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WHAT IS THE OPPORTUNITY COST AND BURDEN OF CONFRONTING OPPRESSION IN AND OUT OF CLASSROOM?

When I was first introduced to the idea of college, I envisioned it as a major step in pursuing my goal of becoming a physician. At no point did I think I would be changing my life trajectory to pursue social justice. The summer prior to matriculating to college, I made a detailed plan of the next four years of my college career. I investigated all the clubs my university had to offer and I picked those that I thought would enhance my curriculum vitae in ways that were favorable by medical schools. However, all of that planning was thrown out the window when my identity became a teaching moment in and out of classrooms.

In many ways, I was uncomfortable by the normalization of the following behaviors. I was not at all prepared for the problematic messages that were being spewed from the students, faculty/staff and school administration. In the classroom, there were many moments where I felt social and political issues were being brought up but the professors remained in neutral territory. These indecisions left me feeling enraged and forced me to be a “co-facilitator”. In my four years of experience in a private institution, there were many moments that left me with no option but to speak up. I was not required to speak up but the very nature of this particular institution challenged my personal values. Over time, being a co-facilitator became an unofficial role I took on in many realms of my life on campus. It became increasingly difficult to separate the social justice and activism aspect of my life from the true reason I was pursuing higher education. It did not take long before academics fell on the back burner and my sole purpose became defending my existence on campus and taking up the burden that many left for student leaders like myself. Contrary to the majority of campus, many of the problems that were occurring became the primary concern to students who are directly affected by the injustice. My involvements in these clubs and initiatives emerged from curiosity and passion for the mission of the groups. However, my level of involvement in some cases is the product of the need for muscle in the work meaning there was a great lack of attention on issues that affected many students of color.

Confronting all the isms have been emotionally taxing. While my peers are able to focus on their studies and pick and choose the issues they want to focus on, I have not been afforded that privilege. A number of the student body is telling the administration that the most vulnerable in this predominantly white institution need immediate support; however, the lack of urgency and interest in taking steps to fix our institutional problems have been deeply disappointing. Confronting so much of the injustice on campus in the workplace, classroom, in the residence halls, dining areas, with friends and in all aspects of my college experience has been draining. It has robbed me of the college experience that I have been yearning for all my life.

It has been so numbing to walk around campus knowing I’m not supported in ways that I need. When the administration does take steps to hear the students concerns and implement changes, it is done in a way the institution can check off a box. Although social justice is what I love to do and where my passions lie, I never signed up for it to take over my life. Many can engage in these conversations without emotional attachment. Because I am not afforded this privilege, I’m forced to engage in dialogues that hit way too close to home at all times. In the midst of all of this, I am expected to perform well academically, be social and smile. This has been an impossible task lately. When these injustices occur in all aspects of my life, it becomes unimaginable to see anything else that is happening outside.

My fellow activists are also overburdened. We talk about the injustices we constantly have to face and its re-traumatizing and re-injuring. There is no means of separating ourselves from the work we do because there are so few of us. We tend to stick together because we understand what we go through each and every day. No one understands our day to day battle like the handful of students who do the true social justice work. Lately, I have been reflecting on my experiences and I am surprised by where I am in life. I should be having the best time of my life but instead, I am counting down the days I get to leave. As my good friend said I “have to do your time” before I can enjoy what’s to come.

It was not long before I realized how behind I am compared to my counterparts. My classmates have been getting enriching experiences that will make them competitive applicants for medical school and graduate school. I, on the other hand, have been investing all my time energy in dire social justice issues that are concurrent and uprising on my college campus. I thought what do I have to show for my college experience? What transferable skills do I have to make me a competitive applicant to post-baccalaureate programs and medical schools?

As the educational standards become increasingly more demanding, I had to rethink the way I was approaching college and my experience. After returning to my university after the most valuable experience of my college career, it was difficult to adjust to my university climate where the majority of the campus was complacent about many issues on the campus, domestically and internationally. I noticed myself repeating the same patterns; putting my future plans on hold to deal with the injustice and deficits of my campus community. I recognize that I am not obligated to speak on these issues and take on the roles I am in. However, if I don’t do it, who will? My personal values won’t allow me to be complacent. Complacency is just as toxic as someone committing the act.

My experiences have questioned and tested my commitments and values as a person and future healthcare provider. It has shaped the issues that keep so close to me and the way I will be providing the care. As a physician, I will be able to make changes to increase equity and provide quality services for people in underserved communities and sexual minorities. I am committed to becoming an agent of change because activism and social justice should be the core of medicine and health care instead of an add-on.