion was not to claim a winner or a "right" way to read the text. Instead, it served as a democratizing invitation to show the complexity of the stories in the anthology, to model how they can be approached from many angles and defended appropriately, and to introduce how to engage the UNST goals.

After this modeling, students read two other stories in *Octavia's Brood.* We wanted them to have multiple experiences with the text. After reading, each student shared which story they liked, and worked through a thematic exploration in connection to one of the UNST goals. We served as scribes, creating a class list showing the stories that students selected. From there, students self-selected which story they wanted to read and create a poster together. The goal of the large-scale representation was for students to create a media pitch with a convincing case for the story to be picked up by a production company. In addition to visuals and key quotes from the story, students included the theme and goal.

Interest was high. *Octavia's Brood* was accepted as a rich text in the community and soon an editor of this text would be in the space with us. It is never enough to "bring in" a guest speaker, to have a stranger dip in and dip out. With Imarisha, our opportunity was rare, and we knew our students would produce exceptional work. When Imarisha arrived, students were ready. She lectured, then guided them through a writing process that utilized her professional time, leaving more of the workshop time to us. Students built a collective story based on a list of themes we co-created. When it came time for students to write their own stories, they were ready and eager. All of our preparatory work created an intellectual and social environment where students were excited to write for themselves. They were able to see themselves as writers and as visionaries whose stories and ideas would be taken seriously, not only by their teachers but by another author.

In the process of creating inquiry-based social justice–centered work with students, we experience as teachers a tension between needing to remain accountable and legible to the people who determine curricular strategy and policy for the school and the district, while at the same time staying very close to the differentiated needs of our students. The *Octavia's Brood*–based writing project serves as a case study for both the acknowledgment and partial resolution of this tension. While we do not necessarily see that social justice–based speculative fiction is going to suddenly become wildly popular at the district or

state level as a means to show institutional benchmarks of achievement, we do know how it meets the needs of our students across a range of the most relevant assessments. A project that nudges us all to imagine and speculate toward better futures is an ideal site to build a transformative learning environment where many worlds are possible.

Conclusion

As we continue to grow and change in this process and this program, we hope to bring in more educators who are curious and inquisitive about how our methods might serve their contexts. So many of our graduates reach back, sharing what they know of the worlds they now inhabit—letting students know that the community they are building together is larger, more inclusive and goes beyond what they thought possible before their SRINQ experiences. The students themselves, past and present, build the bridge between their learning and their larger worlds, and build bridges reaching between educational institutions and across the K-12/Higher Education divide. SRINQ students are showing up in our Sophomore Inquiry courses, pushing their PSU peers to collaborate better and consider social justice more deeply. The whole-school SRINQ model is only one intervention to address deeply entrenched and systemic inequalities that have grown up around public schooling in North Portland. It is but a single program that can only function in concert with visionary, administrative support, community support through wraparound services for young people, and students, and teachers, willing to take risks in their intellectual lives.

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SARAH DOUGHER is a writer, teacher, and musician currently teaching seniors in Portland High Schools through the University Studies Program at Portland State University. In 2016 she co-edited an issue of the *Journal of Popular Music Studies* on girlhood and popular music, and contributed an essay to *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music* (Routledge, 2016).

MICHAEL MOORADIAN LUPRO received academic training in intermedia art (San Francisco State University), geography (Portland State University), and American culture studies (Bowling Green State University). A sojourn through space led by Sun Ra, Major Tom, and Rocketman culminated in teaching "Race and Social Justice" and "Popular Culture" at Portland State University. They are increasingly engaged in research on the transformative pedagogies needed by the traumatized victims of post-colonial late-corporate capitalism.

SONJA TAYLOR is currently serving as Senior Inquiry coordinator for University Studies and teaches "Race and Social Justice" at Madison High School. She has an MS in conflict resolution and is a PhD candidate in sociology at Portland State University. She brings her passion for social justice and authentic relationships to her work as an administrator, instructor, and researcher.

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