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## Let's Talk About Social Justice

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OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Let's Talk About Social Justice

Presented in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
graduating with University Honors

In

HON 300.12 Capstone

by

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*April 2022*

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

During my time as an OWU student and Social Justice major, I have been asked to think about how I can make a difference in the world around me. While grappling with that question, I have come to believe that the problems in the world that are at the root of all injustice are dehumanization, censorship, and a lack of compassion for other human beings. All of these problems have led to a generalized indifference to the suffering of others within much of the world's population. I believe that the most important work I can do to make a difference in the world and help the cause of social justice and equity is to help each community that I am a part of change the way they think about people who come from different identity groups and help increase empathy and compassion through feminist and humanized education about major social justice issues.

For my Senior Honors Thesis and Social Justice Mentored Activism Project, I hosted a series of dinners at which participants engaged in intentional conversation about prominent Social Justice topics. Each dinner focused on a different topic and allowed me to practice community organizing- by collaborating with student organizations, staff members, and faculty who focus on each topic- and put into practice my own ideas of how to support and encourage participant-led social justice education. My participants were students, faculty, and staff who wanted to engage in these conversations and wanted to grow closer with other members of our campus community. I measured how helpful these dinners were in offering space for participants to educate themselves, make meaningful connections with other members of the community, and increase their

compassion and awareness on how these issues impact others around them by conducting entry and exit surveys. I believe that this project allowed me to accomplish my goals of increasing compassion, awareness, and connectedness within a community. While I cannot change the entire world, this project has helped make a difference within our campus community.

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### *Social Justice Education in Group Settings*

Education about social injustice and the impact of identity on experiences within society has been a central focus for social justice movements for at least several decades. Education in movement spaces has taken on different forms throughout the years. From Teach-Ins of the Civil Rights Movement to the “Syllabus” of modern protest spaces, education about social issues has always been integrated into movements. Feminist Consciousness Raising Groups of the Second Wave of Feminism and Black Feminist Healing Circles represent Feminist approaches to collective education and emphasize the importance of group support for individualized learning journeys (hooks, 2000 & Richardson, 2017). Research has been done on various educational frameworks including education happening within social movements (Hall et al., 2011), learning in a collective context (Kilgore, 1999), learning as a form of activism (Choudry, 2015), and various other forms in which education occurs in social movements such as public education, informal education, and education about the movement itself (Niesz et al., 2018). All of

this scholarship points toward education within social movements being an important element of increasing movement cohesion, success, and public awareness of movement issues. Education is a powerful tool that social movements can use to reach their goals, gain public support, and increase effectiveness of participants.

### *Interfaith Conversation Structures*

This project is also rooted in the framework of the Better Together Conversations, which are a style of conversation, proposed by the Interfaith Youth Core, that encourages participants to work on communicating with people that they don't know. This idea was designed to facilitate interfaith conversations, and one of these conversations took place on Ohio Wesleyan's campus in February of 2020, in the form of a dinner hosted by OWU's Interfaith Leadership Council. These conversations bring people together over a common interest in building community and meeting new people within an existing community. Interfaith organizations in other contexts have also facilitated conversations in their communities. Valley Interfaith in Rio Grande Valley, Texas, facilitated community conversations between parents and guardians of students at Palmer Elementary School in Pharr, Texas. The framework of their conversations centers on the concept of *relational organizing* (Putnam, et. al., 2003). On the topic of how their conversation-based structure is effective at building community, a local organizer, Catalina Mendiola says,

...Organizing is all about building relationships. It's not about meetings. These are not counseling sessions. They are not an interview. It's a conversation. You're building a relationship here. Not extracting information. Not pushing an agenda. And the only way to do this is to leave yourself open to be changed by the conversation (Putnam et. al., 13-14).

