GQ: Defining social justice and civic engagement/community service [CS/CE]

Is the term ‘social justice’ commonly understood by the campus community?

When the discussion began some of the students initially had a difficult time coming up with a definition of the term ‘social justice.’ Once the conversation got going a little bit, one student mentioned that SF State is a politically active campus with a diverse student body that provides equal access to opportunity. The group unanimously agreed with this statement. Everyone also agreed that the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) community is represented at SF State. One student brought up age saying, “SF State includes all ages and I’ve never felt excluded from anything at SF State.”

What do you think people on campus think of when they hear the phrase social justice?

When asked about what people on campus think of when they hear the phrase social justice, the students mentioned protests, and the right to protest. Although one student said, “I don’t think the school population has a good understanding of what social justice is.”

The other students seemed to agree with this statement. The students also mentioned that other students will hear the term but not fully understand what it means. One student defined social justice as: “Equality between students and being able to get into the classes that you deserve to be in. If you did the prerequisite for the class, you deserve a spot in that class, as opposed to people that just sign up and get in because the teachers don’t check.”

When the moderator asked about equality among certain groups one student said, “Pretty much any group that is affected by an -ism, which is a lot of groups.” The groups of race, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation were mentioned when thinking of groups that may be affected by social justice. Another student mentioned SF State being the only college in the nation with an ethnic studies program.

Do you think of shared governance as a social justice/civic engagement issue?

When the moderator asked the students if they understood what shared governance is, they replied that they didn’t really know. Some of the students wanted clarification for what shared governance meant, and wanted to know if we were talking about shared governance on campus only or in the greater society. In trying to come up with a definition of shared governance one student said, “I would say it’s between the department heads and the professors, [and] that there’s some sort of teamwork going on there.” Another student mentioned that shared governance is “student organizations and how they work together and how they work with the administration.”

In looking at shared governance as a social justice issue, one student mentioned ASI (Associated Students Inc.) and how they are not fair in money distribution. The student also mentioned that most people do not vote in University elections because not enough people know what is going on.

Another student answered “yes” to shared governance being a social issue and said, “It comes back to equality and that is not only equality between races but also, if you want to break it down into what would be classes, if the classes were like heads, professors, students, the equality between them and the justice that they deserve.”
Another student added by saying: “It’s necessary for social justice. If you don’t have a way for people to speak out against something that they’re concerned about, you can’t say that you’re, you know, you’re socially just.” One of the last things mentioned in this segment was that the students felt that organizing in terms of shared governance was not feasible.

**Do you think SF State exhibits a commitment to shared governance?**

When discussing whether or not the students think that the university exhibits a commitment to shared governance, some of the students agreed that the students as a whole are not represented very well. The group was of the opinion that those involved in ASI are not here to help students, but to have something to put on a resume.

One student said: “In terms of student government I don’t see a whole lot of that. I hear people talking about it every once in a while but it’s not like when you were in high school. I don’t see a whole lot of that going on.” Another student mentioned the Metropolitan Heath Academy (MHA) program and how it is successful in representing students because the program gives the students the tools to graduate in four years.

When asked about seeing a commitment to shared governance through observations of the protests and what’s going on with the budget crisis one student said: “I’m seeing the students making one, the students that are interested in trying to help. They’re taking advantage of everything given to them. Even if the upper heads aren’t giving that much, the students willing to take that much and make it more, are doing that.”

**What can we do to further our commitment to social justice on campus?**

The students concurred that the university needs to be taking every situation and every concern seriously if it is going to be serious about social justice. It was also mentioned that students should be talked to about social justice through a survey of some sort. There was an overall dissatisfaction with outdated General Education courses. The participants concluded that general education courses are boring and not interesting to students.

The students agreed that SF State should have something in the curriculum that could increase awareness about social justice and civic engagement/community service. The general education courses should be addressing those issues more. One student said that it was in a general education course where she became aware of a social justice issue, and it was her first ethnic studies class. Finally, the participants unanimously agreed that the university could do more to keep the students more informed.

**GQ: Are the terms community service/civic engagement commonly understood by the campus community?**

**What do you think people on campus think of when they hear the phrase civic engagement and community service?**

When the students heard the term community service, they all agreed that it could be framed as volunteering and helping out other people. All of the students agreed that civic engagement could be thought of and defined as taking a bigger part in your community or city, by voting and advocating. One student said “I think civic engagement would be in terms of voting or, you know, maybe like, participating in, ah gosh, maybe it’s hard to explain, like going to the court downtown and actually sitting in on a case or something like that.”
Another student added: “Anything political. [Civic engagement] sounds much more political than the other. And to me, community service sounds like more; at least, I include it with cultural things. Like for example, in the Mission having a Mexican group presentation or [anything] geared towards specific cultures. Whereas for civic engagement, I see that more as helping out the city, as a city, not really culturally, [for example] if you wanted to get a traffic light installed near a school or something like that.” Generally, the students felt that the clubs and the organizations were the best way to get involved as far as community service/civic engagement.

