

“I Can Learn from the Past”:
Making the History of Higher Education
Relevant through Social Justice Education Pedagogy

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THE RISE IN COLLEGE ENROLLMENT throughout the twentieth century was accompanied by the growth of a profession focused on higher education administration, leadership, student affairs, and student development. Today, close to 300 graduate-level higher education and student affairs (HESA) programs exist nationally, and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) recommends studying the historical context of higher education as part of the curriculum.¹ Similarly, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) College Student Educators International and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Joint Task Force on Professional Competencies and Standards identified “the ongoing nature of the history of higher education and one’s role in shaping it” as a core competency.² Based on this guidance, most HESA programs include a required course on the history of higher education in the United States.

These courses, however, are not found within history departments and are rarely taught by historians. Many instructors took only one history of higher education course in their own graduate training and most HESA students last studied history in high school or in fulfilling a general education college requirement.³ Attitudes toward history often mirror those of the public at large, who “equat[e] ‘history’ with nuts-and-bolts factual material” and “an assembly of names, dates, and other facts about what happened in the past.”⁴ Historians, in contrast, view the study of history as a way to understand how and why people, institutions, and societies change over time.⁵ History of higher education courses, therefore, offer a unique opportunity to introduce historical thinking and analysis to future higher education practitioners and leaders, deepening their understanding of history as a discipline and their appreciation for the humanities.

The strong social justice emphasis within HESA programs offers a valuable hook for introducing the complexities of the past and the craft of the historian.⁶ Research on the history of higher education has expanded in the last decade and is beginning to reshape the field, including current explorations of the relationship between institutions of higher education, slavery, and racism.⁷ Also under reinvestigation are the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, long celebrated for expanding access to higher education. Recent scholarship has examined how this legislation simultaneously reinforced segregation and inequality through appropriation of Native American lands and restricted funding allocations for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).⁸ As instructors incorporate these and other emerging scholarly conversations into history of higher education courses, they offer students an opportunity to engage with history in complex and meaningful ways.

For this study, we surveyed HESA programs nationally to understand the current landscape of history of higher education courses and conducted follow-up interviews with twenty-eight faculty. Drawing upon this rich data, this article examines the ways in which history of higher education instructors worked through the lens of social justice to make history relevant for graduate students outside of the discipline of history and to foster an appreciation of history as an iterative process involving analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of past events.

Framework and Methodology

As researchers, including two HESA faculty (one a historian and one a former HESA practitioner) and two HESA graduate students, we approached this project with different relationships to the study of history. This manuscript is part of a larger project on teaching and learning the history of higher education within HESA programs that analyzes syllabi, course assignments, survey responses, and interviews with instructors and students. In this article, we concentrate on data from instructor interviews, using the following questions as a guide: How, if at all, do instructors teach the history of higher education from a social justice perspective? What pedagogical approaches do instructors use to engage students in understanding history as relevant and connected to their future work as higher education practitioners?

We used social justice education (SJE) pedagogy as a framework to examine what it means to teach for and about social justice within the context of history.⁹ SJE pedagogy is a justice-based, holistic approach to instruction that centers students' engagement in self-awareness development, content acquisition, and theoretical considerations of new and potentially contradictory information. The principles of SJE pedagogy address how instructors create learning environments, including providing opportunities for students to utilize their own experience as a valid form of knowledge, to examine the influence of systems of power on their multiple social identities, to develop their own self-awareness, to acquire new content, and to identify opportunities to enact change.¹⁰ These principles provided provisional codes for analyzing our data to understand instructor engagement with SJE pedagogy in history of higher education courses.

The twenty-eight interviewees represent adjunct professor, assistant professor, associate professor, and professor roles. They teach at a variety of institutional types across the United States, including Doctoral Universities - Very High Research Activity (R1), Land-Grant Institutions, Master's Colleges and Universities - Larger Programs (M1), HBCUs, and religiously affiliated institutions. These institutions span seventeen states. Ten are located in the Midwest, eight in the Northeast, seven in the South, and three in the West. Participants had different levels of experience teaching the history of higher education course, with approximately 40% having taught

it one to three times, 32% four to nine times, and 28% ten or more times. Although it was not a direct area of inquiry in the interviews, nearly every participant described social justice approaches in their pedagogy. Participants differed in how they discussed commitments to social justice as part of their lives and/or practice.

