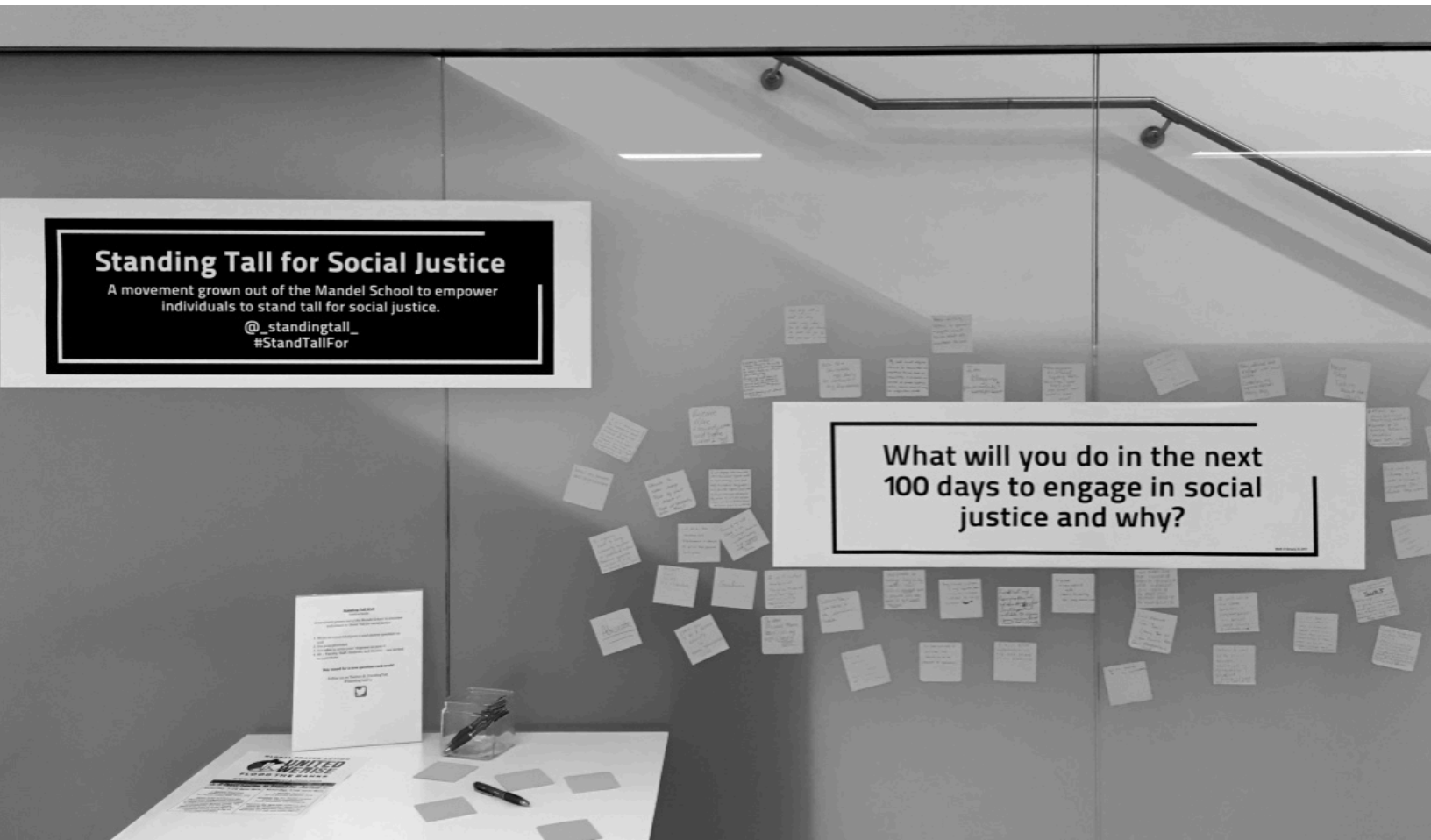# The Post-it Campaign:
Reporting on social justice dialogues in the Mandel School

Fall, 2017

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Overview and Aims

The Collective Action for Social Justice group posted weekly prompts (right) on a public wall in the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences (the Mandel School) during the Spring 2017 semester. Responses on post-it notes and tweets came from masters and doctoral students, faculty, staff, and community members, reflecting the diverse community that the Mandel School embodies. Analysis of the responses to these prompts had three main aims:

1. Identify **differences and commonalities** in how the Mandel School community defines, approaches, and responds to social injustice.

