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# JUSTICE HOUSE AT NIAGARA UNIVERSITY: AN EMERGING APPROACH TO TEACHING VINCENTIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## ABSTRACT

Some commentators have predicted that the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will transform the landscape of higher education in the United States. For example, Scott Galloway, Professor of Marketing at NYU Stern School of Business, predicts that most U.S. colleges and universities will either “go out of business or become a shadow of themselves.” Professor Galloway argues that the few elite universities that survive will enter into corporate partnerships with Big Tech companies such as Google, Apple, and Meta. From this perspective, for the overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities there won’t be a “post-pandemic recovery”—at least not in the sense of a return to anything resembling the status quo ante.

Justice House at Niagara University is a learning community centered on the pursuit of justice. Conceptually and in practice, Niagara’s Justice House program embraces many of the best practices for living-learning communities identified in the extant research, including offering an academic curriculum comprising credit-bearing courses that student-participants complete together; providing academic advisement and mentoring, along with opportunities for meaningful interactions between faculty and students in educational, cocurricular, and informal settings; and fostering engagement

outside the classroom through cocurricular activities and events. The first-year seminar for student-participants in the Justice House learning community introduces students to various models for the pursuit of justice—including Catholic and Vincentian models for pursuing social justice. The Justice House program and its associated first-year seminar offer an alternative approach to reimagining higher education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive disruption in higher education. The sudden transition to remote learning necessitated by the lockdown in spring 2020 and the continuation of remote and hybrid learning modalities in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years—in some instances, persisting through fall 2022—produced uneven results (Compare Ezarik [2021, June 21], reporting that a survey of 2,000 college students at more than 100 institutions found that 47% of students rated the value of their education over the past year as “...fair or poor,” and that

*“The Justice House program and its associated first-year seminar offer an alternative approach to reimagining higher education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.”*

52% of students said that they learned less in that year compared to pre-pandemic years, with Galloway [2020, p. 133], recounting that “...our first pass at online learning was a buggy, Zoom-bombed dreary mess,” and Ball, 2022, p. 252, observing that “...among COVID’s top lessons was that ‘Zoomschool’ is terrible.”) As of May 2022, undergraduate enrollment had declined by more than 1.4 million students, comprising

9.4% of undergraduate enrollment nationwide, since the start of the pandemic (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center [NSC], 2022, May 26). Troublingly, there are signs that enrollment declines are *worsening* rather than improving (See NSC, 2022, May 26, reporting that undergraduate enrollment declined by more than 662,000 students or 4.7% from spring 2021 to spring 2022, representing an annual rate of decline greater than the rate observed from fall 2020 to fall 2021). Measures of student performance, learning outcomes, and perceptions of the college experience paint a bleak picture, and there are indications that these metrics have not returned to pre-pandemic levels; that is to say, college students have not bounced back (Malesic, 2022, May 15; Galloway, 2020, p. 133, reporting that “[a]fter a spring semester of upheaval and ad hoc Zoom classes, 75% of college students were unhappy with e-learning”).

Some commentators have predicted that the pandemic’s disruptive effects will transform the landscape of higher education in the United States. For example, Scott Galloway, Professor of Marketing at NYU Stern School of Business, predicts that most U.S. colleges and universities will either “go out of business or become a shadow of themselves” (as quoted in Walsh, 2020, May 11, referring specifically to universities outside the “top-50”). Professor Galloway argues that the few elite universities that survive—specifically, the top-50 universities globally—will enter into corporate partnerships with Big Tech companies such as Google, Apple, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft (Walsh, 2020, May 11, listing as possibilities “MIT@Google,” “iStanford,” and “HarvardxFacebook”; Galloway, 2020, p. 147, proposing additional partnerships, including “Carnegie Mellon/Amazon,” “UCLA/Netflix,” and “University of Washington/Microsoft”). From this perspective, for the overwhelming majority of U.S. colleges and universities there won’t be a “post-pandemic recovery”—at least not in the sense of a return to anything resembling the status quo ante.

Professor Galloway argues that there is no

alternative, either for higher education or for Big Tech. Even before the pandemic, Galloway posits, higher education was “ripe for disruption” (2020, p. 125);—that is, “disruption” in the jargon of Silicon Valley, referring to susceptibility to technological innovation: in rough terms, the imperative to “innovate or die” (Morozov, 2014, October 25, offering a critical perspective on technological disruption). According to Galloway, the “key signal” of an industry’s “disruptability” is “[a] dramatic increase in price with no accompanying increase in value or innovation (2020, p. 80). Galloway observes that as “[c]ollege tuition has increased 1,400% in the past 40 years” (2020, p. 82), there has been (a) no discernible increase in the value of a college education, and (b) widespread resistance to innovation, again, in the technological sense (2020, pp. 127–28, 133).

