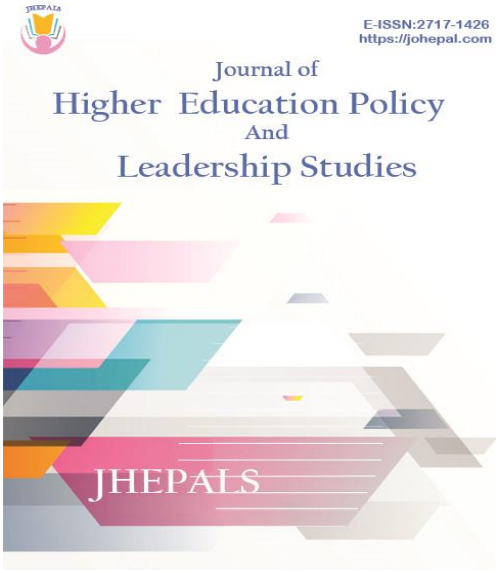
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Civil Discourse and Social Change: A University-wide, Faculty-led Social Justice Initiative within the Neoliberal University



Daniel Olmos [1]
Department of Sociology,
California State University, Northridge, USA
Email: daniel.olmos@csun.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1462-0553

Stevie Ruiz [2]
Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies,
California State University, Northridge, USA
Email: stevie.ruiz@csun.edu

Aimee Carrillo Rowe [3]
Department of Communication Studies,
California State University, Northridge, USA
Email: amiee.carrillorowe@csun.edu

Martha Escobar [4]
Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies,
California State University, Northridge, USA
Email: martha.d.escobar@csun.edu

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Daniel Olmos *
Stevie Ruiz
Aimee Carrillo Rowe
Martha Escobar

Abstract

As U.S. colleges and universities experience increasing diversity and contend with various socio-economic inequities, the university is becoming a site of struggle for reclaiming higher education as a democratic public sphere for social justice. We reflect on the institutional articulation of social justice in higher education by examining a multi-year effort by faculty in various departments to promote social justice education and activism across a large regional public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) university in Southern California. While addressing the tensions between social justice and the neoliberal university, we explore the organizational and pedagogical dimensions of the faculty-led social justice initiative and examine its curricular and cocurricular educational impacts on critical thinking, democratic engagement, and anti-oppressive transformational consciousness among traditionally underserved university students of color. We conclude by discussing implications for social justice-oriented faculty leaders seeking to promote social justice within the neoliberal university which is increasingly under assault by authoritarian forces opposed to democratically engaged and anti-oppressive education. We hope that our social justice project provides lessons on how a coalition of interdisciplinary faculty can effectively push universities to meaningfully embrace social justice education and activism.

Keywords: Social Justice; Cocurricular; Higher Education; Critical Pedagogy; Neoliberal University

*Corresponding author's email: daniel.olmos@csun.edu

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Introduction

In recent decades, the U.S. university system has seen a growing movement challenging racial inequality and other naturalized social hierarchies, led by social justice-oriented university students, staff, faculty, and administrators (Anderson and Span 2016; Alzate Gonzalez 2015; Cabrera, 2012; Kandaswamy, 2007; Ruiz 2019; Tichavakunda, 2022). These efforts have also been accompanied by protests against tuition hikes and budget cuts following the 2008 Great Recession, leading some scholars to celebrate a revival of the student movement influenced by Occupy Wall Street and related economic justice movements (Amador 2011; Ferguson 2017; Levenson, 2011; McCarthy 2012). The university has become a site of struggle as a result of various challenges, including unacknowledged legacies of slavery on university campuses, administrative and state lawmakers' opposition to ethnic studies curriculum and diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, tuition hikes driven by austerity-driven measures, and toxic campus climates experienced by various minoritized people. According to Henry Giroux, the contested terrain of the university in this regard provides multiple opportunities for "reclaiming higher education as a democratic public sphere" (Giroux 2015, 10) by fostering critical thinking, promoting civic engagement, and facilitating transformational change. Higher education plays a crucial role in shaping the minds of future generations who will navigate complex social, political, and economic issues. In this way, social justice education has become increasingly important as it centers marginalized perspectives, uncovers and challenges oppressive systems, and promotes ways of seeing and being that facilitate a more just, equitable, and liberating society.

As U.S. colleges and universities experience increasing diversity among their faculty, staff, and student populations (Elwick, 2020; Espinosa, et al., 2019; Smith, 2020) and begin addressing various inequities (Crimmins, 2022), social justice efforts on campuses have taken multiple forms. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the institutionalization of anti-bias training for faculty, staff, and students (Bonomi, 2019; Bui et al., 2022), the institutional and cultural changes fostered by ethnic/racial and gender/queer studies movements and broader multicultural curricular requirements (Engberg 2004; Ferguson 2017; Hall et al., 2021) as well as their transformational impact on student social consciousness and critical civic engagement (Bowman 2011; Denson 2009; Stake and Hoffmann 2001). Most significantly, education research has highlighted how professors engage in multicultural social justice-oriented pedagogies in classroom settings (Berila, 2016; Cho, 2017; Mayhew & Fernández, 2007). Scholars have also identified the role of student affairs professionals (Lechuga et al., 2009; Pope et al., 2019), service-learning opportunities (Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Grain & Lund, 2016), diversity orientation programs (Burke & Banks, 2012; Cahn, et al., 2022; Boening & Miller, 2005), campus cultural centers (Gonzalez, 2022; Patton, 2010), counseling services (Vera, et al., 2016) and university administration support (Gordon & Gordon, 2017) in promoting multicultural competence, anti-racism, and social justice across university campuses. While these processes and projects are important to understand the institutionalization of social justice in higher education, discussions about how anti-oppressive efforts are promoted through campus-wide faculty-led initiatives have remained limited.

This article presents a contribution to ongoing conversations surrounding the articulation of social justice in higher education by examining a multi-year effort by faculty

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in various departments to promote social justice education and activism across a large regional public Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) university in Southern California. The article begins by addressing the institutional tensions that often exist between social justice and neoliberalism within higher education and sets the stage to explore a faculty-led social justice initiative and its impact within the context of the larger university. Next, the article describes the specific campus demographics and historical context of the faculty-led social justice initiative to contextualize the unique challenges and opportunities that exist within the university, as well as how the social justice initiative was tailored to meet the needs of the diverse campus community. The article then provides an in-depth explanation of the three pillars of the social justice education and activism initiative which serve as the organizational priorities of the faculty-led effort on campus. The article also assesses the impacts of the social justice initiative on student social consciousness and their willingness to engage in societal transformation before discussing implications. Overall, this article presents a compelling case for the importance of faculty-led social justice initiatives within higher education and provides insights for other institutions seeking to promote social justice on their campuses.