2. Explore the **common threads** in how the Mandel School community strives to dismantle oppression.

3. **Build upon existing social justice efforts** in our community to create action for social justice.

The Four Primary Themes

The following primary themes were identified in the analysis and will be discussed in this report:

1. **The Mandel School in Action**: descriptions of engaging in social justice action, with subthemes of actions, barriers, issues, and sources of information.

2. **Dialogues about social justice**: differences in values and expressions of social justice paralleling dialogues occurring in the larger social work community and society.

3. **Calls to Action for the Mandel School**: opportunities for growth within the Mandel School culture and curriculum.

4. A vision of **the Mandel School as a social justice leader**, including roles that the Mandel School and its faculty can assume.

Weekly Prompts

1. What will you do in the next 100 days to engage in social justice and why?

2. What barriers keep you from taking action for social justice?

3. Who do you stand tall for?

4. What is the importance of welcoming people who are different than we are?

5. How and where do we get reliable information about what is happening locally and nationally?

6. What organizations do you look towards for support in North East Ohio to inform and motivate your own social justice actions?

7. The name Standing Tall for Social Justice was chosen to represent a metaphoric act of courage in the face of oppression. Does this name represent empowerment or oppression for you and why?

8. How do you envision the Mandel School faculty and staff best promoting and modeling social justice efforts?

9. How do you envision your role as a developing social worker in engaging social justice efforts?

10. What do you think the role of the Mandel School should be in promoting social justice in the broader Cleveland community?

11. What would a racially just Mandel School look like?

12. Over the last 100 days, what actions have you taken to promote social justice?

Analysis Plan

Qualitative analysis of the responses was conducted using ATLAS.Ti (version 7.5.10, 2017), and proceeded using an inductive process of primary open coding with identification of a thematic structure emerging from the open coding process (Cresswell, 2013).

Transcription of the post-it notes occurred at the end of the project, and captured the original capitalization, underlining, spelling, and punctuation in the content of the responses as accurately as possible. This was preserved in the quotes presented in this report where possible; minor changes are noted with bracketing.

Dialogues were identified when notes were connected physically or visually with arrows or other indications.

**Themes** were analyzed within and across the weekly questions.

Code counts provided some measure of intensity or strength, and code co-occurrences were examined for patterns.

Word clouds were used to graphically present some codes and themes. Within each word cloud, the size of the words provides an indication of frequency for that code, with larger sizes indicating higher code counts. The names of the codes were lightly edited for clarity and spacing, but the concepts captured within the codes were maintained (e.g. "Social media: Twitter" was shortened to "Twitter"). Most word clouds did not allow for repetition of codes, and the exceptions to this are noted in the relevant sections. The word clouds presented here are only intended to present the content in an efficient way, and are not intended to provide a numerical count of the codes.