When structured properly, conversations can be used as a powerful tool for community building. When all members of the conversation are treated with respect and view each other as equals, participants can create relationships that are built on trust and vulnerability. When people feel that they are going to be listened to and valued for their perspective and identity, they are more likely to feel safe to share their genuine opinions and experiences. This is critical in spaces where education related to social activism is happening because, “abstract ideas do not connect people, and social action, when it is not rooted in the heart of people’s life experiences, withers in the face of opposition and disappointment” (Putnam et. al., 21-22). Personal stories give weight to social issues and demonstrate that these issues have real life consequences. Stories are powerful.

Whenever someone tells his or her story [...] you feel the power of narrative. The listeners lean toward the speaker, their eyes on her face; their silence deepens, rich with attention and connection. Often, the stories are similar in ways that bind the tellers together and also different, individual, revealing the variety of human experience. Stories build relationships; they knit communities together (Putnam et. al., 23).

This power of narrative is especially relevant in situations of social movement spaces. Abstract issues must be humanized for participants, especially those who do not have direct experience with the injustice associated with another participant’s specific form of identity-based oppression. Movement spaces that create opportunities for conversation based on participant experiences are also offering a chance for participants to heal through shared recognition and relationship with others who have gone through similar experiences (Richardson, 2017). The intent of the Let’s Talk About Social Justice dinner series was to build on the work of past organizers and movements and build relationships within a campus community centered on a shared desire to work for social justice in our

immediate space, through conversations centered on identity, participant life experiences, and the process of taking ownership of one's social justice education. These dinners and the conversations that took place at them were designed to humanize injustice and abstract concepts within the discourse of Social Justice.

### *Talking about Social Issues at the Dinner Table*

The idea that we should not be discussing “controversial topics” in polite company has become a dominant discourse in much of society. References to hiding political views at Thanksgiving dinner, avoiding politics, sex, and religion at dinner parties, and making polite small talk on a first date are common cliches in much of mainstream media and present in many of our lives. Those who are interested in facilitating meetings and productive workspaces are invested in encouraging participants to discuss complex issues and topics, and when this is translated to a meal space, this indoctrinated taboo of not causing a fight at the dinner table becomes a major barrier to meaningful conversations and productive discourse. Priya Parker responds to this issue of facilitating controversial conversations at gatherings through the concept of “Good Controversy,” or the idea that properly structured and facilitated contention can have the effect of making participants look more closely at the things that matter most, such as morals, values, and priorities (Parker, 233). She speaks of groups at events she has organized, who place harmony over progress and, “by avoiding what truly mattered to them in the name of not ruffling feathers, they were evading the questions they most cared about answering” (Parker, 232). In hosting dinners focusing on topics of social

in/justice and identity, I am intentionally asking participants to step outside of their comfort zones in hopes that they will genuinely connect with one another through recognition of their shared humanity.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Methodology**

##### *Selection of Subjects*

Subjects self-selected to participate in the dinners. To alert the campus community that these events were happening, I shared the information with the Sociology-Anthropology and Social Justice departments, the Women's and Gender Studies department, and the student boards in each of those departments. I also created posters with a link to the event as a scannable QR-code and put them up around campus in visible spots for students. I posted a notice about the dinners as a whole, and about each dinner individually, 3 times in the OWU daily- the daily campus newsletter. Additionally, I shared verbally that the events were happening in each of the classes I was in at the time and shared posters with a registration link QR-code with each of my professors so they could share the information with their classes. Finally, I created an Instagram account, @LetsTalkAboutSJ, where I shared information about the dinners and provided a link to registration. Students widely use Instagram for personal entertainment and many student groups and organizations have Instagram accounts, so the platform offered a convenient way for me to interact with students and organizations directly. I also used the account as a way to assist in the process of helping participants find social

justice focused accounts to follow by following those accounts myself. When participants follow the account I created, the Instagram algorithm is more likely to suggest accounts that I follow for the participant. To maximize the usefulness of the Instagram account, I also created a Linktree, which is a platform that can be accessed by clicking the link in the bio of the Instagram account. On the Linktree, I have links to useful websites, and, during the active periods, I had links to registration for each dinner. Instagram and Linktree are free to use with an email address, therefore making these platforms ideal resources for increasing accessibility of social justice education. In fact, Linktree has been used in the past as a format for sharing “Syllabi” at protests.

