**March 11, 2022**

**But What Can/Should *I* Do?**

We have all seen the Serenity Prayer someplace:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

The problem is, I’m not feeling serene.

I’m not feeling angry.

I’m feeling determined.

How is THIS for a quote?

***I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.***

For the last few weeks, I have been raising concerns about whether support for students with disabilities on campus is equally available and equally usable by students from traditionally marginalized populations. I have cited some concrete examples and, I hope, made a good case for saying that if disability services providers truly want to be active in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion we should begin by looking at our own policies and practices and taking active steps to make disability support equally available to all students with disabilities. In other words, I have spent two weeks pointing out the potential problems. But what is the solution? How do we identify what active steps should be taken?

I know what I *don’t* think is helpful. I learned a new term this week – “optical allyship.” It happens when folks espouse to caring about supporting others, but focus their efforts on demonstrating that caring and openness only in ways that show on the outside but don’t go beneath the surface. These surface efforts aren’t wrong, or bad, they just don’t accomplish much in terms of making a real difference for the marginalized populations with whom they are trying to align themselves. Optical allyship is behind concerns about having sufficient representation (numbers) of people from racial and ethnic minorities on panels or governing bodies simply because it is a visible recognition of support for the idea of diversity. The problem is that including such individuals simply because they are seen as representative of traditionally underrepresented groups does nothing to change to underlying structures that have restricted opportunities for those groups in the past. A reliance on numbers, or on visible signs of kinship with a cause, seems a hollow practice.

[I find it particularly ironic that folks from disability services would get focused on the surface, because we would be incensed if someone treated the population of persons with disabilities in that same way in order to look as if they were sensitive to our issues. If the Provost’s office was going to sponsor a program on DEI issues on campus, and they came to you to ask for a recommendation of a student with a disability who could speak about issues faced by disabled students on campus, and you were specifically told, “please limit the list of potential panelists to students in wheelchairs or to blind students who use a cane or a guide dog. We want this panelist to be visibly disabled. We want the audience to recognize that this institution is welcoming to disabled students on campus” – what would you say? (What would you say after you got through silently screaming in your head?!? GRIN)]

So, no. I don’t think simply recruiting larger numbers of students from traditionally marginalized groups to add to your caseload accomplishes anything if the services those folks find waiting for them are not fully accessible or usable to them. I have come to the conclusion that if we ask the wrong question, we will end up diverting our energies in the wrong direction.

If we ask, “Are students from traditionally marginalized populations fully represented in using the services of our office?” (in other words, if we ask whether the number/percent of students from those groups is what it should be when looking at the total school population) we are going to end up working to increase the optical allyship of our offices. The focus becomes increasing the number, not making substantive change. Nothing will be different for students with disabilities.

What if, instead, we asked,

**“Why are there not more students with disabilities from marginalized populations utilizing the services of this office?”**

I would guess that there will be no single answer to that question. But whatever answers you get can serve as jumping off points to making substantive changes.

• “They don’t know how to request services from your office.”

You need to think about how you can better reach out to the specific populations of students that you believe are underrepresented in your population. I read an article this week about a college that developed a chatbot – one of those automated response systems that you can reach online, ask a question of, and the bot will tell you the answer as if you were having a conversation with a real person. This institution, with its heavily Latinx community, has a chatbot that is bilingual. If you ask your question in Spanish, he’ll answer you in Spanish! Do you have materials that speak to what services you provide and how to access those services readily available in other languages and/or in places where the populations you are trying to better reach out to can be found?

• “They don’t have the documentation of disability that you usually require in order to qualify for services, and they have no way to get such documentation.”

Change the way you look at documentation to allow those students with less formal documentation or experience with disability services to still access services they need. And don’t stop there. Change what you have in writing and on your website to reflect changes you are making in your documentation protocol. It doesn’t do any good to be willing to accept alternative information if you don’t let folks know about that willingness.

• “They don’t get referred to the disability services office as frequently.”

When students are struggling academically on your campus, do faculty regularly refer them to your office to explore the possibility of a disability, or do they get referred to tutoring center to support academic problems assumed to be a function of poor academic preparation? If you find out that faculty aren’t always unbiased in the way they provide referrals, then maybe it is time you organized some in-service training to unbias them (I know that isn’t a word, but you know what I mean! GRIN)

I am guessing you will find other answers to that critical question when you ask it.

**“Why are there not more students with disabilities from marginalized populations utilizing the services of this office?”**

And I am guessing that each of those answers might suggest a course of action for you that could bring about substantive change – and you have to start somewhere. So pick one, and get started!

Here’s to making a (substantive) difference.

Janie

*Do you want to know who you are?  Do not ask.  ACT.  Action will delineate and define you.*

*Take Action.  An inch of movement will bring you closer to your goals than a mile of intention.*

*If someone were watching your day-to-day behavior, would they be able to see what you are working towards? What your goals are?  If the answer is "no" -- FIX IT!*

*One day or day one.  It is your decision.*