Limitations

It is likely we did not capture responses from the entirety of the Mandel School community due to the following limitations:
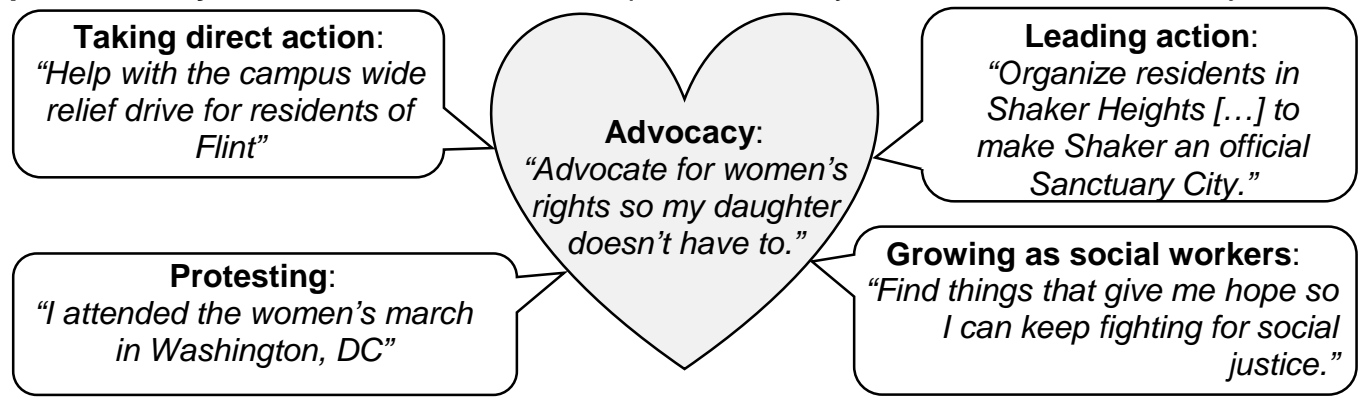
- The on-campus the Mandel School community is split between two buildings, and the prompts were not placed in both. Some community members may not have been exposed to the prompts.
- Online students may have been reluctant to respond in a non-anonymous format.
- There was no way to determine if multiple responses within each week originated from the same individual.
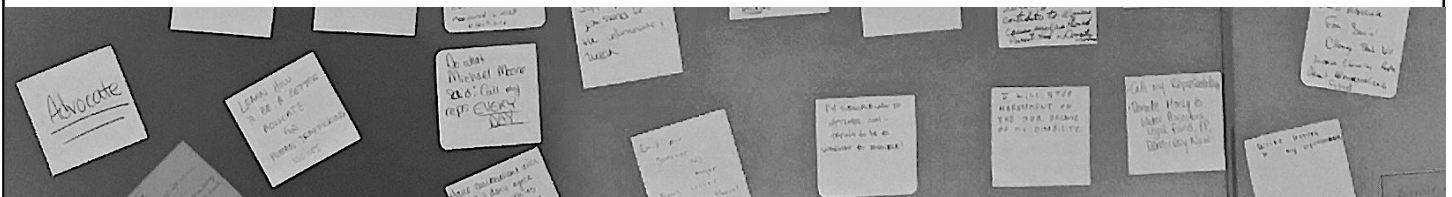
Theme 1: The Mandel School in Action!

Taking Action

The first and last week's questions asked how the respondents engaged in social justice action. In response to these two questions and throughout all of the weeks of the project, respondents **put advocacy at the heart** and listed an impressive variety of actions taken for social justice:

Taking direct action:
"Help with the campus wide relief drive for residents of Flint"

Advocacy:
"Advocate for women's rights so my daughter doesn't have to."

Leading action:
"Organize residents in Shaker Heights […] to make Shaker an official Sanctuary City."

Protesting:
"I attended the women's march in Washington, DC"

Growing as social workers:
"Find things that give me hope so I can keep fighting for social justice."

Barriers to Action

The main barriers to getting involved in social justice action that respondents identified were:

- **Lack of time or energy**: *"Burnout (too many issues!) and lack of time"*
- **Personal issues (health, mental health, income)**: *"Social anxiety, Fear / shyness"*

But respondents also identified barriers that could be addressed by the Mandel School in the form of needs for:

- **Skill development**: *"Not having the skills (yet)"*
- **Opportunities for involvement**: *"Can't attend events and actions during the work day"*
- **Leadership:** *"How do we take this energy and channel it into a sustainable plan?"*

Creating Dialogues

True to social work values, one of the most prominent ways respondents took action occurred through opening dialogues about social justice issues, including talking about:

- **Understanding different viewpoints**: *"…conversations on social media with those whose political views differ"*
- **Listening and hearing**: *"I will work to listen closely to hear and understand the fear underneath the anger."*
- **Learning from each other**: "*We have much to learn from one another."*
- **Promoting respect**: *"Reminding students to respect one another"*
- **Inviting conversation**: *"Let's meet and approach this together as helpers."*

The post-it wall itself became a space for dialogue in which people would respond to other people's post-it note statements, and these will be discussed in the next section.