### *Instrumentation*

When students, faculty, or staff registered for the event, they filled out a brief information sheet and were then sent the entrance survey. For the registration form, entrance survey, and exit survey, I used Google Forms. All OWU students, faculty, and staff have Gmail accounts, which allowed me to have a good amount of confidence that they were familiar with the user-friendly interface, and I had the added benefit of being able to have the forms feed directly into spreadsheets.

For each dinner, I created a list of questions to guide conversation and encourage participants to speak from their own experiences rather than quoting lectures or readings (Appendices A-C). The intention here was to have something for participants to rely on when they were trying to start conversations or as a tool to help bring focus back to the topic at hand when conversations veered off topic. Conversations at each table were

facilitated by the participants. While the questions were provided as an outline, participants decided where conversations went and what was specifically discussed. No two tables had the same conversation as the questions relied on participant perspectives.

### *Procedures*

After participants registered, I sent them an email with specific details of the location and a reminder of the date and time of the event, along with a link to the entrance survey. Entrance and Exit Surveys were anonymous, and I sent out a reminder email about completing the entrance survey on the morning of each event. At the event itself, I arrived prior to the event, ensured that the room was set up in the 6 table, 6 seats per table model that I chose for the project. Catering arrived and I set it up with assistance from friends or volunteers from the participant pool, as participants arrived. As they entered the room, I told participants that they could sit at any of the tables but to try and sit with some people that they did not already know, or whom they did not know well. I began each dinner at about 6:05 PM with a speech welcoming the participants to the event and explaining that the questions on each table were intended to serve as a guide and that participants were encouraged to take turns asking and responding to questions. Participants were reminded to make space for everyone to participate as fully as possible, according to their individual comfort levels. I told them that the questions were intended to all be addressed during the 2-hour event, but it was okay if not every question was addressed. I then dismissed participants to get dinner from the buffet-style serving line.

Having participants serve themselves allowed each person to access food that met their individual dietary needs and avoided participant-driven food waste.

At about 7:50-7:55 PM I informed participants that it was almost time to close, thanked them for their time and energy, and reminded them to fill out the exit survey which I sent to them during the event. After the event I sent out one reminder email reminding participants to fill out their exit surveys.

### *Caterer Selection*

For my project, I was granted a Baran Fellowship, in the amount of \$3,500. I intentionally chose to spend my catering budget in a way that supported local Black- and POC-owned restaurants. I spent about \$1,000 on each dinner and ordered from the following restaurants:

- Pita, Int. - Dublin, Ohio
- J. Gumbo's - Delaware, Ohio
- Steele Your Heart Catering - Columbus, Ohio

Through this process, I found quality food and tried to counteract some of the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic by directing business and attention to local businesses and businesses owned by People of Color. These businesses were negatively impacted in the last few years as a result of increased incidents of openly expressed racism and the global pandemic. My goal in these dinners was to work to counter the negative impacts of the last few years on our socio-political state as a community. In addition to the campus community needing opportunities to socialize and develop connections with one another,

our wider community off campus has been impacted by the same political and social issues that have created divisions and isolation within the OWU Community. By choosing to hire Black- and POC-owned restaurants to cater the events, the events incorporated another level of Social Justice into the structure of the events and by contracting with local minority-owned businesses, I was stimulating the local economy, supporting local business owners, and Black-owned businesses.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

I had 30 registered participants for dinner one, Religion & Spirituality, 33 registered participants for dinner two, Race & Ethnicity, and 29 registered participants for dinner three, Gender & Sexuality. Some participants did not show up, but I had at least 15 (or half of the 30 maximum) participants at each dinner. To analyze the anonymized entry and exit surveys, I connected surveys by asking participants to include the last four digits of their phone number in a field at the beginning of the surveys. When analyzing the data, I removed all entry and exit surveys that did not have a matching pair. This left me with 16 responses from the first dinner, 11 responses from the second dinner, and 9 responses from the third dinner. These numbers demonstrate that not all participants who attended the dinner completed both surveys, and not all participants who registered for the events attended the events.

