

Episode: The DEIA Landscape: Promise, Peril, and the Way Forward
with Dean Keith A. Alford

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:00:10] From the University of Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocial Work podcast. I'm Peter Sobota. It's good as always to have you along everybody. The United States is a pretty diverse place. It's often helpful for a lot of us to feel that we belong. To be attentive to patterns of injustice and supporting the needs of those of us with diverging abilities. These all have a fairly long history of aspiration in our broader society and especially in the field of social work. It doesn't seem too new or too contentious on the surface.

The Covid 19 pandemic, awareness of racial inequities in higher education and the death of George Floyd, and other violence directed at people of color, all seem to coalesce in making issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, again, long familiar to social workers, issues of almost global interest and reflection. These influences fostered increased sensitivity to injustices, and DEIA initiatives blossomed across the country. The road forward hasn't been smooth, and legislatively in many parts of the country, the pushback and backlash is robust. Given all of this, we wanted to talk with a long-standing foot soldier with history and expertise in this area. Fortunately for us, we had somebody handy. Dr. Keith Alford, dean and professor at the University of Buffalo School of Social Work, agreed to talk with us about his long term experiences, both personally and professionally, in advancing and leading efforts to promote an understanding and application of DEIA values and principles. This conversation can be experienced as a kind of an introduction, but also a critical examination of DEIA efforts, their promise, perils, and some informed ideas to navigate the complex way ahead. Keith Alford, PhD, LISW, is dean and professor at the UB School of Social Work. Dr. Alford joined UB upon leaving his long association with the Falk School of Social Work at Syracuse University, which concluded in his position as the first chief diversity and inclusion officer there, among many other accolades and achievements. He is the first African-American dean in the 90-year history of the UB School of Social Work. Dean and Dr. Keith Alford, welcome to Social Work. It's great to have you.

Dean Keith Alford [00:03:02] Thank you very much. I'm so glad to be here.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:03:04] Yeah, I know we chased you for a long time, and we got you. Thank you. So again, thanks for doing the podcast. And before we move into our main topic today, I, I do this for almost everybody, but I'm always interested in how our guests found their way to social. You know, in the intro we heard about your career. As you know, you're a practitioner or an academic, a scholar, the first chief diversity officer, I believe, at Syracuse University, and the first African-American dean of the UB School of Social Work in its 90-year history.

Dean Keith Alford [00:03:46] That's right.

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:03:47] That's probably not how it all started. I'm curious. How did you, how did you find your way to social work?

Dean Keith Alford [00:03:55] Well, Peter, thank you for that question. I have to think about it because I've been a social work practitioner, social work academician, social work scholar for so many years, decades now that this takes me back to my origins. But I actually believe it started during my undergraduate years, when I was actually a student in college and remembered the opportunity of engaging in what we would call an internship experience. At my particular undergraduate institution of Coker University, we did not have a social work major. We did have a sociology major with a concentration in social services, and I took advantage of that opportunity. And that concentration in social services allowed me the opportunity to do this abbreviated internship at the Darlington County Department of Social Services. That's really where I, I believe started my entree, if you will, into social work practice and get my feet wet and really appreciated the opportunity to engage with the fellow social workers at that time. I believe they were called case managers at that time. But nonetheless under that room, umbrella, should I say, social worker. And we now know that is so critical to make sure that there's a social work degree attached to any title of social work. Right?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:05:19] Yeah.

Dean Keith Alford [00:05:20] But nonetheless, those are, if I recall correctly, the early days of my entree into social work. But really, if you think about it, I have to kind of look at this as a part of who I am and my family experience as well, because we are all about engaging and connecting with people. Where I come from, and I'm originally from the South and my family was a great influence. When I say family, I'm referring to my extended family as well as my immediate family was a great influence on my upbringing, and so it was all about engaging and connecting with each other. Now, what does that mean for social work? It just means that we have to hear and engage with each other in order to learn from each other. And to me, all of those ingredients made me who I am and how I started in this wonderful profession.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:06:13] Yeah, well, thanks. And imagine that that is going to lead right into, I think, to our topic in a lot of ways. And you're a former a former family therapist as well as I remember this from previous conversations.