The students generally agreed that SF State does a good job in presenting civic engagement and community service. One student mentioned the recycling and composting project at SF State. To increase commitment to community service/civic engagement on campus, one student recommended that course credit should be given for community service.

**What can we do to improve our commitment to community service/civic engagement on campus?**

The students implied that the information is out there, but it is not reaching them. One student said, “If people don’t know about what is being offered, then it’s not worth having in the first place.” Another student agreed, saying, “That’s true, maybe if the professors would talk about it more, say this is coming up and this is going to affect us this way so you might actually want to vote.” The students agreed that obtaining information through their professors would be very helpful.

Another student mentioned that SF State should have more campus groups that promote community service/civic engagement, making it more accessible for the students to be involved. Another student mentioned the importance of continuing to let activists have a voice on campus in order to get all of the opinions out there. The group of students generally agreed that SF State does a good job in participating and showing a commitment to community service/civic engagement by recycling and composting.

**What can we do to further our commitment to community service/civic engagement on campus?**

When asked what could be done to further our commitment to community service and civic engagement on campus, one student mentioned receiving course credit for community service. This student suggested that a certain amount of hours volunteered could add up to class credit. In regards to values, the students agreed that if people’s values aren’t there, then they will be less likely to go out and participate.

One student mentioned that the professors at SF State are engaged in their classes and SF State should continue to hire good professors.

One student reiterated the importance of sharing information about what is happening on the campus. This student said, “I think it would be really nice if they would promote civic engagement more, something that’s going on in the university, in terms of voting, I want the university to be more involved.”

**Do you make a distinction between social justice/civic engagement/community service?**

All of the students did make a distinction between civic engagement and community service. There were a number of different responses, however there was an overall general agreement that community service could be defined as volunteering and as something that pertained to an individual’s particular interest. One student said that “someone can be socially unjust and still participate in community service.” Also, majority of the students thought that you don’t have to be involved in your community to have your social justice stepped on.
As an example, one of the students mentioned that the Campus Republicans should have a right to free speech. Even though the majority of the population at SF State is more liberal, the Republican group should still be allowed to have a presence in the university community. To make the distinction between civic engagement and community service clearer, one student gave an oil spill example: “I’d put [an oil spill] under the civic [engagement] one because that needs to be done. [Community service] should be done, but it doesn’t need to be done for us to live.”

The moderator asked about activities versus values and if there is anything SF State can do to influence values. One student talked about how their professors were really engage and passionate about what they were teaching, and said that they had taken courses that ultimately influenced their values.

**GQ: Budget Cuts**

**Is the budget sufficient to address the social justice values and commitment to civic engagement/community service we already have on campus?**

When discussing the sufficiency of the budget, all of the students agreed that it severely affecting classes. When asked if they thought the budget in a time recession is or will be sufficient to address the social justice values that we have, one student immediately replied with: “Definitely not. I mean because this is my third year now and it’s not really been fun. And I’m sure it’s only going to get worse.” This student added by saying, “I’ve had such a hard time getting into classes, and having to get enough classes to keep my financial aid.”

When this student mentioned financial aid it prompted another issue that needed to be discussed, especially in terms of social justice. The student continued: “I rely on that completely, and although I wanted to take 19 units of classes there’s been semesters where I need 12 for financial aid. I’ve struggled to get that much even though I wanted 19, and I’ve taken classes that I didn’t need at all.” This student’s words show how the budget is very much negatively impacting and not sufficient in terms of social justice and maintaining social justice values.

Another student brought up an important point in relating the budget to social governance. That student said, “It’s going to get to the point where only the certain people can be involved in social governance because the other people are going to be working so hard just to stay in school that they’re not going to have time to participate in that stuff and it’s going to affect their social justice because they’re not going to be able to have a voice.”

The students then discussed how it is hard to have funding for social justice issues when we don’t have money for classes and other basic necessities. However, they still agreed that social justice should always be taken into consideration. The students then mentioned that the basic justice would be to allow students to take classes they need, when they need to take them.

The students thought that if you don’t have the time to participate because you’re working to pay for your education then the budget definitely does become related to your social justice values. In concluding this discussion the students felt that the right to a higher education is social justice.

**How are budget cuts impacting student demographics?**

**Do you think the budget cuts are affecting everyone in the same way?**

When asked how the budget cuts are impacting the student demographics here at SF State, the students asserted that residents of California aren’t being serviced adequately. According to the group,
international and out-of-state students are being catered to because they pay a higher tuition, which in-
turn, means more money for the university.