As a result of the surveys conducted across all three dinners, I found that 72% of respondents felt that participating in the dinners increased their level of comfort in

discussing the topics, 25% of respondents felt that the event neither increased nor decreased their comfort level in discussing the topic, and one person said that it did not increase their comfort level, but added in the comment section that they reported this way because they came to the dinner feeling fully comfortable discussing the topic. When asked if attending the dinner increased their sense of community or belonging on OWU's campus, 81% of respondents indicated that it increased their sense of community or belonging, 17% of respondents indicated that they felt that the event neither increased nor decreased their sense of belonging on campus, and one respondent indicated that the event did not increase their sense of community or belonging on campus.

At the end of each survey, participants were asked two open response questions:

1. Do you have any ideas about how to build more connections and a sense of belonging on campus?
2. If you have any other comments or reflections to share, feel free to do so below.

The responses of participants to these questions can be found in Table 1.1 and 1.2. The responses to these questions demonstrate participant perspectives on their experience at the event and capture participant ideas for how to create future opportunities for building connection and community on campus.

**Table 1.1** Participant responses, by dinner, to the question: *Do you have any ideas about how to build more connections and a sense of belonging on campus?*

<b>Let's Talk About: Religion &amp; Spirituality</b>	<b>Let's Talk About: Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	<b>Let's Talk About: Gender &amp; Sexuality</b>
I really loved the mixing of students, faculty, and staff on really deep subject matter.	I loved being able to talk about these topics in a calm and open environment.	continue to offer similar programming and promote service & travel-learning opportunities
Offer more opportunities for folks to connect with others who share their faith background/spiritual beliefs -- most people on campus only know about Cru and OMT and not really any of the other faith-based opportunities on campus	I think inviting classes to your project could be really interesting, since the people that are attending are pretty like minded with what we're talking about.	Not really other than the normal reach out to more people to get them involved on things like this,
Have something similar to Camp Oh-Wooo offered to other grades. Just without the orientation part. Allows students to branch outside of their friend group	These gatherings are certainly a move in the right direction. :)	This was a really great start! More spaces like this is exactly what we need.
I have wondered about some sort of program explicitly teaching students how to make friends or what community looks like. It's also worth noting that the folks at my table seemed to feel like they had found belonging already.	I think having more events like these and encouraging both informal and formal gatherings around shared interests is important in community building. Already I think OWU has a lot of good opportunities to develop a strong sense of belonging on campus; there are countless organizations where students can gather with like minded people and try to make the campus a better and more inclusive place for everyone.	No more cishet men! No but in all seriousness, we need to find ways to foster conversation and education that is designed for the inclusion of people who don't necessarily agree with it. We had someone at our table who was only there for extra credit and he looked annoyed at the general conversation, but no one was sure how to reach him because we were all well versed in the topic and he seemed resistant.
Have more events like this where people are encouraged to talk to people they might not usually converse with. I really enjoyed this and would like to attend more like it!	No, as a white person I don't feel qualified to suggest anything but would happily support any efforts made	
None, we all think that this is actually something OWU does quite well, if not in the ways they intended...	events like these and more service-learning projects in classes	

No, they do a great job. I had to really go out of my way to be a loner on campus.	more events like this	
Expand the spring break trip offerings that the Chaplain's office does. They are some of the best community/belonging building experiences we do.	We discussed offering more events (plus incentives such as extra-credit or free food) and more education on the topic (through immersion in UC 160 or 230 classes or through better diversity-credited courses)	
I do think the simple act of getting people together for conversation around a theme is in and of itself a good way to build community.		
Clearly this event engaged everyone in a meaningful way. People felt heard; people listened. Let's find a way to do more of these - or use this model for building a similar sustainable program. Maybe IFYC BETTER TOGETHER relaunch?		
more events like this one		
Yeah I do		
I think the dinner was great practice in how to productively discuss possibly divisive topics, which is a key to connecting with people different than you.		