Social Justice and the Neoliberal University

The pursuit of social justice in higher education has been a long-standing concern for students, faculty, and staff. Social justice efforts contest systemic exclusion, subordination, and oppression and aim to foster a more equitable society. Social justice education, according to Charlisle, Jackson, & George (2006), is "the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability), foster critical perspectives, and promote social action" (p. 57). Originating from the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, social justice education facilitates teaching and learning that move students from awareness to activism and closes the "principal-implementation gap" where students often abstractly support social justice but are less inclined to participate in actions to eliminate injustices (Bell, 2016; Brookfield, 2003; Grayman & Godfrey, 2013; Howard et al., 2022). At the university level, social justice is often associated with multiculturalism and is tied to curricular and cocurricular initiatives that promote civic engagement, critical consciousness, mutual recognition, democratic deliberation, collective accountability, and other forms of anti-oppressive transformational change. From a social justice perspective, the role of higher education goes beyond simply equipping students with skills and credentials to become professionals on the job market; instead, higher education primarily seeks to foster critical thinking, active citizenship, and democratic engagement with the aim of producing future agents of transformative social change (Harkavy, 2006).

Social justice programs in U.S. universities have been the subject of considerable debate and are a byproduct of complex organizational processes (Heybach, 2009; Skubikowski et al., 2009). Much scholarship has emphasized the significance of university faculty involvement in social justice and equity initiatives as a means for promoting inclusive and critical pedagogies, which help students develop the capacity and agency to shape their own futures (Dewsbury, et al., 2021; Giroux, 2003; McArthur, 2010; McLaren, 2020). University social justice programs are often faculty-driven, politically and ideologically

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controversial, regularly encumbered by organizational struggles over control, direction, and funding, and require substantial "public relations" efforts to promote, maintain, and expand (Boucher, 2010). Given the difficulties involved in changing higher education institutions, St. Clair and Groccia (2009) suggest that advocates of social justice in universities should focus on three main factors to succeed: commitment to a vision for social justice education that coheres with the institution's culture, engagement in a change process that is participatory and collaborative, and the establishment of a robust leadership to create the necessary collaborations to accomplish their vision. Despite the developmental and organizational challenges of institutionalizing social justice programs, the overall growth of social justice-oriented goals across U.S. colleges and universities has been well documented (Devies et al., 2023).

While historical and recent student movements have helped advance anti-oppressive efforts on college campuses (Boren, 2001; Moreno, 2020; Rhoads, 2016), the contemporary university is increasingly shaped by a neoliberal agenda. Critical scholars of higher education have identified three market-driven trends that characterize the neoliberal university and undermine the pursuit of social justice education: privatization, marketization, and entrepreneurialism (Giroux, 2015; Mintz, 2021). Privatization emphasizes private funding and public-private partnerships, rather than public funding and state control, which have negatively impacted public university systems across the country. Marketization promotes the notion that education is a product to be consumed, casting students as customers who pay for it, and measuring educational quality by likelihood of securing high-paying jobs in desirable economic sectors. Entrepreneurism encourages universities to view themselves as businesses, incentivizing administrators to cut costs and outsource, while demanding academic units to create credentialing programs to compete with other universities for student enrollment. These neoliberal trends in higher education have considerably transformed education into a commodity for private consumption rather than a public good, eroded critical thinking and academic freedom, and exacerbated social and economic inequalities (Darder, 2012; Dolgon, 2017; Pusser, 2006; Newfield, 2021; Sleeter, 2014). Critics have argued that neoliberalism has shifted public higher education from a social institution whose goal is to prepare engaged citizens for democracy, to an industry that produces competitive graduates for the job market and research that supports corporate interests (Suspitsyna, 2012). The pedagogies of the neoliberal university educate students to view themselves as market-oriented subjects rather than as democratic agents with collective responsibilities to the overall public good. Under a neoliberal model of education that prioritizes private interests over social and civic responsibility, Giroux (2015) argues that "public spheres and educational realms necessary for students to imagine alternative futures and horizons of possibility begin to disappear" (p. 7).

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Figure 1. Faculty-led social justice efforts in the neoliberal university

While higher education has become increasingly neoliberalized, efforts to promote social justice and anti-oppressive education have persisted (Macrine et al., 2010). Some scholars have argued that neoliberal educational systems have commodified and absorbed multiculturalism and social justice into university branding and global economic competitiveness through a whitewashing process of "neoliberal multiculturalism" (Atasay, 2014; Darder, 2012; Malemed, 2006). Nonetheless, faculty, administrators, student service professionals, and counselors have persisted in advancing genuine social justice agendas through community engaged equity-based curricular and cocurricular activities, despite facing institutional obstacles and incorporation within the neoliberal university. Museus and LePeau (2019) propose various strategies to advance social justice in the context of the neoliberal university. These include reducing the influence and power of oppressive external factors (austerity and reactionary politics), refocusing the university's mission and resources of the university on democratic education, and supporting student, staff, and faculty activism that is consistent with campus-wide social justice objectives. This approach views the university as a terrain of struggle, where social justice faculty and advocates promote ideas, cultivate cultures, and distribute resources that advances equity and social transformation. According to Tomlinson and Lipsitz (2013), these struggles within and against the neoliberal university are best understood as "insubordinate spaces" where critiques of neoliberalism and social oppression emerge, democratic desires flourish, and new anti-oppressive imaginaries and subjectivities are formed. Similarly, Darder (2012) notes that social justice advocates in higher education should tenaciously "seek to create political links between the classroom, campus, and community, in ways that foster a more seamless political democratic understanding of theory and practice" (p. 422). In alignment with such counter-hegemonic imperatives within the neoliberal university, this article presents a case study of Civil Discourse and Social Change (CDSC), a faculty-led initiative

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centered on social justice education and activism that aims to foster student learning by creating political connections and facilitating students as agents of social transformation.