A focus on the issues

Respondents identified a **wide variety of issues** throughout the 12 weeks on the post-it notes, and these issues are listed in the word cloud for this section. "**Social justice**" was a common theme among the issues identified, as shown in the quotes below:

- *"Stay informed and engaged with social issues."*
- *"Equal rights and justice."*

Organizations that motivate our social justice action

Week 6's question was, *What organizations do you look towards or support in NE Ohio to inform and motivate your own social justice actions?* Responses highlighted the **diversity of interests** in the Mandel School community and the **high level of connection** that our community members have to organizations in our area. The organizations are listed in the word cloud for this section, and codes were allowed to repeat.

Staying informed

Week 5's prompt asked, *How and where do we get reliable information about what is happening locally and nationally?* Sources of information identified by respondents are listed in the word cloud for this section. Quite a few respondents expressed the value of **getting a variety of viewpoints and verifying the content**, as can be seen in the quotes below:

- *"Verify from multiple sources"*
- *"…fact check on multiple sites"*
- *"Listening to a variety of people in different situations with different experiences… Then critically assessing what you hear and see in media- and pay attention to (all) forms of media- even the ones u hate."*

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Theme 2: Dialogues about social justice

Several weekly questions sparked dialogues among post-it respondents, which is the focus of this section. Some of these dialogues occurred within a contained space, often in response to a statement made on a post-it, but others occurred as reflections of differing viewpoints throughout all of the weekly responses. These dialogues parallel ongoing dialogues within the larger social work community, and may present opportunities to continue the dialogue within the Mandel School community in a more formal way.

Dialogue: The language of oppression and silencing

One exchange centered on the statement *"All Lives Matter"* and the responses that ensued. This dialogue mirrors a national discourse, particularly in the social media environment, and reflects differing viewpoints that have implications for social work education. As Carney (2016) asserts, the viewpoint embodied by "All Lives Matter" has the potential to perpetuate oppressive racial hierarchies and silence marginalized communities, whereas those embodied by "Black Lives Matter" potentially offer empowerment and visibility to marginalized groups. Likewise, a statement, *"How are you white, cisgender, straight, able-bodied people being oppressed anyway?"* started a similar dialogue about positionality to oppression. The dialogue shown in the quotes below illustrates how individuals may grapple with and try out concepts related to social identity, identity politics, and intersectionality in relation to power, privilege, and oppression. Notably, this exchange included an invitation to open a dialogue that could continue off of the post-it wall.

> *"All Lives Matter"*
>
> *"Native Lives Matter"*
> *"Black Lives Matter"*
> *"Latinx Lives Matters"*
> *"Black Trans Lives Matter"*
>
> *"All lives? Why are brown people being deported without regard? Why are brown people more likely to be shot by police? Why are there so few brown people in higher ed? Yeah, all lives matter. But no one acts like it. Brown People's Lives Matter is a reminder of inclusion and disparities. All Lives Matter is erasure of the issue."*

Although brief, **these two dialogues present an opportunity to examine 1) how the school educates its students and community about the systematic marginalization, oppression, and silencing of various populations, and 2) how language choice can perpetuate or diminish the impact of oppression in social work practice**.

> *"How are you white, cisgender, straight, able-bodied people being oppressed anyway?"*
>
> *"This question is effective in calling out white, cisgendered, straight, able-bodied privilege, but does not acknowledge that white, cisgendered, straight, able-bodied individuals can also be oppressed by class structure, by physical / emotional violence, by rape, incest, molest, by the stigma of mental illness. "What oppresses you anyway?" deletes another set of voices from the conversation which I'm sure wasn't intentional. Let's meet and approach this together as helpers. We have much to learn from one another."*

Dialogue: *"We are all different"* versus *"NO ONE is different"*

The prompt for week 4 asked, *What is the importance of welcoming people who are different than we are?* The resulting discussion mirrored an ongoing discussion in the social work community regarding the value of emphasizing unity versus diversity (for examples, see Lusk, 1997, and Mayadas, 1997). One side argues that unity highlights the commonalities of the human experience, and the other side argues that diversity highlights the unique contributions of the individual and culture. Both sides of this debate were well-represented on the post-it wall for this week.