We refer to all interviewees by pseudonym. After each transcript was reviewed by at least two authors, we determined that twenty-four participants utilized some form of SJE pedagogy in their instructional approach. Author Catalano coded all twenty-four transcripts and Authors Schrum and Fay each coded twelve. All authors then compared codes as a mechanism of peer debriefing and credibility checking. Author Abbot participated in data collection and during manuscript revision to member check qualitative interpretations.

Findings and Discussion

We identified three overarching findings in our analysis. First, we found that the majority of instructors shaped the learning environment from a social justice perspective, whether or not they self-identified as “social justice educators.” Second, instructors used elements of SJE pedagogy to help students expand their preconceived notions about the discipline of history. Third, grounded in HESA’s focus as an applied field, we found that instructors made history relevant by applying learning beyond the classroom and helping students connect history with practice.

Shaping the Learning Environment

Most of the history of higher education instructors interviewed for this project were not trained as historians and some were assigned to teach history because it was the “course nobody wanted to teach.” They came to value this course, however, and invested significant time and energy in designing and revising syllabi to connect with the social justice emphasis found nationally within HESA programs. Interviewees made intentional choices to construct courses in ways that are consistent with SJE pedagogy and found this to be a powerful approach for engaging students in studying the past.

Interviewees often described their history of higher education courses as perpetually unfinished. As Ignatius shared, “This course

is always a work in progress...there is a huge amount of indirect instruction going on just by the hours and hours and hours that it takes...hours of reviewing materials and trying to figure out the right mix.” The sheer volume of materials instructors considered for inclusion and the effort to keep up with new publications proved both a joy and a challenge. Yosef, for example, imagined himself as a student when selecting content and designing assignments and in-class activities, stating, “I never teach a course that I wouldn’t want to take. Not only that, but that I wouldn’t want to take again and again and again...I’m in a constant state of learning, almost at my own expense sometimes.” Peter similarly observed, “we just have 100 pounds of stuff that needs to fit in a 50-pound bag and it doesn’t all fit in. So we’re just always constantly struggling.”

This struggle reflected, to some degree, the larger goals instructors brought to the course. Sidney felt strongly that “the way we teach history matters” and aimed to avoid teaching it “as teleological creep in reverse.” Patrick began by questioning the commonly told stories:

There’s a lot of pieces out there that valorize the field [of higher education] and talk about all of the amazing things that we’ve done.... And [yet] there are still very wide equity gaps that have persisted throughout the entirety of the existence of higher education in the United States. Are there things that speak to that as well? Are there things that students can read that don’t necessarily refute any of that, but say these things exist in parallel? We need to have our understanding informed by all of it.

Similarly, Yosef advocated for “an honest history of higher ed” and LaVerne aimed to help students acquire a “balanced understanding” of the many complexities woven throughout this history. Sam saw this course as an opportunity to “remove the rose-colored glasses and the ways in which [students] tend to romanticize higher ed... we want them to walk out being critical.”

Instructors discussed their strong commitment to blend SJE pedagogy with the discipline of history. Indeed, Antonia described herself explicitly as a “social justice educator.” Sidney framed her course around broad questions, such as:

How does our critical social justice understanding of history lead us to act differently in the academy? How does it allow us to understand our histories differently? And how does it cause us to tell our histories

differently, particularly our institutional histories and programmatic histories? How do we reimagine those in light of our understanding of the history of higher ed?

These questions framed course materials for students in a way that promoted critical thinking about the historical and contemporary purposes of higher education.

Instructors further promoted SJE pedagogy through attention to asymmetrical power dynamics, encouraging students to examine historical legacies that permeate twenty-first-century inequities. Many institutions of higher education were founded for select populations and never intended to educate a diverse student body. Instructors emphasized the importance of exploring historical context as well as factors that led to individual and broader institutional change. LaVerne wanted students to understand that many institutions of higher education, “particularly the predominately white ones, were not built with Black people or Latino people in mind. They just weren’t.” Similarly, Adam sought to include “something with every social identity...to cover everything related to helping [students] understand the navigation of social identities over the last 400 years within higher education.” He tried to balance breadth and depth with the goal of helping all students envision themselves in this history.