Institutional and Historical Context

Social justice efforts in diverse regional public higher education systems advance equity within universities as much as they contribute to a more just society outside the university (Brennen & Naidoo, 2008). CDSC was established at California State University, Northridge (CSUN)—a leading institution in diversity as designated Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) located in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles, California. With an enrollment of 36,123 students in Fall 2022, CSUN is one of the largest universities in Southern California. The student body is predominately comprised of first-generation college students (70%), with 55.5% identifying as Hispanic or Latinx, 20% identifying as White, 9.4% identifying as Asian, Southwest Asian or North African, 4.7% identifying as Black or African American, and 3% identifying as multiracial (CSUN, 2022). According to the 2022 CollegeNET's "Social Mobility Index" (SMI), which assesses universities' ability to enroll students from low-income backgrounds, provide affordable education, and prepare graduates for successful futures, CSUN ranks #15 in the nation (CollegeNET, 2022). CSUN's status as an HSI, its diverse student demographics, and its impressive track record in promoting social mobility position it among the ranks of accomplished Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs). This standing provides unique opportunities for innovating new ideas and practices in social justice education (Ross, 2014; Staryhorn & Hirt, 2008). Generally, MSIs play an important role in higher education, as they serve historically underrepresented student populations who have faced systemic marginalization and are keenly aware of the pressing need for social justice.

In response to rising university tuition costs in Spring 2010, a student-led social movement at CSUN gave rise to the establishment of CDSC. The movement was primarily comprised of first generation, low-income, and historically underrepresented students of color who were concerned about their exclusion from the university due to their limited access to financial resources. As their concerns spread across campus, numerous faculty, staff, and administrators from various disciplinary and interdisciplinary departments joined students in protesting the rising costs of tuition and were met with harsh police repression which resulted in the arrest of several key student activists and a severely injured sociology professor (Los Angeles Daily News, 2010). This important protest formed part of a larger national student movement that arose in response to neoliberal policies of austerity imposed by lawmakers in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession, which resulted in cuts to state funding and increased tuition fees (Bady & Konczal, 2012; Levenson, 2011; Maira & Sze, 2012). Capitalizing on the momentum of campus protests that semester (see Figure 2), Dr. Marta López-Garza, Dr. Kathryn Sorrells, and other faculty members leveraged the support of the Office of the Provost to create opportunities for critical engagement in and out of the classroom. These discussions and efforts identified the need to establish a connection between student activism and social justice-focused curriculum, ultimately leading to the founding of CDSC. As such, CDSC as a social justice education and activism project grew out of the social movement needs of vulnerable students at CSUN and continues to link its priorities and activities to the struggles of majority underserved student populations and their communities.

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Figure 2. CSUN students protesting tuition hikes take over city streets, 2010. This protest movement launched the creation of CDSC. Photo courtesy of Marta Lopez-Garza.

In addition, CDSC's affiliated and allied faculty from various departments and divisions reflect the diversity of Los Angeles County and CSUN's increasingly diverse faculty. Over the last several years, newly appointed underrepresented and minoritized tenure-track faculty have joined CDSC from across campus including departments of Sociology, Communication Studies, Gender and Women Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Deaf Studies, Journalism, Africana Studies, and Asian American Studies. As CDSC programming continues to grow, CDSC plans to formalize its relationship with the university by becoming a teaching and learning center that will host its own research agenda. Interdisciplinary CDSC faculty leaders have carried out their work with the support of various CSUN campus entities, in particular the Office of the Provost and, most recently, the Office of the President's Commission on Diversity and Inclusion. After the 2021 appointment of a new university president who is a vocal advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), CDSC faculty leaders have strategically aligned their initiative with the university's DEI efforts to secure organizational legitimacy and institutional resources in order to advance CDSC's agenda.

CDSC Vision and Organizational Priorities

Drawing on social justice education theory and practice, CDSC's strives to create meaningful educational opportunities that address the challenges and structural inequities that impact the daily lives of CSUN students and their communities (Brennen & Naidoo, 2008; Cho, 2017). To achieve this, CDSC has established a coalition of students, faculty, staff, and community members to provide high impact learning activities that reveal injustices, promote community engagement, and encourage student activism. Informed by nonviolent social justice methods and theories developed out of the civil rights movement, CDSC advocates for constructive engagement with controversial social issues, employing a nonviolent model of social change (Lawson Jr., 2022; Wang, 2013). The vision of CDSC is deeply rooted in the teachings of Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr., a renowned civil rights activist who collaborates with CDSC organizers to translate theories of nonviolent struggle into action. Recognized by Martin Luther King, Jr. as "the leading theorist and strategist of

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nonviolence in the world," Reverend Lawson, Jr. has been a vital leader in CDSC, offering public lectures, leading workshops, developing curriculum on nonviolent struggle, and teaching courses on the philosophy and methodology of nonviolent social change. Inspired by Reverend Lawson, Jr.'s life work, CDSC's public lectures and programming provides students with opportunities to engage critically with the importance of mutual care and consideration for fellow human beings, animal species, and the planet.

This unique approach to social justice teaching and learning echoes best practices in anti-oppressive education. According to Kumashiro (2000), anti-oppressive education is made up of four approaches: education for the other, education about the other, education that is critical of privileging and othering, and education that changes students and society. By centering the knowledges of marginalized communities challenging systems of oppression at a predominately non-white and working-class public university, CDSC's nonviolent social justice approach addresses all of these aspects and promotes a transformational education that helps change students as they change society at large. To enhance anti-oppressive nonviolent education, CDSC works to move students from awareness to activism through what Howard et al. (2022) identify as the three dimensions of social justice education: recognition of inequality, determination to do something about those inequalities, and the willingness to engage in collective transformational change. In this way, CDSC is committed to creating meaningful educational opportunities for underserved students that address structural inequities and provide them with tools for resisting systemic oppression.

CDSC actively advances social justice education and activism through its three interrelated pillars: Public Programming, Teaching Commons, and Curriculum (see Figure 3). Public Programming events, lectures, and workshops provide opportunities for students to come together and learn about the collaborative nature of mutual respect and dialogue in transforming their world into a more socially just and livable society. Tied to the initiative's public programming, CDSC's faculty engage with their students by assigning shared reading lists under the Teaching Commons on various themes, including police brutality, environmental inequality, immigration justice. CDSC's Curriculum features a course on nonviolent struggle and civil rights taught by Rev. Lawson, Jr., an iconic figure of the civil rights movement. This course is encouraged for all students who seek deepening their knowledge and understanding of social justice. At the core of CDSC's philosophy is a commitment to student engagement through dialogue, where students learn to recognize injustice and problem-solve via mutual respect and dignity. In line with scholarship on critical pedagogies in higher education (Giroux, 2003; McArthur, 2010), the vision is to create a more critically engaged student population that can translate the values and spirit of transformative democracy into their everyday lives. CDSC embraces an inclusive and liberating model of education, where the classroom becomes a democratic space for students to engage, dialogue, and learn from other's diverse perspectives and experiences, with the potential to establish common ground for collective action (McLaren, 2018; Ochoa & Pineda, 2008; Waghid, 2001). These critical engagement skills are essential in addressing social issues that persistently harm U.S. society, including mass incarceration, immigration reform, financial crises, climate change, and LGBTQ+ discrimination.