**Table 1.2** Participant responses, by dinner, to the prompt: *If you have any other comments or reflections to share feel free to do so below.*

<b>Let's Talk About: Religion &amp; Spirituality</b>	<b>Let's Talk About: Race &amp; Ethnicity</b>	<b>Let's Talk About: Gender &amp; Sexuality</b>
Such a great experience! Kudos.	I really enjoyed this event! It was very well done!	N/A - Thank you so much for the great discussions Anna, it was awesome! <3
Anna this was amazing! I am so proud of you! I am so glad that I came to this dinner tonight. Can't wait for the next one. Lots of Love!	I said that I don't feel different or more comfortable because I largely feel comfortable about discussing these issues; I do it pretty much daily in my classes and with my colleagues. I do think that events like these and this one in particular are good for increasing comfort levels and that they have great value.	This dinner, like all the rest, was really great. I appreciate, as always, the possibility for deeper conversations. One person at the table didn't really even know what he was coming to but came for a class. It's nice to get a chance to converse with folks other than those who are super active on these issues.
I thought this was a great event! The conversation was rich, deep, and respectful and lasted pretty much the whole time, except for a digression at the end into queer representation in media. :)	It was a good conversation. I wish more people could've been there for it.	It was really nice to share my experience, and hear other people's experiences. I knew no one there, so it was a really nice experience.
This was really wonderful, thank you for creating the space for these conversations (and for the delicious food!)	I loved this experience. Thank you so much!	
More questions? I wish I was able to learn more about religions so outside of my own, but obviously the selection of people and different backgrounds was limited to who signed up!	These events are so beneficial in making students more comfortable discussing topics that they may have felt unsafe or uncomfortable speaking on before. I think everyone could benefit from attending.	
Thank you for gathering us....		
This is a great launch for your Social Justice project, Anna!		
Excited for the rest of the dinners!!!!		

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

#### *Discussion*

The data collected indicates that students, faculty, and staff benefitted from these dinners. The data also demonstrates that this model of collective learning is beneficial to individual participants trying to increase their comfort in discussing topics related to social in/justice. As a result of the data, it can also be said that these dinners increased participant feelings of connectedness or belonging on campus.

The result of this study demonstrates that this dinner series continues the legacy and success of social justice education as a part of community building and education of community members. In the context of the Let's Talk About Social Justice dinner series, the community was based on a college campus rather than in a movement space, but participants still self-selected to participate and demonstrated an interest in connecting with other community members and increasing awareness and/or comfort levels in discussing topics related to identity, belonging, and Social Justice.

#### *Conclusion*

Based on the above findings, this project was successful in achieving the goals for which it was designed. The responses collected indicate that the dinners were successful in increasing participant comfort in discussing targeted Social Justice related topics and successful in increasing participant feelings of community or belonging on campus.

### *Recommendations*

If this project or something similar to it were to be repeated, I would suggest that it be facilitated by students. While student run projects are harder to sustain across academic years, I believe that events arranged and facilitated by students feel more genuine and less like academic tests or performances. The intention of these dinners was to offer students, faculty, and staff space to work on their own social justice education through sharing with and listening to others in our community. Because the events were not being overseen by administrators, participants may have felt more comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions with others more openly than if they felt that the conversations were being recorded or monitored.

I would also suggest that future iterations of this project could include more questions related to relevant research interests. I chose to limit the number of questions I asked because I wanted the surveys to be as short as possible in order to encourage participants to complete them. I think the surveys could have gotten more out of the participants, and more questions could have been answered about topics such as, likelihood of participants seeking other opportunities for community building or social justice education, likelihood of participants seeking out service opportunities related to topics discussed, and likelihood of participants having conversations related to target topics with individuals who were not present at the dinners. These topics are all hypothetical questioning, but I think that encouraging participants to do some of these things and then surveying them a couple weeks after the event might be a way to further document the impact of the events on participant behavior and mindset.