> *"We can never reach our full potential without engaging with people from a variety of backgrounds!"*
>
> *"Diversity enriches and strengthens!"*
>
> *"The beauty of diversity enables us to be and become better people."*
>
> *"Perspective and Empathy"*
>
> *"We're so much stronger together and we learn from one another!"*

> *"In my eyes, NO ONE is "different."*
>
> *"We all are human and we all should love and respect all."*
>
> *"We all belong."*
>
> *"Because we might just find that we are more alike than we are different."*
>
> *"Because most problems between "us" and "them" are solved by a broader definition of "US"!"*

As can be seen in the text boxes, some responses supported an argument for unity, including some espousing a global perspective focusing on shared humanity. Other responses expressed the value of diversity, especially how valuable diversity is in providing perspective and strength. **While there are strong arguments on both sides of this issue and no clear answer, this dialogue demonstrated a need for continued education and understanding on how ideals of unity and diversity can impact social work education and practice**.

Dialogue about the Standing Tall name: Inclusion versus exclusion

Due to repeated post-its about the ableist nature of the Standing Tall name, the question for week 7 was: *The name Standing Tall for Social Justice was chosen to represent a metaphoric act of courage in the face of oppression. Does this name represent empowerment or oppression for you and why?* For some, the name was seen as a good metaphor, a call to action, and empowering, as in this quote: *"Empowerment- focuses on 'Taking Action'"* Others saw the name as ableist, oppressive, offensive, and excluding to people, as seen here: *"It's ableist and offensive. Empowerment should be for <u>all</u> people."* Many did not find the name personally problematic, but agreed that the name could be disempowering and invited discussion about changing it: *"I find it empowering but am open to the idea that others don't find it to be. I think those opposed should come voice their opinions and contribute to the development of a more inclusive empowering name."* **This discussion on the post-it wall along with feedback from other sources sparked an engaged dialogue in community forums and resulted in a collective decision to represent the values of the group. This exchange further underscores the need for the Mandel School community to engage in the trauma-informed principles of transparency, empowerment, voice, and choice.**

Ongoing dialogue: Paternalism versus empowerment

While no explicit dialogue occurred around the issue of paternalism within social work, there was an observed dichotomy in the ways that posters used the language of paternalism and the language of empowerment. Bransford (2011) explains that the heart of this dichotomy in the social work profession concerns the locus of power in the relationship between practitioner and client. In paternalism, the clinician or profession holds the power and functions in an "expert" role. In empowerment, the individual or community is recognized as having power and expertise, and functions in partnership with the clinician. This dynamic can be seen in the language which was used in the various post-it comments quoted in the text boxes.

Language that embodied paternalism in the post-it notes included speaking out for people whom they believed could not advocate for themselves, educating others, and language that "othered" groups. It should be noted that some of the othering language may have come from wording of the prompt question for Week 3 (*Who do you stand tall for?*).

Conversely, language that embodied empowerment in the post-it notes included statements of supporting people, joining with, partnering with, or organizing, and advocacy in the form of speaking out for causes. Listening and seeking out understanding of the specific concerns of people or groups also emerged as central theme to empowerment.

> *"Support/Take a stand for the unfortunate and weak."*
>
> *"I will educate those who don't know how to educate and advocate for themselves."*
>
> *"I will continue to try to educate people with facts backed up by objective research and even if they don't agree or believe I will promote personal choice above all else."*
>
> *"The vulnerable, the oppressed."*
> *"Impoverished children."*
> *"The abused."*

> *"I will support my LGBT brothers and sisters and bristers and sothers"*
>
> *"I will join in unity with my neighbors and family members--anyone--in danger of unfair deportation and denied entry"*
>
> *"I will engage with minorities within the justice system and be their advocate, voice, and help in whatever they need.*
> *I will provide support and listen to those who need assistance the most."*

Many of the statements above that personify paternalism reflect a strong desire to help others in need, and this is commendable in our community. This desire to help is what draws many of us to social work in the first place. However, statements that embody paternalism threaten to negatively affect the populations we serve. **This ongoing dialogue may reflect varying levels of professional maturity in social work and highlights the need to provide the Mandel School community with more education regarding what constitutes paternalism versus empowerment, and the potential impact of both.**

Theme 3: Calls to action for the Mandel School

Three of the weekly questions for the Collective Action wall focused on ways that the Mandel School could enhance their facilitation of social justice.