Carol asked students to consider, “Who are the people in power? They used to be mostly white men and now, even as we’ve diversified, we still have that whiteness.” She further discussed this in the context of current admissions controversies, “even as the complexions of the people change, it doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re going to see the values underlying selection criteria necessarily change.” Carol encouraged students to consider the legacy of whiteness and what it meant for an institution’s mission and vision, especially when serving a racially diverse population in the twenty-first century. Marcus also highlighted the legacy of discrimination:

I really want them to take away a sense that we look at higher education as a promise of increasing mobility and equity in our society. However, what higher education is very, very good at is reproducing inequalities. And so that’s really the starting point.

He further encouraged students to examine “the ways in which student populations must still negotiate access issues and barriers.”

The most common approach to introducing asymmetrical power dynamics in higher education was examining the historical roots of contemporary issues. As Yosef explained:

I think that to really understand the difficulty with race on campus, and ethnicity, and the difficult and seemingly endless challenges around that...you have to understand the history. And it can't just be the whitewashed history... You need to understand the relationship between the bigger culture and society and higher ed.

Common historical narratives of progress obscure discriminatory policies and practices and fail to address the asymmetrical power dynamics of racism. In contrast, instructors cultivated learning environments that encouraged more complex ways of thinking about and understanding historical events, asking students to consider how intentional (and sometimes unintentional) policies and practices were complicit with or perpetuated oppression.

Adam began that interruption of history by pointing out to students, “most of the books that are written on American history of higher education were written by white men about their privileged institutions.” Sam recalled learning “the white lens of higher ed. I learned about Yale and Harvard and the New England hilltops... So I really had to challenge myself later on...to understand other historical narratives...that’s something I think I’ve really had to educate myself on to teach this class.” This includes examining the many kinds of institutions throughout U.S. history, such as HBCUs, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges, regional public institutions, community colleges, vocational institutions, and teacher education programs. In pushing students to reconsider the legacy of land-grant institutions, Peter reflected:

It is very easy to go through a history of American higher education and think about the Morrill Acts, but then not really examine where did all this land come from that was sold to benefit higher education...I thought I knew a lot about the Morrill Acts, but there’s a lot more to learn.

Peter, along with many other interviewees, introduced the connections between forced removal of indigenous people from their lands and the funding of land-grant institutions, complicating the long-standing celebration of higher education’s expansion.¹¹ For Peter, this introduced an ongoing “tension throughout the class,” often leading students to “experience a lot of emotion.”

Instructors similarly discussed their efforts to introduce the role of slavery in the history of higher education.¹² Sidney explained the decision to begin the second unit in his course with Craig Steven Wilder's book, *Ebony and Ivy* (2013):¹³

We often think historically about higher education, the colonial colleges, as being agnostic on this question of slavery. But what does it mean that our institutions are deeply embedded? That they weren't a reluctant participant in the slave trade, but an active proprietor of it in the Boards and in where students went after they graduated with jobs. That it was the lifeblood of the slave trade is something that I wanted our students to sit with because our institutional story is tied to that. So how do we work differently as a result?

As part of their engagement with SJE pedagogy, instructors required students to reckon with uncomfortable histories and with the unacknowledged labor that funded institutional growth. Doing so provided students an opportunity to grapple with their place within larger systems of power in American higher education while connecting with students' interest in social justice issues.

Whether consciously or not, instructors also drew on SJE pedagogy principles as they asked students to examine their own positionality in relationship with higher education. Patrick, for example, wanted students "to see the very, very long history and to understand their situation within it," including the ways in which they can "add to that history" in the future. Jacob noted that he starts his course with an assignment about students' undergraduate degrees, asking them to investigate "how the[ir] institution evolved and why it looks the way it does now." Peter used a similar assignment, asking students, "What do you really know about the history of your own school or college?" He also asked students to consider what sources they could use to uncover answers regarding "Who founded your school? Who was initially included in your school? Who was initially not included in your school? Where did the money for your school come from? Religious ties?"

Peter hoped to "challenge the mental framework...about what is normal, which is their undergraduate experience, and to be a little bit more critically reflective of that." He furthered this goal with site visits to a diverse range of local higher education institutions, explaining:

When you visit an HBCU, you talk to students there and understand why they chose an HBCU and what it feels like to be a Black

student on an HBCU campus as opposed to a Black student on a predominantly white campus. And that adds dimension and depth and texture and richness.

Peter also sought to contextualize students' historical understanding of institutions by in-person visits to places shaped by these historical legacies, rather than exclusively discussing abstract ideas of campus experiences.

