Imagining a More Just University

Summary of Panel Discussion

November 15, 2022 | 10:30 am – 12:00 pm EST

Panellists: Dr. Adam Davies (they/them), Dr. Roberta Hawkins (she/her), Suman Roy (he/him), Jena-Lee Ashley (she/her), and Nicole Walker (she/her)

Moderator: Dr. Leah Levac (she/her)

Event Description

In this hybrid event, we explored how to create more just academic spaces that reduce/eliminate barriers to access and ensure equity for everyone in the university community. We are interested in this topic generally, and specifically as it relates to the University of Guelph.

Creating more just academic spaces has long been a critical topic but feels increasingly pressing as we navigate several overlapping and intersecting injustices structured by the pandemic, systemic racism, colonialism, (hetero)sexism, ableism, and economic inequality, among others.

Drawing on expertise local to the University of Guelph and the surrounding communities, this event both illuminated specific challenges, and imagined and discussed promising practices moving forward. A full transcript of the event is available on the [Live Work Well Research Centre website](#).

Panellists:

- Jena-Lee Ashley (she/her), Vice President External, Central Student Association (CSA)

- Dr. Adam Davies (they/them), Assistant Professor, Family Relations & Human Development; co-lead of the Sexual & Gender Diversity Cluster with Live Work Well

- Suman Roy (he/him), Chair, Feed Scarborough

- Dr. Roberta Hawkins (she/her), Associate Professor, Geography, Environment and Geomatics; co-lead of the Integrating Care & Livelihoods Cluster with Live Work Well

- Nicole Walker (she/her), President, Central Student Association (CSA)

Moderator:

- Dr. Leah Levac (she/her), Associate Professor, Political Science and Canada Research Chair (Tier 2), Critical Community Engagement and Public Policy; Acting Director of the Live Work Well Research Centre

Summary

Defining & Identifying (In)Justices

From your personal and professional experiences, what does "just," or "justice," mean, look like, and/or feel like to you?

What injustices do you experience, or do you witness others experiencing, in your or their day-to-day lives at the University of Guelph?

What are the consequences of these injustices?

Adam's Response:

- "Justice" can't be universalized: It is difficult to pin down a definition of justice – what is just to one person may be unjust to others.

- We are all accountable within the system: Higher education is part of the neoliberal capitalist complex which we cannot escape from, so if we choose to be part of the university, we are in relation with it in some way. At the same time, we must deconstruct harmful and oppressive structures.

- The university bureaucracy often makes conditions more harmful for marginalized communities: Forming a committee or making a statement in response to violence is insufficient, and invisibleizes the violence.

- We need to move beyond tokenism, and disrupt the status quo: The University is happy to celebrate faculty and students who are nonbinary and who live with disabilities until they make requests for accommodation. The University needs to do better to protect those who are most marginalized.

Roberta's Response:

- Injustices often intersect with one another: We must work on addressing them simultaneously, and collaboratively.

- The environment is highly competitive and individualistic, leaving faculty and students physically and emotionally exhausted and unable to work collectively.

- Overwork is a form of injustice: it leads to burnout and health problems, and doesn't have to be a fundamental part of the university system.

- Only Western, Eurocentric knowledge is measured and valued (e.g. in the form of publications, grants, scholarships, grades, course evaluations). This prevents the university from diversifying in terms of people, ideas, and ways of knowing.

- A just university would be more collaborative and less hierarchical, less focused on quantification, and inclusive of diverse forms of knowledge and experience.
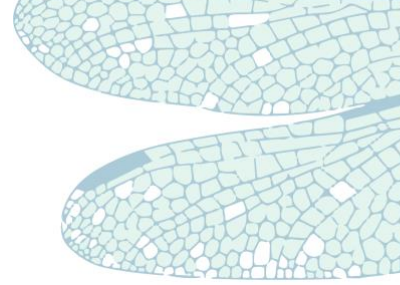
Jena-Lee's Response:

- Justice can be understood in the context of the Seven Grandfather Teachings -- everyone's rights deserve to be respected.

- Students experience many forms of injustice on campus, including instances of racism, misogyny, vandalism, microaggressions, and lack of accommodations – these injustices are barriers to education and wellbeing.

- Shared a story of a professor refusing to give a signature that she needed to prove to her band that she was using her university funding correctly. This highlighted the persistent injustices in the university system that she and many other students have faced.

