

**Cultural Competency for Social Justice:  
A Framework for Student, Staff, Faculty, and Organizational Development  
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The concept of cultural competence or multicultural competence has been discussed for many years, in a variety of fields, especially in the helping professions. People working in higher education, and student affairs staff in particular, have recognized the importance of developing cultural competency within diverse educational communities. In addition to enhancing teaching and working with students, cultural competence enhances the ability of faculty and higher education professionals to help students develop the capacity to be effective global citizens and workers.

Most cultural competency initiatives focus on developing the interpersonal skills needed to understand, work with, and serve people from marginalized racial and ethnic groups. There has been increasing interest in developing cultural competencies related to other marginalized groups (e.g. based on socio-economic class, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion, national origin) and to address issues of social inequality ( c.f. Pope, Reynolds & Mueller, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2007).

Based on my many years doing social justice education/training, I created the Cultural Competence for Social Justice (CCSJ) model, a framework that clearly integrates social justice issues into developing cultural competency. This model adopts an intersectional perspective which recognizes that social identities interact to shape people's sense of themselves and their experiences. This model of Cultural Competence for Social Justice (CCSJ) is intended to be an accessible and useable framework to help people become more culturally competent for social justice across a range of contexts. In this piece, I clarify what I mean by cultural competence for social justice, briefly describe each component of the CCSJ model, and give examples of the competencies within each of the components. I conclude by discussing some of the unique aspects of the CCSJ framework and the ways it can be applied

## Overview of the Cultural Competence for Social Justice Model

Cultural competence for social justice is the ability to live and work effectively in culturally diverse environments and enact a commitment to social justice. Social justice refers to creating a society (or community, organization, or campus) with an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. In socially just environments, all people are safe (physically and psychologically), can meet their needs, and can fulfill their potential. This notion of social justice entails *equity* (fairness) and a sense of real *inclusion*.

Cultural Competence for Social Justice requires a range of awareness, knowledge, and skills. The five key components of this model are: 1) Self-awareness, 2) Understanding and valuing others, 3) Knowledge of societal inequities, 4) Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts, and 5) Skills to foster equity and inclusion. Each of these components will be discussed in more depth.

1. **Self-awareness.** Self-awareness is the consciousness of our social identities, cultures, biases, and perspectives. It entails the ability to understand who we are and what we bring to relationships and situations. There are numerous competencies to this component, including:

- Awareness of our social identities and their cultural influences and how they intersect.
- Awareness of our prejudices, stereotypes, and biases.
- Awareness of our internalized superiority and internalized inferiority--how we have internalized (often unconsciously) notions of the superiority of our dominant/privileged social identity groups (internalized dominance) and the inferiority of our subordinated/marginalized social identity groups (internalized oppression).

2. **Understanding and valuing others.** Not only is self-knowledge and awareness needed to enact cultural competence for social justice, so is knowledge and appreciation of the social identities, cultures,

and worldviews of other people. Many of these competencies mirror the ones in self-awareness which include:

- Knowledge of the social identities of other people, their cultural influences, and how they intersect.
- Ability to value and appreciate ways of being, doing, and thinking other than our own.
- Ability to recognize how other people express internalized superiority and internalized inferiority.

### **3. Knowledge of societal inequities.**

We cannot understand ourselves or other people, or create greater equity without considering the larger socio-political and historical context of which we are part. We need to have a grasp of different forms of privilege and oppression and how these they affect people's experiences, opportunities, and access to social power. It is also critical to appreciate the interlocking nature of different types of inequality and how they intersect in people's lives. Some key competencies include:

- Knowledge of the history, ideology, and current manifestations of systemic inequalities and how they reinforce each other.
- Understanding of how different forms of oppression operate on interpersonal, cultural, institutional, and structural levels.
- Understanding of the intersectional impact of systemic inequalities on our own and others' experiences of advantage/disadvantage and lived realities.

### **4. Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts.**

In addition to understanding self, others, and society, we need the ability to adapt to and work collaboratively with diverse people in a range of situations. People's social identities affect their interpersonal, communication and work styles, as well as their views of conflict, notions of leadership and sense of time (among many other things). Some competencies of this component of the model include the ability to:

- Embrace, integrate, and adapt to different cultural styles.
- Deal with conflict due to cultural differences and the dynamics of inequality.
- Engage in dialogue about social identities, diversity, and oppression issues.

#### 5. Skills to foster equity and inclusion.

Cultural competence for social justice requires more than just understanding the impact of social inequality. It entails being able to identify and address inequities and choose appropriate interventions to create environments, policies, and practices to ensure diversity and fairness. Competencies for creating change are needed at various levels such as skills for:

- Continual *self-development*, including for self-education, self-reflection, and personal change.
- Addressing *interpersonal and group* issues for example, responding to biased comments, addressing inequitable group dynamics, and creating culturally inclusive work and learning groups.
- Transforming *institutions* such as being able to create, critically analyze, implement or advocate for organizational norms, policies and practices that are equitable and inclusive.
- Creating *societal* change by being able to work collaboratively with others to foster social justice.

#### **Highlights of Cultural Competence for Social Justice Model**

There are several aspects of the CCSJ model that expand on other frameworks of multicultural competence and make it a potentially useful tool. The CCSJ framework is:

- *Inclusive of all social identities and cultural differences.* This framework addresses various sociocultural groups, not just those related to race and ethnicity.
- *Incorporates intersectionality.* Not only does this model address a variety of sociocultural groups, it considers how these various social identities and forms of oppression interact and intersect and how these interrelationships affects people's sense of self, worldviews, and experiences.

- *Social justice focus*— Examinations of power and privilege, as well as cultural differences, are infused throughout all components of the model.
- *Skills for social justice action and advocacy*—In addition to interpersonal skills, this framework addresses the skills needed to ensure equity and inclusion on group, organizational, and societal levels.
- *Flexible, broad framework*—This model can be applied across a variety of contexts and purposes. The five components of the model can be tailored to meet the needs of particular fields or domains

### **Applications of the Cultural Competence for Social Justice Model**

There are many ways people in student affairs could utilize the CCSJ model. Framing diversity and social justice initiatives in the language of cultural competence is sometimes more readily accepted by people reluctant to buy into these efforts. The CCSJ model can be used for:

- Developing and assessing learning outcomes—to set goals and identify what individuals need to know to be culturally competent for social justice, create plans to address the areas that need attention, and assess whether the competencies are being gained.
- Staff/faculty development—to ensure that people working in various aspects of student and academic affairs have the needed cultural competencies to foster equity and inclusion.
- Student development—to prepare students in leadership development programs to become more cultural competent for social justice.
- Student programming—to move beyond just cultural understanding to social justice competencies that promote a deeper level of awareness and commitment to equity.

It is important to emphasize that developing cultural competency is an ongoing process; it is not an endpoint. We will have different degrees of competency in different components with different social identity groups. Issues of diversity and social justice continually evolve and no two individuals are the

same. The Cultural Competence for Social Justice model can help us navigate the path towards greater understanding, effectiveness, equity, and inclusion.

References:

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