Sidney encouraged students to delve into their own history, noting, "I would love for them to take their own institutional history pages and rewrite them." She also asked students to do "a deep dive or history around their programs and functional areas...particularly with a lens toward equity," asking, "how are we finding and creating counter-narrative around what these different functional areas of programs look like?" Incorporating the goals of SJE pedagogy, Sidney inspired students to complicate the stories institutions and programs tell about themselves and to place them within a broader historical context. Similarly, Marcus pushed students "to consider things from a position outside of their own experience" and Sam reflected that "when they can understand what it's like to be a student in that moment, it makes more sense to them."

SJE pedagogy emphasizes self-awareness development for both instructors and students.¹⁴ Several instructors modeled self-awareness about their own limitations regarding the discipline of history to encourage deeper student engagement. Clay explained:

I love that I can come into the class and tell students I'm not a historian, I'm just really interested...I think it gives me a place to be able to claim that I will be learning with you, even though I chose the material. And I'm familiar with it enough that I can lead this, but honestly, a lot of this is going to be the knowledge that you construct relative to your own interests. What stands out to you? I am pretty sure you're going to shed new light on these issues that will also teach me in the process...I'm creating these conditions where we can come together to learn.

His transparency modeled de-centered teaching, common in SJE, as he invited students to explore their own curiosities as part of a community where learning was the central goal.¹⁵ Niall similarly shared that he is "genuinely interested" in what his students have to say and leaves the course "learning as much as anybody" and gaining "insights that I wouldn't have had before."

Instructors' self-awareness played a key role for many in grappling with issues of equity and exclusion. Patrick shared that his perception of history "has a lot to do with a lot of the learning and unlearning that I did about the ways in which I was socialized as a white man to try and fix everything." He reflected:

[Some of my unlearning] came from working with groups of students, particularly queer and trans students of color, who really—through a series of lessons which were not all easy to hear at the time—taught me and presented me with the opportunity to condition myself to look for what folks have already been doing. And so, I really think I approached this course with that in mind.

Patrick's experiences as a higher education practitioner, including difficult conversations with students, helped him construct a course that interrupted hegemonic norms and constructions.

Desi similarly drew on his professional experience when shaping course content, sharing that "We had student riots on campus... and I was involved with helping the administration in negotiating with students." Based on this experience, he developed "a course on student activism connected to the history of activism...it's like a serendipitous loop of events that I guess feeds my soul with my interest in history." As a pedagogical and scholarly tool, self-awareness benefits both instructors and students, and fosters new consideration of the forces that perpetuate interpersonal, institutional, and systemic patterns and inequalities. Interviewees' social justice approach to teaching the history of higher education influenced all aspects of their content and pedagogical decisions, shaping the impact of these course on HESA students and programs.

Expanding Preconceived Notions about History

As noted above, most HESA students have a curricular requirement to take a history of higher education course and they typically enter the classroom with dread based on preconceived notions of history as a discipline. Niall observed that the students entering his course envisioned history "as a series of facts or a series of things to memorize." Sam similarly encountered students predisposed to "look for facts" rather than "meaning making." By using an SJE pedagogy, instructors can transform these assumptions through encouraging active engagement with issues and content.¹⁶

Many of the interviewees opened their courses with discussions about the value of history for higher education professionals to actively engage HESA students with the materials. Niall recalled feeling that the “responsibility [was] on me to make the case” for history as meaningful and valuable: “this is the chance you get to make your pitch.” He continued, “you can’t just tell them interesting things” or “replace history with a bunch of encyclopedias...you have to make it relevant.” Adam asserted that in his classroom:

[H]istory is not dates on a calendar...history is about telling people’s stories and the interactions of people in society. I’m showing how people interacted with higher education, how higher education interacted with people, and what is the nuance or what are the synergies or the challenges that come off those interactions.

Marcus found it effective to frame his course around “critical questions, forks in the road, and a sense of historical empathy.” Sidney invited students to “begin with the assumption that it didn’t have to end this way.” Marcus similarly noted that understanding history “unlocks some creativity about where we might go in the future.” Examining colleges and universities throughout U.S. history allowed students to see that “higher education isn’t static and entrenched...it’s also dynamic.” Jacob challenged students to think critically by posing questions about when tenure originated, the shifting balance between residential and non-residential student life, and curriculum trends and debates over time. He then asked students to consider, “Why do things change? What are the events and forces that produce change or result in change?” Such questions can lead to introspection as well as deeper research and analysis. Additionally, by asking “why” questions, instructors interrupted student thinking that assumes what is familiar today has always been that way.