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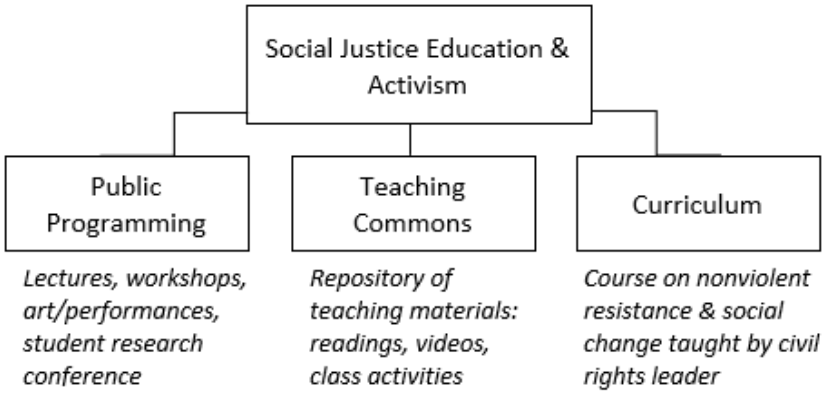


Figure 3. The three pillars of Civil Discourse and Social Change

Public Programming

Informed by scholarship emphasizing the positive impact of cocurricular engagement on students' learning, social, civic, and political commitments (Trolian & Barnhardt, 2017), CDSC provides an array of creative cocurricular Public Programming on campus aimed at promoting anti-oppressive and nonviolent social transformation. These public programs include lectures, workshops, music, performance, and the visual arts, and revolve around social justice themes. In recent years, CDSC themes have covered a range of important issues, including queer migrations, environmental racism, militarism, prison abolition, disability justice, and housing justice. Given the breadth and depth of these topics, and in line with intersectional social justice approaches in higher education (Chan, Erby & Ford, 2017), invited lecturers and workshop leaders engage with the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and power within U.S. society as well in global contexts. For example, Setsu Shigematsu, an Asian American feminist scholar whose work focuses on U.S. militarism in the Pacific, conducted a workshop for over two hundred students from various invited classes (Shigematsu & Camacho, 2010). During the session, students engaged critically with the impacts of militarism on the Asia Pacific region, as well as U.S. society, and generated a broader discussion of recent U.S. military engagements in the Middle East. In addition, Shigematsu led students in a creative activity where they were encouraged to imagine alternatives to U.S. militarism based on her involvement with a collective that produces a book series called The Guardian Princess Alliance. This book series features children's stories in which young protagonists encounter strong and ethical heroines who join forces to challenge structural inequalities like violence, land theft, and environmental degradation. Through workshops such as Shigematsu's, which offer students the chance to draw, interact with the speaker, and work together, students are encouraged to recognize a social problem (i.e. militarism) and collectively imagine socio-political resistance to it.

CDSC consistently draw a high attendance for its public lectures, frequently filling campus event spaces to capacity. CDSC utilizes an email listserv comprised of affiliated and allied faculty and staff, as well as bulletin boards throughout campus, to advertise public events and attract students who are interested in social justice issues. Affiliated and allied faculty members support CDSC cocurricular public programs by offering extra credit to students who attend these events. The directors of CDSC often coordinate with faculty who

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teach social justice-focused courses in various departments to schedule public events during class time and encourage these faculty members to integrate the events into their course instruction. This approach boosts attendance to maximize impact and enhances social justice curriculum across departments and divisions. In addition, student participation is increased when individual students become aware of CDSC events that align with their research interests. For instance, during a three-part series on environmental justice, student activists involved in climate change awareness attended CDSC lectures despite not being required to do so for their individually enrolled courses and benefited from meeting and learning from invited scholars and activists. CDSC cocurricular public lectures and workshops have not only drawn the attention of students and faculty, but also community members. When renowned environmental justice scholar Laura Pulido was invited by CDSC to deliver a lecture on campus, news of her visit quickly spread among CSUN community, attracting environmentalists, local educators, and other community members to attend. The packed audience for Pulido's lecture highlighted the value of public lectures and workshops as a space where students engage with a wider community and serves as an outreach tool. These campus-community learning relationships are proven high-impact learning experiences for students and have demonstrated positive effects on student civic engagement (Wawrzynski & Bladwin, 2014). Moreover, inviting external academics and activists to campus allows students to receive a more comprehensive education by engaging with experts who are not their regular professors. Often many of these invited scholars and experts are excited to engage with CSUN students due to the university's reputation as a diverse HSI and robust public institution of higher education.

In 2017, CDSC's "Art and Activism" theme featured a variety of programming that addressed important social justice issues, including women's incarceration, environmental justice, and impunity at the U.S.-Mexico border. The programming included invited artists and community leaders who provided insights into these savage inequalities. One such artist was Ana Teresa Fernández, who presented her work "Erasing the border (Borrando la Frontera)" and held art workshops for students. In addition, CDSC collaborated with students to create an art installation titled "Journey up North/Hacia el Norte," which examined the experiences of migration that inform the majority of CSUN's large Latinx-identified student body. CDSC also co-hosted CSUN's Sustainability Day Annual Lecture in partnership with the Institute for Sustainability on campus. During this lecture, Fabian Garcia from the U.S. Forest Service and Vanessa Torres from the National Parks Service presented on the challenges Latinxs face in visiting federal lands and waters, as well as programs they have implemented to reimagine Latinxs relationship with nature with the intend to cultivate environmental justice frameworks. What's more, CDSC hosted an event on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, featuring Susan Burton, the founder of A New Way of Life, a women's re-entry program in Watts, California. This well attended public event raised questions concerning the intersectional oppressions of the "new Jim Crow" and facilitated a serious consideration of prison abolition politics. Overall, CDSC cocurricular programs provide unique venues for exploring critical social justice issues that facilitate meaningful dialogue between faculty, students, politically informed artists and community leaders.

In addition to public lectures and workshops, over the last six years CDSC has hosted an annual Social Justice Student Research Conference. Previous research has found that student conferences positively impact student learning by fostering increased self-

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confidence, self-efficacy and intellectual autonomy, promoting networking and learning communities, develop meaningful faculty-student relationships, and facilitate student identity formations as researchers and scholars (Hill & Walkington, 2016; Little, 2020). CDSC's Social Justice Student Research Conference provides a platform for undergraduate and graduate students engaged in social justice-oriented research from across various disciplines to showcase their scholarship and receive feedback from peers, faculty, and community members. Students are required to submit abstracts of their research presentations and CDSC directors select and organize papers into thematic social justice sessions for the day-long conference program. Students are encouraged to present their research and community engagement projects through traditional panel presentations or other creative formats. In addition to student research presentation panels, the conference invites one or two renowned social justice scholars and/or activists to present keynote addresses that highlight the importance of bridging academic and community-based social justice efforts. This conference has previously featured musical performances by local musicians and incorporated a social justice art auction, with the proceeds from the auction going to support community organizations and other social transformation projects in the Los Angeles area. CDSC's cocurricular public programming have been highly successful in promoting social justice education by providing valuable learning experiences for students across disciplines and serving as a platform for students to engage with wider communities to promote transformational change.