It would have been beneficial to have a higher participation rate in the entry and exit surveys in order to more accurately summarize participant experiences. If future organizers or researchers could find a way to increase participant completion of surveys, this would greatly benefit the data collection process.

In future research, it would be beneficial to find a way to measure compassion and awareness. This project was able to measure comfort level in discussing the topics I researched, which starts to get at the idea of familiarity and interest, but I believe that events such as the dinners might be capable of increasing empathy and awareness. I also had hoped to practice community organizing to a greater extent through working with different student groups to develop the questions at each dinner, but, due to time constraints, I was not able to do so, and instead I ended up working with faculty and staff to develop the questions. I think that this approach still worked, but I would have liked to collaborate more with the campus community. Future iterations of these events could utilize student groups and organizations and more deeply root conversations in student interest.

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## Appendices

### A. Discussion Questions from Dinner 1: Let's Talk About: Religion & Spirituality

#### a. **Instructions included on the page:**

Feel free to move through these questions in whatever order is comfortable for the table. Try to get to all of the questions, if possible, but also create space for all participants to engage with the conversation as fully as possible and according to personal comfort.

1. Why did you come here tonight?
2. Is there anything in your religious, philosophical, or personal background that inspires you to be involved in Social Justice work/activities on and/or off campus?
3. How familiar are you with interfaith cooperation and dialogue? Do you think interfaith cooperation and activism are necessary to address social inequities?
4. How has your religious or spiritual identity impacted your daily life on campus during the pandemic?
5. How has your religious or spiritual identity affected how you viewed recent political and social events in the US or the world?
6. Do you wish there were more opportunities for building connections and a sense of belonging on campus?
7. Do you have any ideas about how to build more connections and a sense of belonging on campus?

## B. Discussion Questions from Dinner 2: Let's Talk About: Race & Ethnicity

### a. **Instructions included on the page:**

Feel free to move through these questions in whatever order is comfortable for the table. Try to get to all of the questions, if possible, but also create space for all participants to engage with the conversation as fully as possible and according to personal comfort.

1. Why did you come here tonight?
2. Is there anything in your racial and/or ethnic background that inspires you to be involved in Social Justice work/activities on or off campus? Do other elements of your identity intersect with your racial or ethnic identity and result in a motivation to act?
3. Were conversations about race a part of your upbringing? If so, how was the subject approached? How did the people around you talk about other races?
4. How has your racial and ethnic identity impacted your daily life on campus? Has your experience been impacted by the pandemic?
5. Do you think your racial or ethnic identity affected how you viewed recent political and social events in the US or the world?
6. What would a society that values racial and ethnic differences look like? What hopes and fears come up for you when thinking about that society?
7. Do you wish there were more opportunities for building connections and a sense of belonging on campus?
8. Do you have any ideas about how to build more connections and a sense of belonging on campus?

### C. Discussion Questions from Dinner 3: Let's Talk About: Gender & Sexuality

#### a. **Instructions included on the page:**

Feel free to move through these questions in whatever order is comfortable for the table. Try to get to all of the questions, if possible, but also create space for all participants to engage with the conversation as fully as possible and according to personal comfort.

1. Why did you come here tonight?
2. Growing up who or what were the biggest influences in your life regarding your views on gender and sexuality?
3. Have your views on gender and/or sexuality changed since you have come to OWU? If so, can you talk about how your views have changed?
4. Do you think that social media plays a role in challenging traditional gender norms and/or reinforcing them?
5. Has your sexuality and/or gender identity impacted your daily life on campus? Has your experience been impacted by the pandemic? Does your gender identity and/or sexuality impact how you have processed recent social or political events?
6. What are your views on feminism and how have they influenced your perspectives on changing social norms regarding gender in our culture?
7. What would a society without gender inequity look like? What would a society that fully accepts LGBTQIA+ people look like? What hopes and fears come up for you when thinking about that society?
8. Do you wish there were more opportunities for building connections and a sense of belonging on campus? Do you have any ideas about how to build community on campus?