The students also theorized that we will be seeing an older student body because more and more students
will be going to junior colleges and then transferring. An important issue was brought up when the
students talked about how those who can afford to pay the high tuition will either continue to attend SF
State or they will start going to private schools.

Those who cannot afford the high tuition will stop attending, which ultimately leaves the student body
with less diversity. One student said: “I think it’s going to get a lot harder to get in here. You can’t take
everyone because we already don’t have, things that we need to make this university work.”

When asked who would not come to SF State the student immediately responded with “low income
[students].” The students then begin to talk about how this issue affects faculty and lecturers as well. They
thought that lecturers will be tempted to go elsewhere or will be laid off because the university cannot
afford to keep them.

The students also talked about how some of the lecturers are up and coming, and more energetic and
overall great, however we’ve lost some of them. They students thought that ultimately more general
education classes will be taught by graduate students.

Do you think the budget cuts are affecting everyone in the same way?

When the students were asked if they thought the budget cuts are affecting everyone in the same way,
some of the previously discussed topics were touched on again and reiterated. That being said, all of the
students generally agreed that “yes,” the budget is affecting everyone negatively, but not precisely in the
same way.

The students discussed how there is a wide range as far as people’s ability to cope with the cuts.
However, it is still rough to get classes whether or not you can afford it. The students generally thought
that in some ways, it is not affecting people the same; people who have no problem paying will continue
to pay. They thought that in other instances, such as furloughs and fewer classes, everyone is affected the
same.

The students came to a generally agreed conclusion that diversity will dissipate over time if the budget
keeps increasing, as will social justice. One student said, “Back to talking about the social justice values, I
feel like that’s a luxury to be able to have, and I feel like a lot of people that would be completely
committed to that when they’re struggling to get classes, and when they’re struggling to work, to make
sure they keep this and that.”

Another student added, “They’re just trying to get out [the students].” When prompted and asked about
lecturers, and how the budget is affecting them, one student said, “That’s going to be affecting them more
because before when that may have been something that we really wanted here, now it’s something that’s
cuttably.” Another student added by saying, “Almost all of the teachers that I’ve liked, so far, are gone.”
So the students explained that in terms of providing equal access and in terms of student demographics,
the budget is very much having a strong affect.

GQ: Suggested changes in how to talk about social justice:

Do you think there is adequate communication/collaboration on campus regarding social justice
and community service/civic engagement activities?
When the students discussed whether or not there is adequate communication on campus regarding social justice and community service/civic engagement activities, there were mixed feelings and thoughts. The students think that there is apathy on campus when it comes to social justice issues.

The students also suggested that people do not always know what is going on, while others have really strong opinions. Overall the students generally agreed that if you want information about social justice, community service/civic engagement activities, you have to seek it out.

However, one student reiterated the need for more information from the university. The student said, “Even though I’m not exactly the most interested in it, I know that there are many others like me that would be if they knew about it.” If students had the information on these social justice and community service/civic engagement activities then there might be more participants.

**What venues can you suggest for sharing our social justice and civic engagement/community service activities with one another?**

When discussing the possible venues for sharing information on social justice and civic engagement/community service activities with one another, the students had a number of different ideas. One student mentioned getting more focus groups together. Everyone agreed that organizations and social clubs on campus are the best venue for communication and collaboration about social justice and community service/civic engagement activities.

The students also agreed that being a part of diverse groups and organizations is the best way to get your voice heard. One student talked about a professor giving extra credit for going out and seeking social justice, community service and civic engagement activities in the larger community. Another student said that “classes too, in general, have been a great venue,” because the class she took was an ethnic studies class that had raised her awareness about issues that she had not had awareness about before.

The students all agreed that professors should start taking advantage of the environment that we live in, because there are a lot of opportunities for civic engagement and community service. At one point during the discussion the moderator mentioned sending out e-mails as way to share information with one another. The students agreed that e-mails would not be that effective in sharing information because people will hardly pay attention to a mass e-mail sent from the university.

One student said: “I mean e-mails work sometimes, but I tend not to take e-mails from the university incredibly seriously. I think in terms of volunteering, I don’t think it would be effective to come from the university because they don’t know you personally. I think that if professors would take more of an interest and maybe put it on more of a forefront, or not even necessarily them being like this is something you could do. Or maybe just giving students, say five minutes before each class as an opportunity for you to come up [to ask questions].”

So it seems that instructors are one of the most viable sources for students to become informed on social justice and civic engagement/community service activities because the student will already be in the classroom and therefore more likely to listen.