Teaching Commons

CDSC employs a cooperative and collaborative pedagogical model that involves faculty members from various departments across the university (Briggs, 2007; Chenault, 2017). This model is supported by its Teaching Commons that provide faculty a set of learning materials and best practices to address critical social issues that are reflected in its public programming. Huber and Hutchings (2005) refer to teaching commons as a space where educators dedicated to inquiry and innovation exchange ideas about teaching and learning, and apply them to the challenge of educating students for personal, professional, and civic life. CDSC affiliated faculty are invited to share teaching resources, such as readings (books, book chapters, journal articles, reports, newspaper articles), visual media (documentaries, video clips, art, posters, websites), sample assignments, and various classroom activities, which are made available on the CDSC website and categorized under various "Current Freedom Issues." CDSC's teaching commons provided a shared curriculum and range of pedagogical tools that are often used by faculty in individual courses and classrooms. These teaching common are a repository of teaching materials to help faculty promote shared anti-oppressive learning among students, specifically related to CDSC's high impact public programming.

CDSC has effectively connected teaching and public programming by utilizing its teaching commons. This was evidenced by CDSC's three-part series on environmental justice. Before the public series, CDSC affiliated faculty shared reading materials that were uploaded to the teaching commons. These resources were then made available to other faculty members who incorporated them into their syllabi to prepare their classes for the CDSC public lectures and workshops that were scheduled for that semester. This preparation

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allowed students to become acquainted with the topic of environmental justice and provided clear context for them to relate the reading material to the public program they would be attending. Post-event evaluations revealed that students found the material more relatable after hearing from invited scholars, community members, and activists who provided real-world examples. In addition to deepening social justice learning in the context of CDSC's public programs, CDSC teaching commons have also proven effective in helping overcome learning challenges that arise from large class sizes and adjunctification in the neoliberal university. The increasing demand on faculty with larger class sizes and the increase reliance on overworked and exploited adjunct lecturers across the California State University (CSU) system, as well as other public universities in the U.S., has led to compromised student learning and engagement with course material (Abendroth & Porfilio, 2015; Tirelli, 2014). Despite facing high student-faculty ratios, overworked adjunct faculty, and feelings of discomfort and intimidation with difficult readings, students have reported improved engagement and learning with course materials that were tied to CDSC public programs.

CDSC's public programming and teaching commons facilitates social justice education on topics that empower marginalized students, fostered high-impact learning, and narrow educational opportunity gaps. For example, 2015-16 CDSC events and teaching commons included: Black Lives Matter; Indigenous Arts and Music; Campus Sexual Assault; Militarism; and Queer Migration. In 2016-17 events examined: Hunger and Homelessness among CSUN Students; Mental Health among CSUN Students; Disappearances in Latin America; Disability/Differently-Abled Justice; and Environmental Justice. From 2018-2022, CDSC events and teaching commons included: Prison Abolition; COVID-19 and Social Inequalities; Anti-Asian Hate; Black Lives Matter; Iranian Freedom Movements; and Immigration Justice. Analysis of data collected before and after these events shows that they provide students with intensive, high-impact learning opportunities. The topics covered in these events and readings are particularly empowering for students of color, first-generation college students, queer students, migrant students, working class students, and others whose life conditions challenge their ability to succeed in college.

To facilitate safe and supportive learning environments for students who originate from traditionally underserved communities, CDSC employs a student engagement model that emphasizes collaboration among faculty members across multiple courses through its teaching commons. One of the major goals is to build students' confidence to participate actively in large settings such as lecture halls or public workshops once they have mastered the CDSC-informed course material. This approach is grounded in educational research that highlights how "communities of practice" such as CDSC teaching commons positively improve student learning by providing faculty with resources and pedagogical tools to better facilitate active student engagement and participation (Groccia, 2018; Collaço, 2017; Walsh et al., 2013; Zepke, 2015). These teaching commons serve as valuable resources for faculty and students to engage in critical thinking and learning about social justice issues. Their success highlights the importance of creating collaborative spaces which promote active learning in social justice and anti-oppressive education.

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Curriculum

CDSC has developed a distinctive curriculum that provides students with a comprehensive understanding of nonviolent philosophies and social movements through a historical perspective. For over a decade, Reverend James Lawson, an eminent figure in nonviolent education and civil rights activism, has taught an upper division course on nonviolent social change for CDSC at CSUN. With his experience and past collaboration with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Lawson has established himself as a leading authority on nonviolent resistance and social movement activism. Since the 1960s, he has participated in numerous social justice movements, advocating for racial and economic justice, immigrant, and LGBTQ+ rights, both as a leader and an advisor. As a visiting instructor and recently a Distinguished Scholar, Lawson is an example as to how CDSC has bridged the gap between community leaders and the CSUN campus. Lawson's association with CDSC has brought together community leaders and the CSUN campus, putting into practice what education scholars term the "community engaged university" (Curwood et al., 2011; Kecskes & Foster, 2013).

Under Rev. Lawson's mentorship, students enrolled in his nonviolent social transformation course critically engage with methods, theories, and strategies that activists utilized during the civil rights and other movements. Rev. Lawson's pedagogical approach can be best described as that of a "warm demander" in the classroom (Ware, 2006). As a warm demander, he demonstrates the utmost respect for his students and their experiences while also challenging them to think deeply about how examples discussed in class relate to their everyday lives and society. Through his mentorship and teaching, Rev. Lawson has played a critical role in inspiring students to imagine possibilities for social change when young people engage in the work of social justice. Rev. Lawson's course on nonviolent social change also engages in what scholars call "pedagogies of agonistic democracy," which highlight the importance of productive conflict in social justice education (Sant et al., 2021). Since CDSC's affiliated faculty, students, and community members may have divergent views on how to achieve social justice, Rev. Lawson's course on nonviolent resistance and social change provides students a historical background on various social movements and their internal tensions, with a particular emphasis on the U.S. civil rights struggles for equality and freedom during the 1960s. For instance, Mahatma Gandhi's advocacy for nonviolent organized resistance was a significant influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Lawson. However, as Lawson's course explores, not all activists during the civil rights movement agreed with King's and Lawson's stance on nonviolent resistance, leading to divisions among the movement. By studying the competing views within the civil rights movement, Rev. Lawson's course allows students gain a better understanding of the high stakes involved in activist struggles and gives them analytic tools to negotiate ideological tensions in the various movements that they may participate in the future.