- *What do you think the role of the Mandel School should be in promoting social justice in the broader Cleveland community?*
- *What would a racially just Mandel School look like?*
- *How do you envision the Mandel School faculty and staff best promoting and modeling social justice efforts?*

The responses to these three questions showed many opportunities for the Mandel School to grow. It should be noted that many of the responses to these questions bridged multiple weeks, and were thus thematically examined as a whole rather than as direct responses to the questions.

Confront institutional racism

Commentary of the lack of diversity often occurred alongside statements about the school's environment and culture. Institutional racism was identified as a problem within the post-its, as can be seen here: *"Stop being institutionally racist."*
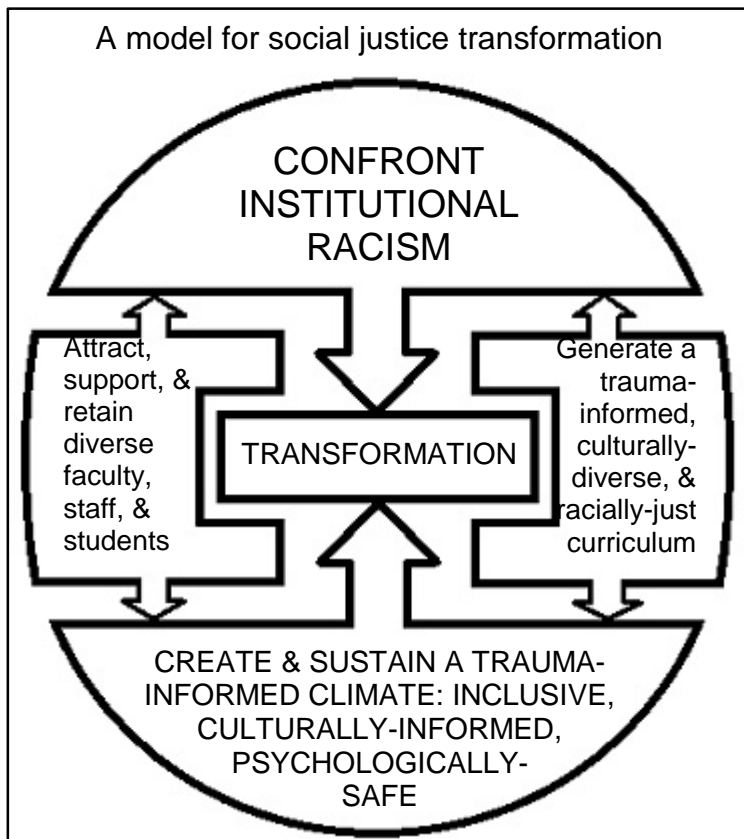
Many of the concerns centered on the disparity between the message the school promotes and the cultural experience of the school. Some called for *"an internal assessment of its policies, practices, culture for institutional racism."* Others called for action, as seen here: *"Stand up for injustices and wrongdoings they see/know happen right in this school (power dynamics being exploited, students being treated unfairly, etc.)."*

"There remains a disconnect between the social justice mission and the lived experience of people of color in the building. The silence around this issue is deafening."

"There is a systemic / culture of oppression problem in the department. We give lip services to diversity and inclusion, but in practice don't support it well."

"I feel like there is a disconnect between the ultra liberal and progressive content, and the ultra conservative culture and pedagogy of the school policy. The Mandel School itself should create an egalitarian environment for social justice to flourish."

"Respect of diversity has to exist at this school not just out in the world."

A model for social justice transformation

CONFRONT INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Attract, support, & retain diverse faculty, staff, & students

TRANSFORMATION

Generate a trauma-informed, culturally-diverse, & racially-just curriculum

CREATE & SUSTAIN A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLIMATE: INCLUSIVE, CULTURALLY-INFORMED, PSYCHOLOGICALLY-SAFE

Problems with recruitment

Several post-its focused on **problems with using students in promotional materials based on their racial or cultural identities**, as seen in the quotes below.

