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Intersectionality to Social Justice = Theory to Practice

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Intersectionality to Social Justice = Theory to Practice

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#PROJECTINTERSECTIONS POST - INTERSECTIONALITY TO SOCIAL JUSTICE = THEORY TO PRACTICE



[MultiRacial \(/constituent-groups/kcs/multiracial\)](#)

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NASPA's MultiRacial Knowledge Community's #Projectintersections highlights the intersectionality movement in higher education and student affairs contexts. First used by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term *intersectionality* was used by Crenshaw to describe the experiences of Black women who, because of the intersection of race and gender, are faced with interlocking systems of oppression and marginalization.

Today, intersectionality as a framework is used more broadly to highlight the identities and experiences of people beyond Black women and women of color. Perhaps because intersectionality provides practitioners with a working framework aside from other developmental and identity theories, which several higher education practitioners and scholars have deemed outdated and ineffective as they often focus on single identities. Given its expansion, I define intersectionality as the intersection of salient socially constructed identities

and the extent to which individuals or groups are oppressed or marginalized as a result of interlocking, socially constructed systems of oppression associated with those identities.

While I am encouraged by widespread use of intersectionality as a framework, I caution practitioners and scholars from simply using the intersectionality as a tool to simply describe multiple identities. (Something I still unconsciously fall into at times.) Similarly, Susan Jones (2014) notes,

To only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power. ...intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

I highlight this point because practitioners using intersectional frameworks must recognize with race comes racism, with sexual orientation comes heterosexism/homophobia, with gender comes sexism/transphobia, with religion comes religious intolerance, and among other identities come systems of oppression. In addition, practitioners must recognize these systems of oppression are interlocking, interact, and increasingly marginalize groups who identify with more than one oppressed group.

To begin to move from theory to practice, when starting with intersectionality as a framework acknowledging that deconstructing *all* systems of oppression—or social justice—should be the end goal. Higher education and student affairs practitioners must move beyond identity politics (e.g., fighting just racism) or simply using intersectionality to name multiple identities to recognizing that fighting racism is empty without fighting sexism and classism because moving towards social justice is, in fact, justice for all. This recognition is “*doing* intersectionality well” (Jones, 2014, p. xiv).

As demographics shift and college and university campuses become more diverse, higher education and student affairs practitioners must advocate for, align with, celebrate, and create safe spaces for *all* who inhabit postsecondary spaces and for *all* of who they are.

Intersectionality serves as a powerful framework to help move towards those just practices.

Let us move from theory to practice; let us move from intersectionality to social justice.

Donald Mitchell, Jr., PhD, is assistant professor of higher education at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, MI. His research centers on race, gender, and identity intersections in higher education contexts. He is editor of the newly released book, “[Intersectionality & Higher Education: Theory, Research & Praxis](http://www.amazon.com/Intersectionality-Higher-Education-Theory-Research-Praxis) (http://www.amazon.com/Intersectionality-Higher-Education-Theory-Research/dp/1433125889/ref=tmm_pap_title_0?encoding=UTF8&sr=8&qid=). Follow him on Twitter at @drdonmitchelljr.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139, 139-167.

Jones, S. R. (2014). Foreword. In D. Mitchell, Jr., C. Simmons, & L. Greyerbiehl (Eds.), *Intersectionality & higher education: Theory, research, & praxis* (pp. xi-xiv). New York, NY: Peter Lang.