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Figure 4. Civil rights leader Rev. Lawson Jr. facilitating a nonviolent resistance workshop for CSUN students in front of the university library, 2011. Photo courtesy of Marta Lopez-Garza

Rev. Lawson's course highlights that social justice involves a multitude of actors with diverse perspectives and opinions, and that social change if an often messy and highly contested phenomena. Instead of presenting a simplified version of historical figures such as Gandhi and Dr. King, students learn about the struggles that these leaders faced in adopting nonviolent resistance as a philosophical stance, personal discipline, and a path for social change. Indeed, the course emphasizes the human dimension of these historical figures and social movements, encouraging students to place themselves in their position or in the movement and understand the stakes of the decisions that movement leaders faced while pursuing social justice. In this way, Rev. Lawson's course on social justice not only presents social change as a process-oriented collective action but does it in a way that engages a critical pedagogy in line with radical democratic principles that center issues of inclusion/exclusion, conflict, negotiation, and refusal (Mouffe, 1999; Zembylas, 2022). Critical education scholars have argued that liberatory pedagogy must move beyond critique and highlight diversity, difference, and disagreement to help drive social change processes forward in a more productive fashion (McArthur, 2010). As seen in Figure 4, CDSC's distinctive curriculum on nonviolent social change taught by a renowned civil rights elder provides valuable insights for academic leaders in other institutions on how to establish connections between the university and the community to advance social justice and anti-oppressive education.

Surveying Social Justice Education

Since educating people about social justice is a challenging task, researchers have developed various tools and methods to measure the effectiveness of social justice education (Howard

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et al, 2022; Misco & Shiveley, 2016; Torres-Harding et al., 2015). To assess the impact of its cocurricular programming and educational efforts, CDSC has established a system for conducting pre- and post-session surveys with students who attend its workshops, lectures, and other public events. These surveys are crucial for CDSC to gather feedback and improve learning outcomes of its public programming and associated teaching commons, especially given the nontraditional student population of the campus, which includes commuters, full-time workers, and parents. In addition to assessing student learning outcomes, CDSC uses survey feedback to adjust its public event schedules and ensure accessibility for most students. Survey questions cover a broad range of topics, including students' previous exposure to addressed topics, confidence in their knowledge of a topic, scheduling preferences, advertising effectiveness, and areas of interest for future events. By incorporating survey feedback, CDSC is capable of better tailoring its programming to meet the needs and interests of the university's diverse student body. In addition, survey results are used to demonstrate effective impact to continue justifying requests for funding from university entities such the Office of the Provost and the Office of the President's DEI initiatives.

CDSC surveys conducted both prior to and after each event provide valuable data regarding students' exposure to anti-oppressive topics and social justice issues. According to Howard et al. (2022), social justice education is measured based on three dimensions: 1) recognition of inequality, 2) determination to do something about the inequality, and 3) the willingness to engage in action to eliminate or reduce the inequality. In terms of the first dimension of recognizing inequality and the second dimension of determining what to do about the inequality, a survey conducted at an environmental (in)justice event revealed that 21.6 percent of students reported having no awareness of the topic prior to the event. However, in the post-event survey, this number dropped to 0 percent, with 40 percent of students reporting that they felt competent and 60 percent disclosing that they were confident in what they knew about the topic. Over time, students demonstrated that they were well versed in the topic and could effectively communicate information about environmental injustice and environmental justice to other peers on campus. This data is remarkable considering that the lectures/workshops were conducted within a one-hour timeframe, and students were able to retain the information post-event. Evidence of increased competency of topics covered by CDSC events is significant, as students expressed a heightened social consciousness such as the recognition of inequality (environmental injustice) and the determination to do something about it (environmental justice). At a "Queer Migrations" event, student surveys revealed a compelling case that student participation in programming enhanced their social consciousness on issues that significantly impacted members of their community. Students were surveyed both prior and post event, and one of the questions assessed students' awareness of the struggles and injustices that queer migrants face. As shown on Table 1, students' knowledge on this topic and recognition of equalities faced by queer migrant communities significantly increased after their attendance. This dramatic shift is significant as students develop into social justice advocates by beginning to determine what to do about the inequality and eventually generate a willingness to participate in activism and social transformation.

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Table 1.
Queer Migrations Pre and Post Event Surveys

Students with little information	Shifted from 58.5 percent to 15.8 percent
Students with some information	Shifted from 34.2 percent to 63.2 percent
Students felt confident on the topic	Shifted from 4.9 percent to 15.9 percent

Source: Civil Discourse and Social Change, 2016

Regarding the second and third dimension of social justice, which involve determining actions against inequality and the willingness to participate in collective efforts against inequalities, students have utilized the knowledge that they acquired through CDSC cocurricular programming as a foundation for their nascent activism. At the "Queer Migrations" and "Environmental Justice" events, students overwhelmingly agreed in both the pre-event and post-event surveys that addressing social inequality is of the utmost importance. Most interestingly, during the "Militarism" series, students were asked whether militarism, defined as the use of military force to address social problems, should be opposed. As shown in Table 2, the pre-event survey revealed that students were mostly neutral on the issue. However, post-event surveys recorded a significant shift toward most students believing that militarism should be stopped. This change in opinion could be attributed to various reasons, one of which is that many of the students were born between 1997 and 2004, a period in which the United States had been in a constate state of warfare. This extended exposure to militarism may have normalized it in their everyday lives, rendering them oblivious to its status as a social problem.

Table 2.
Militarism Pre and Post Event Surveys

Students felt neutral about stopping militarism	Shifted from 58 to 30 percent after event
Students felt it was important to stop militarism	Shifted from 32 to 57 percent after event

Source: Civil Discourse and Social Change, 2016

The results of pre- and post- event surveys indicate that CDSC's cocurricular programming elicited a highly favorable response from students, suggesting that the initiative's social justice education efforts can serve as a means of bridging the "principal-implementation gap" (Grayman & Godfrey, 2013). This gap refers to the phenomenon where students tend to express support for social justice in theory yet are less likely to participate in contentious collective action aimed at effecting social transformation.