Others discussed how **racial problems within recruitment extend to the PhD program**, stating that there is a need for *"Faculty [to] actually work to better the program for students instead of sending PhD students of color to other schools…"* with another responding, *"This. Stop, certain faculty, being passive here. Your avoidance, in sending our prospective students of color to [other schools of social work], does nothing to help those already here at MSASS."*

"Not asking students of color to act as spokespeople for their racial/cultural group in providing blurbs for promotional material."

*"I can tell you I haven't seen one thing happen on this campus that has reassured me that my presence was recognized or appreciated here. **There is no sense of community, no representation, there is no advocacy…simply put, the student voice is silenced…that is until you want to use us for a marketing tool to flex the "#9 in the country, #1 in the state" badge."***

A need for diversity

One of the most prominent needs identified in the post-its was **a need for more diversity in the staff, faculty, and student body**. One post-it noted that, in a racially just the Mandel School, *"It would be as likely to see a black boss as a black janitor."* Several post-its suggested that the Mandel School focus on recruitment to improve this, by *"Being intentional in attracting racially diverse faculty and students,"* and *"Hiring more African American women professors."*

"More diversity in Professors!!"

*"More diversity in staff, too!
Esp. leadership"*

"Why not more Black and Hispanic doctoral students and faculty?"

Curriculum issues

Seven responses highlighted issues related to social justice within the curriculum. Some highlighted a need for **diverse representation in the readings**: *"Reviewing and incorporating the readings selected for classes to represent diverse authorship."* Others identified a need to have a curriculum that is grounded in **trauma-informed, culturally-diverse, and racially-just practices** to address social justice issues within the classroom:

"Making intersectionality more than 5 seconds of the Theories of Oppression Curriculum."

"… resources that don't assume the "Diversity" competence means learning how to talk to brown people...which isn't as useful for brown people…who are usually asked to highlight info from [the] book."

"We need a whole trauma informed curriculum! How could we not???" "Becoming a trauma-informed organization. Recognizing that racial justice is a cornerstone of being trauma-informed."

A need for a supportive, inclusive climate in the school

There were multiple responses that focused on **the need for the Mandel School to be a more inclusive, culturally-informed, psychologically-safe space**.

Several respondents emphasized the need for, *"Culturally-competent classroom environments,"* *"culturally competent professors,"* and *"Making sure as non black POC and white folks to combat antiblackness in the classrooms."*

One response suggested using *"social work ethics and values to inform their interactions with students and each other"* as means to achieving this end.

"Operate as a transformative, creative, and empathetic system.. Not a rigid, formal, critical institution."

"I really wish that white people who have grown up in poverty were welcome at the Mandel School."

"How inaccessible this school and program are for people of color."

A need for more equality of opportunity for students

Some respondents described **perceptions of unequal opportunities offered to students by the school**, stating that the Mandel School needs to be *"A school that actively supports its marginalized students / students of color and their unique challenges."* One respondent offered a suggestion for how to correct this imbalance of opportunity:

"Perhaps ease off of celebrating the talented and privileged 10% of students who were given the opportunity to study abroad, serve peace corps, intern for free. Need you continue to give these students more accolades and opportunities (like the IPE, the second year scholarship, the leadership Scholarship)? ***Keep making education even more free and easy for those who can already afford it and you perpetuate injustice.****"*

Concerns about the willingness of the Mandel School to change

A heated dialogue emerged around the question of whether the Mandel School is willing to take action to address the issues highlighted in this section, focused on the prompt: *"In the last 100 days what has Mandel done to address and implement student concerns?"*

Much of the dialogue around this centered on opportunities for student engagement, but **the central concern was around feeling silenced and unheard**. As the original poster in the dialogue concluded, *"Such a shame that a sticky note is all that was needed to be heard even though there have been complaints formally made!"*

"The question is.. Are the people who need to read this just walking by and ignoring it..."