One strategy instructors employed to reach these objectives was to start with the familiar. Sidney, for example, challenged her students to ask why a building on campus was “named after a noted Black abolitionist, but no one knows that history...no one is telling that story.” She encouraged her students to “tease out the narratives around what our institution is and inject, intentionally, these issues around justice and equity.” Marcus asked students to look at the long history of specific kinds of institutions (such as liberal arts colleges, women’s colleges, community colleges, or HSIs) and at individual university functions (such as the registrar, student affairs, or financial

aid) that did not always exist as they do today, leading students to rethink their assumptions and expectations.

Other instructors used current events to help students connect with the history of higher education. Cleo explained her decision to include Joy Ann Williamson-Lott's *Jim Crow Campus: Higher Education and the Struggle for a New Southern Social Order* (2018):¹⁷

[I]n just thinking about what went on with the University of Missouri protests, after Ferguson in 2015, or even some of the student activism that's gone on...over the last few years. I really thought that that was a great book for homing in on how student activism has shaped higher education.

Many instructors found that student activism provided a powerful hook for their students. Marcus emphasized that students have always been "agents of change in higher education." Patrick added readings and activities about Latino/a/x, Asian American, and indigenous student activism to works on black student activism and anti-war protests, emphasizing the substantive role played by many different groups of students across decades and higher education contexts.

One shared goal was to help students understand the history of higher education as more than a linear progression of institutional openings and closings, well-researched leaders, and expanding student demographics. Instructors sought instead to interrupt dominant narratives by introducing complexities and nuances of time, place, and socio-political realities. Antonia described wanting students to understand that there are "other ways to tell stories." Desi similarly told students "that you have to humanize part of history because it's so detached in many ways." One way to accomplish this is through direct contact with primary sources. Mary asked students to explore a special issue of *Life* magazine focused on higher education, instructing them to look at images and stories that captured their interest. She then asked, "Now what's your impression of higher education from the 1930s?" and drew connections to other readings they had discussed. She concluded that this activity "was really fun" and provided an opportunity to engage students in the discipline of history and the work of historians.

Expanding students' assumptions about doing history also meant providing opportunities for students to question their own status quo. TJ described how the experiences with this course caused her to reflect on teaching more broadly:

I've learned a lot about how we don't teach, what we don't talk about, and how it has implications for where we are today. We talk about diversity and equity issues on our campus and people talk about them as if it's just a matter of reaching a certain percentage threshold of having students on our campus so that we can say that we're recruiting and retaining students of color. That is such a narrow, limited view of that conversation and what it could be about.

She further discussed strategies for introducing these complexities into her classroom, "We spend a lot of time at the beginning talking about what you learn from people's perspectives, from simply hearing what those perspectives are...how a person might think about issues or topics." She then engaged students in applying these skills to their study of the past:

If you want to study the Black Power movement of the 1960s, you're going to have to wrestle with the ways in which gender and queer identity are treated. You're going to have to wrestle with that because you're not going to find that it checks all of the boxes in terms of being "ok" with all of the different identities. And, so, what does that mean? And how do you read to hear what's important to the individuals or person whose experiences are being reflected in that primary source text? How do you suspend your own judgment from sitting here today of what you want them to do or to say versus actually hearing what they're saying to you? That's really hard.

TJ drew students into examining historical perspectives within their own contexts, challenging them to "read and critique without it just being, 'I want you to say this and because you don't say this, I don't have to pay attention to what you've said.'"

Promoting active engagement with preconceived notions about the work of historians and history as a discipline while expanding student thinking is difficult, time-intensive work, but it can lead to positive outcomes. Niall recalled a student who started the semester by saying, "I've never really liked history." At the end of the semester, the student concluded, "I don't think history is my favorite subject now, but I do see how it matters...I see how it's useful." This does not happen with every student or in every classroom, but blending social justice education pedagogy with pedagogical strategies for teaching history to non-historians can lead to student engagement with the past in meaningful ways that may benefit the whole higher education endeavor.

Applications Beyond the Classroom

Graduates from HESA programs work as professionals throughout higher education, including in academic affairs, student affairs, policy, research, and teaching. Many already hold these positions while earning graduate degrees. Acknowledging this, history of higher education instructors focused on course outcomes with practical applications beyond the classroom. Students bring their knowledge about higher education to the course based on their own college experiences, but they have almost no exposure to the history of higher education. Ande reflected, “I don’t know that they’ve ever critically thought about the institution as an object of study.” Connecting content knowledge and skills with professional goals and future work helps bridge that gap.