Suman's Response:

- In the context of food security, someone without access to proper drinking water, housing, or food is experiencing injustice. More than 50% of post-secondary students are currently food insecure.

- Food insecurity is being normalized by university executives who ignore and/or dismiss the problem -- Normalization of these issues is itself an injustice.

- COVID-19 has only highlighted the issues that advocates have known about for years, including intersections between racism and food insecurity.

Nicole's Response:

- Everybody has a responsibility to work towards justice. We share a collective responsibility to do better for everyone.

- Change is very slow. Students are advocating for themselves, which leads to a high burnout in student leadership. All parties must be willing to do the work, and the onus should not be on the most marginalized or underrepresented people. This requires a holistic approach – faculty advocates for students, and students advocate for faculty.

- Policies around supporting students are vague and seem subject to the personal preferences of decision-makers. Responsibilities for making change are often passed off, creating a vicious cycle of injustice.

- Students registered with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) do not get the same amount of respect as those who aren't.

Imagining Solutions

How might we use the concept of intersectionality or other sorts of scholarly and practical concepts that you work with, to inform our efforts to create more livable universities?
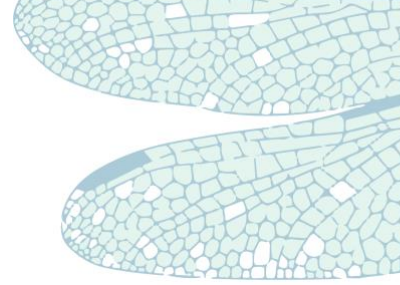
Adam's Response:

- Spaces are safe for some and unsafe for others: We need to be conscientious about how we move through the university, and recognize that some of us move through it with more privilege than others.

- We must centralize the individuals who are the most vulnerable in what we do: Ask, how we can learn to be more empathetic to people that experience barriers that we ourselves don't experience?

- If our leaders are only in conversation with knowledges that are harmful, violence is perpetuated. We must make space for scholars with differing knowledge to change the way institutions are run.

What could universities be like if they were structured around ethics of care?

Roberta's Response:

- We must create an environment to allow folks to better care for themselves and one another's well-being, which would involve:
    - Caring for ourselves by: prioritizing food, movement, and rest; setting boundaries; not overworking; and taking sick days when unwell.
    - Modelling caring behaviour for others like wearing masks, holding space for individuals to connect about well-being in meetings, and ensuring spaces are accommodating for everyone to participate.
    - Valuing and embracing different ways of knowing, and prioritizing collaboration and relationships, including encouragement of collaborative research groups and nonhierarchical labs.
    - Grounding ourselves in the place we work and learn by learning about its colonial history, Indigenous land rights, and environmental dynamics.
    - Creating an environment where everybody advocates for everybody, and collectively refusing or pushing back against requests that lead to overwork, and supporting the work of all unions.
    - Encouraging quality over quantity in decision-making and recognizing the invisible work that historically excluded groups often undertake.

What are the necessary actions that must be taken to improve the experiences on our campus, especially for students? And what role do other groups (e.g. faculty, staff, and administrators) have to play in this?

Nicole's Response:

- Follow the CSA's lead and mandate training and supports related to sexual- and gender-based violence, anti-racism training, and mental health training.

- In the classroom, there need to be opportunities for student feedback and dialogue throughout the semester, not just during course evaluations.

- People learn differently: The CSA is encouraging universal design for learning and hybrid learning. This would dismantle the barriers faced in the classroom and would reduce the need for student accommodation requests.

- There needs to be collaboration between students and the university, and policies on campus must support students, staff, and faculty, rather than create barriers for and between them. The University needs to amplify the work that's already being done.

Jena's Response:

- The university needs to be transparent about responses to issues like racism and hate. They must collaborate with students and follow up on progress.

- When multiple groups on campus push for changes together, we can have greater impacts.

- Remember the impact that small things can have on someone's experience, and the opportunities that can come from that.

What can we do about these extremely high rates of food insecurity for students on campus?

Suman's Response:

- Get rid of food banks – these were designed as a temporary measure to address food insecurity in the 80s. Students are paying for the food banks they access in their tuition, which is a systemic problem.

- Every campus has the goal of providing better education to students, but food must be understood as essential to education. We need to create better policies that centre food as a human right at the campus, provincial, and federal levels