Theme 4: A vision for the Mandel School

The role of the Mandel School

The overall vision for the Mandel School presented in the post-its was of the Mandel School as a social justice leader. **the Mandel School was encouraged to highlight and expand their social justice work, potentially serving as a hub for such work in the university and community.**

The Mandel School should…

- *"… create an egalitarian environment for social justice to flourish"*
- *"…represent progressive positions in media"*
- *"…[create] opportunities and inclusive spaces to talk about integrating neighborhoods and resources"*
- *"…provide a home base for student activation"*
- *"..[give] ALL a platform to speak about their experiences and their ideas for change"*
- *"…includ[e] and encourag[e] all voices to talk, even if it means silencing our own."*
- *"…encourage and support activism - don't just teach it!"*
- *"…advance the liberation of people of color."*

The role of the faculty

The vision for the school's faculty was one of leadership in social justice. The Mandel School faculty were identified as important connectors to the larger social justice community and were seen as key players for engaging and organizing social justice action within the Mandel School community. They were urged to be active in social justice, and then share that activism work with their classes.

"Inviting cooperation with community members and bringing together staff, students and community."

"Talking about social justice in the classroom."

"Organize students to participate in social justice work (i.e. talk to politicians / legislators, letter writing, etc.)"

"Utilize the passion, interest, and experiences of their students to help build social justice efforts and work together as colleagues."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the responses to the questions on the post-it wall showed the Mandel School as a community that is already active, engaged, and focused on social justice issues. Community members talked about engagement with a wide variety of issues and causes and the multiple sources and institutions where they connect with important social justice issues, and shared the many ways that they are acting as leaders for social justice.

However, there is also a clear call to action to address community concerns and elevate our social justice work as we embark on the next 100 years of leadership. The Mandel School community is poised to take up this call by stretching our frames, connecting and amplifying existing efforts, and transforming our organization into a trauma-informed, racially-just, and culturally-inclusive community. The following recommendations for action are suggested:

Trauma Informed Recommendations for Action

Recommendation 1: Identify ways to transform the Mandel School culture to prioritize psychological safety for all

- Facilitate and participate in dialogue to generate a multi-faceted definition of 'safety' as it relates to interpersonal interactions, inclusivity, and power dynamics within the school.
- Systematically review policies, practices, norms and expectations of School culture and identify those that perpetuate or maintain institutional racism.
- Identify actionable ways to transform the cultural experience of the School so that it is more welcoming and accepting of multiple cultures, experiences, and world views.
- Identify specific ways to reduce the disparities in the opportunities offered to students at the school.

Recommendation 2: Attract, support, and retain diverse faculty, staff, and students.

- Identify specific ways to attract students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds.
- Identify and implement specific elements that will support diverse students, staff, and faculty across all learning formats (traditional, intensive weekend, online), offices, and centers.
- Explore ways to effectively present diversity in promotional and recruitment materials without tokenizing individuals or groups.

Recommendation 3: Examine and revise the Mandel School pedagogical practices and curricula using a trauma-informed, social justice lens

- Update the readings and course materials across the curriculum to incorporate more racial and cultural diversity in the authorship and subjects covered.
- Provide a broader spectrum of ways to fulfill the Diversity Competency that reflects the composition and interests of the student body.
- Incorporate racial justice, trauma, and intersectionality throughout the curriculum.
- Use the identified dialogues as a starting point for discussion in the Mandel School classroom and community regarding how language and attitudes can either promote empowerment, voice, and choice, or create a space that is potentially harmful.

Recommendation 4: Cultivate the Mandel School community's passions and expertise to transform the Mandel School into a leader for social justice

- Identify specific ways that the Mandel School as an institution can more prominently serve as a leader for social justice in the social work field, university, and community.
- Elevate and connect the Mandel School-led opportunities for engagement in social justice work on a regular basis.
- Use the Mandel School faculty expertise to identify potential community partners in social justice work, and create a structure for them to collaborate with the Mandel School in a formal ways beyond field education.
- Identify and develop resources to empower the Mandel School faculty to bring social justice into the classroom, whether through topics of discussion, sharing their own efforts, or bringing in collaborators in social justice work for guest lectures.

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