Instructors adopted different approaches to managing the tension between classroom learning and practice, especially in this field of practitioners. Evelyn shared that in her experience, “there’s always going to be the students who say, ‘What’s the point? I don’t need to know this.’” This was echoed by other interviewees who addressed this issue in multiple ways. Peter stated, “We’re practitioners and unashamedly so. One of the things that we try to do every week in this class is to connect topics to current practice.” Other instructors found strategies for introducing and modeling historical thinking skills to evaluate cause and effect or explore how the past informs the present. TJ was intentional about helping students “connect the dots” between history and current issues, noting, “What’s happening in class is also really powerful in the process of bridging from the content to the application in terms of understanding what’s happening in their world, on their campuses today.”

Some interviewees explicitly sought to demonstrate the value of using history to inform future practice. Introducing contemporary issues such as free speech, student athletics, access to mental health services, food insecurity, and the challenges of first-generation students provided a critical starting point. TJ emphasized that “today’s problems aren’t new problems. If we look at student drinking on campus, for instance, that’s got its own long history. And what does that do if you understand that the problems that we’re dealing with today didn’t just show up here today?” As Niall explained, once you “get the student interested in that topic, or at

least willing to consider the idea that history informs that topic,” you have opened the door to that student learning to appreciate history. The next step, Niall continued, is to “get them talking about it, and thinking about it, and showing them that there are roots to this.”

Instructors were intentional in their reading selections and class activities to further highlight these connections. Cleo used assigned readings and class discussions to “help students look at contemporary educational problems across time and context.” She selected an article about gay purges in the 1940s,¹⁸ for example, to ask:

How can you use the past to understand that so much of what we deal with in higher education is not necessarily new, it’s just sort of changed, morphed to meet the day? . . . Maybe the degree of violence is not the same or the acts of violence against marginalized populations are not the same, but the core issues are still the same.

When Mary dedicated class time for students to explore digital archives, she “didn’t even expect it to be one of those ‘aha’ moments, but it was!” She recalled a student exclaiming, “‘Oh my god! I’m looking at stuff from 1920 and that’s totally related to what I do!’” Instructors, often with minimal additional work, can provide students with information that connects the past to their present work and professional identity. By fostering an active learning environment where students engage directly with the past, instructors open the door for students to appreciate the value of history.

Drawing on this understanding of impactful learning, many interviewees intentionally facilitated student discovery. Max, for example, posited questions about the history of residential life: “Was it always a feature of American colleges? Let’s talk about how it developed.” He found that this approach “pulls them in to realize, ‘This has been going on a long time, and there are things I can learn from the past that will not necessarily help me do my job, but help me with my career and my vocation. And it may not be day to day, but it will help me understand why I do the things that I do.’” He concluded that his was “not a ‘how’ class—it’s more of a ‘why’ class.”

TJ similarly used the history of HBCUs to ask, “How [do] we think about diversity and campus climate on our campuses today? What’s the nuance there? What’s the thread that ties it all together? And if you understand that thread, do you have better capacity to advocate for the pieces that you want to advocate for today?” Niall articulated something similar as his primary learning objective.

Students entered his class with “some issue in higher education that they care very deeply about...that they think is the most pressing issue.” He uses that as a starting point, telling students, “This is the thing you care about, so let’s investigate. Let’s figure out how history matters for this.”

Patrick introduced the concept of historical contingency using the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic:

[W]e don’t really know when the pandemic is going to end...[and] there’s no way of knowing for sure what it’s going to look like after this... You are all here learning in this space right now and watching your institution figure it out in real time. Literally building the bridge as we’re walking across it.

This is also how historical actors experienced their actions and decisions within their own context. To emphasize the point, Patrick encouraged students to “Go out and observe. What’s your office doing? How do you feel about that? Would you want to see something happen differently?” He asked them to think about “other possibilities for shifting and redirecting or creating change” in the moment and then to use that thinking to ask similar questions of historical actors across different times and places.

Other instructors used a “how we got here” approach to help students make connections to their future practice. Evelyn explained:

Everything we do has a history and [it is important] to understand how that manifests in our work now, particularly in things like DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] and structural policy. If you are of a majority identity, it’s very hard to see where those problems are... But if you understand the origin of how some of those things came to be, it’s much clearer.