Across all our studies, participants reported that CDSC-sponsored events helped them acquire new knowledge about recognizing inequalities, identifying actions to take against inequalities, and facilitated their willingness to engage in social justice activism. These findings underscore the value of CDSC's efforts as an effective pedagogical strategy for advancing social justice in higher education. Moreover, they highlight the potential of CDSC's approach to inspire and motivate students to become active agents of change and address the urgent challenges of social injustice in our moment of capitalist crisis. In addition, the use of surveys as a form of eliciting student input reflects CDSC's commitments to create programs that reflect the needs of its diverse student body and their communities. In a 2017

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survey, students overwhelmingly voted they wanted us to address issues that pertained to Hunger and Homelessness among CSUN Students; Criminalization of Poor People and People of Color; Mental Health among CSUN Students; Disability/Differently-Abled Justice, and Environmental Justice. Under CDSC's "Art and Activism" theme the following year, students engaged with each of these topics through the expression of art as a tool for social change. By performing and enacting collaborative input, CDSC also models the importance of democratic deliberation and collective accountability to the communities it serves, in particular first-generation working-class students of color.

Discussion and Implications

Although social justice in higher education has been a vague and sometimes strategically ambiguous institutional category within the neoliberal university (Devies et al., 2023), CDSC provides a case study of how a coalition of interdisciplinary faculty can effectively push universities to meaningfully embrace social justice education and activism. CDSC's model of social justice education is organized around faculty collaborating in a "community of practice." A community of practice is a system that fosters collective belonging, inquiry, and reflection around a shared interest, creating a collective identity within an institutional context (Wenger, 2000). CDSC recruits and attracts social justice-oriented faculty who reflect the experiences of the campus' marginalized student populations and provides opportunities for collective engagement in social justice education and activism with similarly situated faculty. This community of practice not only produces a set of shared critical pedagogical practices in the form of teaching commons linked to high-impact social justice cocurricular public programs, but also cultivates mentorship relationships between senior and junior faculty navigating the limits and constraints of the neoliberal university. Through this unique community of practice, CDSC faculty have established a strong collective identity as social justice advocates. This socio-political identity among faculty becomes a valuable resource in the challenging work of fostering critical thinking, active citizenship, and radical democratic engagement within a neoliberal university system that treats education as a commodity and students as customers. What's more, this collective identity with its associated social support system helps retain minoritized junior faculty from working class communities who are often first-generation college graduates. This unique practice positively contributes to the important work of faculty development in a large comprehensive public university that strives toward diversity and inclusion. In these ways, CDSC's initiative demonstrates the significance of intentional and strategic efforts to build communities of practice among social justice advocates in higher education.

CDSC's initiative also reveals the importance of cocurricular student engagement in social justice education. Educational psychology research highlights that cocurricular experiences centered on multiculturalism and social justice represent effective approaches to engaging various students in recognizing societal inequalities and addressing the imperative for transformational social action (Gurin, Nagda & Lopez, 2004). While much social justice education literature on cocurricular practices has focused on service-learning opportunities, the impact of cocurricular activities such as public lectures, workshops, and art exhibits have remained understudied (Gordon & Gordon, 2017). As evidenced by CDSC pre- and post-event student surveys described above, students who attended public

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lectures and workshops with students from other disciplines and departments reported considerable increases in knowledge acquisition about topics covered, deeper recognition of inequalities, and a greater willingness to take action against them. These outcomes are hallmarks of effective social justice education. In addition, cocurricular campus events such as social justice workshops and conferences foster a greater sense of connection and belonging to campus life for non-traditional minoritized students of color who are commuters, parents and/or work full-time (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Wyatt, 2011). In addition, while deepening student learning and cultivating academic self-confidence, CDSC's annual social justice student conferences also facilitate student networking relations with CDSC faculty who transform into "institutional empowerment agents" that support minoritized students to craft research papers and prepare them for public presentation (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018). In this regard, social justice and anti-oppressive education efforts in HSIs and MSIs should be recognized as part of institutional efforts to support minoritized students of color and close educational equity gaps. One of the significant challenges of cocurricular social justice programming, however, is the recent growth of online learning following the COVID-19 pandemic, especially at HSIs and MSIs which promote distance learning offerings as means for expanding accessibility and increasing student enrollment. This challenge is currently being navigated by social justice advocates across various universities and more research on anti-oppressive online learning is needed to determine its limits and opportunities.

Unlike social justice education programs that are structurally embedded into existing departmental or interdepartmental curriculum which are institutionally supported by university administration, CDSC's social justice initiative is maintained by faculty who must continuously labor to preserve the legitimacy of the initiative to administrators and consistently secure funding from university entities that align with its social justice mission. Funding a robust cocurricular social justice-oriented public program can be costly, with external guest speakers, panelists, artists, workshop leaders often requiring honorariums and sometimes travel and hotel accommodations. Moreover, since CDSC requires substantial faculty labor to design and manage public programs on campus, the initiative's faculty co-directors are each released from teaching one course a semester. Since the initiative is labor-intensive and carries a risk of causing faculty burn-out and exhaustion, it is recommended that co-directors who design, promote, and implement CDSC programming be rotated every couple of years. Currently, CDSC co-directors serve only two years. This rotating approach also distributes leadership opportunities among interested faculty from different departments and divisions and ensures programming content reflects the diverse interests of social justice-oriented faculty and students on campus. These combined administrative and financial burdens present real challenges to social justice advocates, especially in already under-resourced public colleges and universities experiencing reductions in state provided financial support in the context of neoliberalism and austerity politics. However, as St. Clair and Groccia (2009) illustrate, advocates who organize around a robust leadership of faculty who articulate a social justice education vision that aligns with the institution's culture and engage in a collaborative process with other faculty, students, and some key administrators are likely to succeed.

Finally, CDSC's initiative demonstrates the urgency of anti-oppressive and social justice education in today's moment of globalized political and economic crises. As Giroux aptly

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points out (2022), the economic disasters of neoliberalism have generated neo-fascist movements that are emergent and becoming dominant around the world. These movements' authoritarian and racist visions for society threaten to destroy education as a democratic public sphere and articulate "pedagogies of repression" such as obedience to political ideologies rooted in various social hierarchies, toxic hetero-patriarchy, white supremacy, militarism, and fanatic nationalism and patriotism. This alarming "Nazification" of education exploits and deepens the existing socio-economic contradictions of the neoliberal university and takes special aim at educational efforts that promote any degree of critical thinking, democratic engagement, and civic and social responsibility. Under this context, even the most modest and moderate diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) initiative at a university can become public enemy number one, as demonstrated in the state of Florida under Republican Governor Ron DeSantis (Ray, 2023). Nevertheless, these reactionary political conditions are precisely the grounds from which to develop a university-wide social justice and anti-oppressive education and activism initiative. As Tomlinson and Lipsitz remind us (2013), cultivating "insubordinate spaces" in the university are crucial to fostering connections between academics and activists and to facilitate the formation of counter-hegemonic publics and polities that deepen and defend democracy against neoliberal authoritarian politics.