At the same time, Big Tech’s unceasing growth imperative makes higher education—a “\$700 billion business” (Galloway, 2020, p. 125)—an attractive target. In Galloway’s formulation, Big Tech “needs to find billions of dollars in top-line revenue growth every year, and partnering with educational institutions is an obvious expansion” (2020, pp. 145–46). And because online learning “scales” in a way that traditional brick-and-mortar instruction does not, Galloway contends that the scalability of online education will serve as the “bait” that lures Big Tech to disrupt higher education—more precisely, to partner with the “elite institutions [that] have the brand strength to attract big tech’s investment in the requisite intellectual capital and technical infrastructure” (2020, p. 146).

Professor Galloway’s thesis is that the pandemic has accelerated preexisting trends in the U.S. economy—trends tied to technological innovation in particular—and, indeed, in all areas of society (2020, pp. xvi–xvii). Recall that higher education, according to Galloway, was among the industries most susceptible to technological innovation (“ripe for disruption”) before the pandemic. The pandemic’s sudden onset in spring 2020 “forced the industry to adopt distance tech that faculty and administrators [previously] resisted” (Galloway,

2020, p. 142). Galloway concludes that with the pandemic “acting as an accelerant” (2020, p. xvi, higher education “is on the cusp of transformative change” (2020, p. xv).

Professor Galloway’s vision of the transformation of higher education will assuredly strike some readers as dystopian. For his part, Galloway expresses ambivalence. (Compare Galloway [2020, p. 149], noting that “[d]isruption is an opportunity to better serve the broader community,” including women, persons of color, and LGBTQ students, who have “had to fight... for an equal place on our campuses,” with Walsh [2020, May 11], relating Galloway’s prediction that “a four-year liberal-arts-campus experience is going to become something that’s largely relegated and positioned to the children of rich people,” and his questioning, rhetorically, whether Big Tech’s disruption of higher education will “reduce our humanity.”)

This article introduces an alternative model for reimagining higher education. Justice House at Niagara University is a learning community centered on the pursuit of justice. The Association of American Colleges and Universities has identified learning communities as a “high-impact practice”: that is, an educational practice that “research suggests increase[s] rates of student retention and student engagement” (Kuh, 2008, pp. 9–10); (See also Kuh, 2008, p. 10, reporting that “[t]he key goals for learning communities are to encourage integration of learning across courses and to involve students with ‘big questions’ that matter beyond the classroom.”). Learning communities have “the potential... to provide coherence to and ultimately improve undergraduate education (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 1, citing Kuh, 2008). Living-learning communities are an expanded version of learning communities in which “cohorts of students [are] intentionally grouped together in a residence hall [and] have a shared academic experience along with cocurricular learning activities for engagement with their peers” (Inkelas et al., 2018, p. 5, citing Inkelas & Soldner, 2011).

Justice House’s mission statement encapsulates

the learning community’s core values, goals, and broader aspirations.

Justice House reimagines what is possible for college students in today’s world. We believe that a college education should have value and meaning, and we seek to empower students to achieve their dreams. Our mission is to create a learning community centered on the pursuit of justice; to critically examine the meaning of justice and its denial; to impart knowledge of struggles for justice, past and present; to illuminate the intersection and interconnectedness of justice struggles across contexts and levels of human interaction; to provide models and tools that will empower students; to build a just community premised on equality, cooperation, and other shared values; to inspire the members of our community to pursue their vocations as advocates for justice.

Conceptually and in practice, Niagara’s Justice House program embraces many of the best practices for living-learning communities identified in the extant research. Specifically, consistent with the evidence-based “best practices model of living-learning communities” that Professor Inkelas and her coauthors have developed, the Justice House program (a) offers an academic curriculum comprising credit-bearing courses that student-participants complete together; (b) provides academic advisement and mentoring, along with opportunities for meaningful interactions between faculty and students in educational, cocurricular, and informal settings; and (c) fosters engagement outside the classroom through cocurricular activities and events (Inkelas et al., 2018, pp. 20–22; Wawrzynski et al., 2009, pp. 144–49).