This is a critical skill for higher education professionals and one with important implications for future policy and practice.

Examining the past in its historical context contributes to a more nuanced understanding of current issues and cultivates informed practitioners. Instructors often wove discussions of future practice into their study of the past with the goal of inspiring students to think about their own roles in imagining and implementing change. Ignatius shared his view that “the past is associated with the creation of a lot of inequities, but we’ve also done a lot moving forward. We do have a system that can continue to change.” In his course,

he emphasized the ways in which “understanding and seeing how higher ed has evolved over time can also give us tremendous hope for the influence that we can all have working in higher ed to really spur on that evolution.” His underlying goals included equipping students with a knowledge of the past when contemplating change in the present and leaving them “armed with history as they go into meetings in their professional settings.”

Sam shared his pride in helping students expand their thinking: “Students at first are like, ‘So what?’ But then, by the end, they were like, ‘Oh my god, I get it. We have to understand the past to understand the future, right?’ I’m like, ‘Yes, thank you.’” By raising awareness and fostering curiosity about the history of higher education and its relevance to the present, instructors can inspire students to build a future grounded in an understanding of the past.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that SJE pedagogical approaches to the history of higher education shaped course design, expanded narrow conceptions of the discipline of history, enhanced student learning, and promoted applications beyond the classroom. These findings further support the importance of this course for increasing students’ understanding of higher education, past and present, and moving beyond rote facts to uncover the many ways to tell this history.

Despite the national standards, several instructors in our study reported the need for ongoing advocacy to protect the history of higher education within the curriculum. Some programs sought to replace the class with content they deemed more practical or to cram it into a section of an introductory course. In response, interviewees argued that history, as an essential component of a HESA curriculum and integral from a social justice content and pedagogical focus, should remain a separate course.

Paramount to social justice is the resistance of an ahistorical view to any contemporary issue.¹⁹ Instructors used SJE pedagogical approaches to shape the learning environment and facilitated learning in ways that challenged typical classroom hierarchies. The benefit of teaching the history of higher education from a social justice perspective is that it interrupts acceptance of hegemonic ideas about historical events. Students do not need to accept the future of

higher education as inevitable, nor the past as an overly simplified narrative of progress and expansion. Instead, instructors can engage students in ways of thinking that question the past and the present while simultaneously imagining the potential of higher education and their role in shaping its future. As Max's student discovered, there is value in learning history and this course, especially when taught through a social justice lens, offers a clear path for doing so.

The history of higher education is central to understanding its past, present, and future, most notably for students in HESA programs today who will lead our colleges and universities. Engaging students in this history requires access to primary sources, including college yearbooks and newspapers, federal legislation, oral history interviews, photographs, institutional records, novels, films, and higher education periodicals. Currently, there is a dearth of freely available, quality resources for instructors to access and include in their courses, especially sources focused on historically marginalized groups and non-elite institutions. Access to these kinds of sources can be used to complicate or counter dominant histories of American higher education. As part of our larger project on teaching and learning the history of higher education, the authors have developed a prototype open educational resource (OER), titled *History of Higher Education*, providing primary sources, secondary sources, and a list of digital archives representing more than 500 college and university collections.²⁰ The archives list includes every state and a range of institutions, such as public and private, two-year, four-year, and graduate, minority serving institutions (MSIs), predominantly white institutions (PWIs), women's colleges, and technical colleges. This resource may help instructors continue their important efforts to teach the history of higher education through diverse voices, multiple perspectives, and a focus on social justice.

As the instructors in our study demonstrate, teaching the history of higher education with a social justice perspective helps to make the course relevant and engaging to students and encourages them to see history as an essential discipline in their practice. These experiences can lead students to carry the value of the humanities with them as they become leaders in higher education for decades to come.

Notes

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3. Marybeth Gasman, ed., *The History of U.S. Higher Education: Methods for Understanding the Past* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 12.
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edu/"; and Harvard University's Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery at <<https://legacyofslavery.harvard.edu/>>; as well as Adam Rothman and Elsa Barraza Mendoza, eds., *Facing Georgetown's History: A Reader on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021); and D-L Stewart, "Twisted at the Roots: The Intransigence of Inequality in U.S. Higher Education," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 52, no. 2 (2020): 13-16.

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