Such "insubordinate spaces" in universities are reflected by a wide spectrum of anti-oppressive faculty, staff, and students who utilize the resources and tools of educational systems to counter neoliberal and repressive pedagogies. On one end of this spectrum, university administrators institute DEI programs that may not substantively address the needs of anti-oppressive educational efforts but provide rhetorical and discursive space for social justice advocates to leverage power over institutional resources to promote their agenda (Thomas, 2020). Faculty attempting to craft a social justice initiative that aligns with this institutional context must navigate the pressures of being incorporated into milquetoast administration-controlled DEI activity while fostering a genuine set of critical pedagogies that develop social change agents. Social justice efforts in this position benefit from institutional recognition and resources but are highly vulnerable to neoliberal appropriation and neutralization (Singh, 2011). On the other end of the spectrum, social justice-oriented faculty, staff, and students forego engaging with university power brokers and their organizational culture and instead create a subversive intellectual and political formation that appropriates university resources without becoming part of the institution. Faculty and students who walk down this path often view themselves as renegades and fugitives of the university, and are primarily informed by a growing literature on the so-called "undercommons" (Moten & Harney, 2004; Smith et al., 2013). Social justice efforts in this position benefit from being autonomous but have little access to resources and may experience difficulties reproducing themselves as core members graduate, burn-out, leave, ideologically conflict, and/or retire. Given this wide spectrum of "insubordinate spaces" in universities, CDSC might fall somewhere between these two poles since its social justice initiative aligns itself to the DEI mission of CSUN's HSI status but also creates and encourages a relatively autonomous faculty community of practice that is often critical of the multicultural neoliberal university. We recommend our social justice-oriented colleagues at other colleges and universities to assess their institutional positionality and recognize their limits and opportunities.

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Conclusion

Given the growing interests around social justice education in higher education (Osei-Kofi et al., 2010), our case study reveals the importance of faculty advocacy in creating a unique infrastructure for realizing social justice-oriented teaching and learning in a university setting threatened by neoliberal logics and authoritarian politics. As one of the largest clusters of faculty and student led programming on campus, CDSC offers dynamic forums for students to learn about nonviolent social action and social justice issues that range from racial justice, prison reform, environmental justice, workers' rights, art activism, violence against women, labor rights, immigration, homelessness, and LGBTQ rights. Despite the challenging task of maintaining a social justice project amid a neoliberal university that is currently under assault by reactionary forces opposed to critical thinking and democratically engaged education, CDSC faculty remains committed to educating its diverse and traditionally underserved student of color who enroll in college to improve themselves and to acquire tools/frameworks to address the various social injustices that their respective communities face. For those considering similar initiatives on their university campuses, this article provides a sketch of CDSC's pedagogical, organizational, and institutional approach to anti-oppressive and social justice education. In particular, CDSC designs and implements this work through its three pillars of public programming, teaching commons, and unique curriculum, and provides lessons for how to promote radical democratic engagement while also supporting equitable access, retention, and success for traditionally underserved university students. Finally, CDSC's faculty-led social justice initiative demonstrates the possibilities, limits, and challenges of anti-oppressive work in the neoliberal university. To effectively tackle and address the institutional challenges discussed in this paper, we suggest that social justice-informed faculty leaders at other universities foster strong faculty and administration collaborations across divisions and departments. This approach can help them obtain greater support, secure institutional legitimacy, and acquire organizational resources to advances their anti-oppressive educational and activist projects on campus.

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Human Participants

All necessary permissions were obtained, and so all ethical guidelines are observed. All persons who participated in this study did so voluntarily and were made aware of minimal risks. All participants remained anonymous.

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Dr. Daniel Olmos is Assistant Professor of Sociology at California State University, Northridge. He received his Ph.D. in Sociology at UC Santa Barbara and was an IRISE Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Denver. At CSU Northridge, Dr. Olmos is currently co-director of Civil Discourse and Social Change (CDSC) and a faculty advisor for the CSUN DREAM Center. His research and teaching interests cover issues related to race/racisms, immigration, urbanisms, political economy, and globalization. His publications have appeared in *Sociology Compass*, *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities*, and *Contemporary Sociology*.

Dr. Stevie Ruiz is Associate Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at California State University, Northridge. His current book manuscript, *Stewards of the Land: Race, Space, and Environmental Justice* (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming), is a study about the racial origins of the environmental justice movement prior to the 1960s in the US Southwest. His publications have appeared in *Kalfou: A Journal of Comparative and Relational Ethnic Studies*, *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, *Resilience: A Journal of Environmental Humanities* and *Ethnic Studies Review*.

Dr. Aimee Carrillo Rowe is Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Northridge. She received her Ph.D. in Communication Studies at the University of Washington. Her research and teaching work at the intersection of cultural studies, critical ethnic and gender studies, and indigenous studies to analyze power relations in national, imperial, and settler colonial contexts. She is the author of *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances* (Duke University Press, 2008), *Answer the Call: Virtual Migration in Indian Call Centers* (coauthored with Sheena Malhotra, University of Minnesota Press, 2013), and *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound* (co-edited with Sheena Malhotra, Palgrave, 2013). She is working on a monograph entitled *Queer Xicana: Performing the Sacred,* a study of indigenous sovereignty and Xicana indigeneity in performance communities. Her writing appears in *GLQ (A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies)*, *Cultural Studies/Critical Methods*, *American Quarterly*, and elsewhere. Dr. Carrillo Rowe was formerly a co-director of Civil Discourse and Social Change (CDSC).

Dr. Martha D. Escobar is Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies at California State University, Northridge and serves as Executive Director for Project Rebound, a campus resource for formerly incarcerated students. Escobar is the author of *Captivity Beyond Prisons: Criminalization Experiences of Latina (Im)migrants* (University of Texas Press, 2016), which received the National Association for Ethnic Studies' 2017 Outstanding Book and Media Award. In this work, Escobar examines experiences of jailed, incarcerated, detained, and deported Latina (im)migrants, and maintains that imprisonment serves to construct (im)migrants as socially irrecuperable under hegemonic governing logic where (im)migrants marked as "criminal aliens" are deported and banned from returning to the U.S. Her intellectual and scholarly concerns center on race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship in relation to state violence, transnational migration, and incarceration. Dr. Escobar was formerly a co-director of Civil Discourse and Social Change (CDSC).

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