Justice House’s academic curriculum—what Professor Inkelas and her coauthors call the “intellectual hub” of a living-learning community, (2018, p. 20)—is a first-year undergraduate seminar designed and co-taught by the program’s faculty directors and contributors. Since fall 2020, Justice House’s first-year seminar has been offered as a pilot or experimental section of Niagara University’s newly created first-year seminar, Vincentian Social Justice. Vincentian Social Justice

is a three-credit course that aims to “introduce students to college-level learning in the context of Niagara University’s Catholic and Vincentian tradition” through discipline-specific content within a framework of shared learning objectives and assessments.

The first-year seminar for student-participants in the Justice House learning community critically examines the meaning of justice, and it seeks to open students’ eyes to the reality of injustice. The seminar also introduces students to various models for the pursuit of justice—including Catholic and Vincentian models for pursuing social justice. And the seminar surveys historical examples of cases, campaigns, and movements focused on justice, drawing connections to contemporary issues.

A central feature of Justice House’s first-year seminar is the use of case studies in combination with experiential and project-based learning. For example, a module on environmental justice uses the Love Canal disaster and the grassroots citizens’ movement that emerged in the affected community as a case study in organizing and advocating for environmental justice. After reading about and discussing Love Canal in the classroom, students travel to Love Canal to walk the abandoned streets, to set eyes on the so-called containment zone, and to meet and hear from Luella Kenny, whose seven-year-old son Jon Allen died after being exposed to toxic chemicals at Love Canal. Standing and walking together in this haunting physical environment, Luella shares with students the story of Love Canal, including the pain and trauma of losing a child, and her “mission in life” as a citizen-scientist and internationally recognized environmental activist and educator. Students have reported that the Love Canal module is a highlight not only of the Vincentian Social Justice course and Justice House program, but of their entire first-year experience at Niagara University. For some students, the experience is life changing. It is difficult to imagine an online lecture or other remote learning experience that could achieve similar impact, even deploying the best technology that Google, Apple, or Amazon has to offer.

Another distinguishing feature of the Justice

House learning community’s first-year seminar is the focus on preparing students to respond to injustice through advocacy and collective action. In spring 2021, faculty and students in Justice House’s first-year seminar learned of a plan to construct an asphalt plant next door to Niagara University’s campus, and in close proximity to a predominantly Black neighborhood in Niagara Falls, a community disproportionately burdened by environmental contamination and air pollution. Using methods of consensus-based decision making, students chose unanimously to depart from the course syllabus and to instead organize an environmental justice campaign in opposition to the proposed asphalt plant. The students’ campaign shed light on the threatened harm to students and other members of the university community in terms of exposure to airborne pollutants and other contaminants, as well as the negative impact on campus aesthetics. Critically, the students’ campaign also connected the plant proposal and the underlying zoning and planning processes to concepts explored in the classroom, including environmental racism and the disproportionate burdens of environmental harm foisted on impoverished persons and communities. Students seized the opportunity to translate theory into action, working collaboratively to plan and carry out all aspects of the campaign.

Niagara University student Ellen Rajnisz, who served as the campaign’s spokesperson, spoke at a meeting of the town board to voice students’ opposition to the proposed asphalt plant. Ellen remarked in closing:

*As we collect support behind this initiative, we also stress that this issue is not isolated to one event or project. If this project fails, we will not celebrate and return to passivity. Though we speak today to strongly discourage one proposed plant, rest assured this is one moment in a much larger movement. We will rally against future proposals that seek to further damage the local environment and the communities that live here. (As quoted in Geiger, 2021, July 2)*

Another student-advocate, Raven Nelson,

reflecting on what she'd learned through the campaign, said:

*I have been told about many environmental issues that disproportionately affect communities of color; I am a member of one of these communities. This is just one problem; however, each individual problem must be handled in order to truly make systematic change. I value Justice House because we are more than a house. We are a community that helps make systematic change, and I can contribute my voice and concerns and take action. (Nelson, 2021, August 4)*

The Love Canal module, the student-led environmental justice campaign, and other components of the seminar and program that similarly engage students in experiential and project-based learning cannot readily be duplicated or replaced in a remote-learning environment—nor in a Big Tech-enabled megauniversity whose *raison d'être* is narrowly focused on job training or career preparation. The Justice House program and its associated first-year seminar thus offer an alternative approach to reimagining higher education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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