Dean Keith Alford [00:06:26] Am I am I am I actually have a degree. My PhD is certainly in social work with a specialization in family therapy, and so I have a great deal of experience working as a mental health practitioner serving families in the Columbus, Ohio area for a number of years. So you're exactly right.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:06:49] All right. Terrific. And thank you for doing that. So are you ready to to dive in here?

Dean Keith Alford [00:06:54] Yes.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:06:55] All right. Social work and social work education has been in the diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility business for quite some time. I mean, in some ways these are kind of baked into social work values. You know, just how effectively might be a topic for another podcast. We'll leave that maybe for, for part two. But, and also in many ways, you know, many in corporate America, I have also been on the record stating that DEIA is actually good for business in a diverse society. So, these really are not

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new ideas. You know, I think people talk about them as new ideas, but I don't think that's quite accurate. So social work is committed to the ecological perspective. So, if we could I'd like to start with that lens. So very brief here, history. Following the deaths of Trayvon Martin and George Floyd, DEI efforts were increased, funding was attached to it, and programs seemed to gather a lot of momentum. I don't know if you would agree with this, but currently we seem to be living in an environment that is now pushing back, to say the least. Detractors of DEIA efforts conflate initiatives and commitments with let's see here indoctrination, unfairness, anti-white whiteness, anti-Semitism, and even racism. You and I are speaking in May of 2024, and legislation limiting or banning DEIA initiatives and funding have been introduced in 25 states, and in eight of those, they've become law. Members of the U.S. Congress brag about their success in taking down educational leaders of our universities. Claudine Gay, the first black president of Harvard, on the job I think for about six months, no longer has that job. So, let's talk about DEIA over this conversation. You know, where are we? How are we doing? And finally, and most practically, what can we do as social workers, social work educators and, and as people to move forward? So, I know that was a mouthful. I've tried to give you lots of bait. Feel free to take whatever you'd like. And I just wonder if you'd like to comment on that kind of characterization.

Dean Keith Alford [00:09:44] Peter, you've said a lot, and I certainly do want to comment. I have a lot of comments that I want to share, but I want to probably start out by saying that diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Those are terms that we first need to understand their definitions. We need to appreciate the fact that, yes, diversity, equity inclusion and accessibility. A this is not new. This is actually a piece that if we want to we can trace it back to the Civil Rights Act. Where in that particular act, the outlawing of discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin and so many more. Right? That was really a watershed moment for our country. Now, keep in mind, though, so much has taken place since that time and I'm referring to, of course, the 1960s. Nonetheless, we needed a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. We need it. We need it to appreciate, should I say, that it is a multicultural society that we live in, not a one-race society or one-cultural society. It's a multicultural society. So an appreciation for multiculturalism and appreciation for the lived experiences of others is really what I believe sits at the core of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. And so when we say diversity, in my opinion, diversity is really an appreciation of so many different elements, right? Race. Identity. Positionality. A number of elements that make up diversity, even neurodiversity. Right? We have to be mindful that it's not just a term in and of itself. It's a term that is, I would say, replete with a number of different elements. Equity is not equality. While equality is certainly critically important. But equity says, I want to really make sure that I understand your lived experience in terms of what you need. What resources you obviously would benefit from if you had them at your disposal? What are the pieces that will help move the equation forward for you? We're talking about equity versus, and maybe I shouldn't use the term or the word versus I actually should say equity and equality. But I know that oftentimes we use those two words interchangeably. So I wanted to agree. Yeah, I wanted to make sure that I distinguish in my opinion the difference. And then inclusion really is about belonging. We can certainly talk about having folks at the table, but once they're at the table, are we making sure that their voices are heard? Are we making sure that we hear where they're coming from? So inclusion has a great deal, in my opinion, to do with. Belonging and making sure that everyone feels connected. Involved. And of course when we talk about accessibility, that's an elevation or an appreciation of the lived experiences of people with disabilities, and making sure that we are really doing our part to address how we are engaging, how we are even performing, if you will, relative to all that we do, so that people with disabilities, whatever those disabilities may be, are

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fully embraced and they are fully appreciated around their needs as well. So I wanted to make sure that I talk about the definitions of those terms associated with DEIA. Now yeah. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:13:38] No, no I, I actually just wanted to interject, because I think this is something in just hanging around with you. This is something that I've just noticed is that a lot of folks talk about DEIA. I hear that term all the time, right? Right. When I hear you talk about DEIA, you always say.

Dean Keith Alford [00:13:57] Yes, I do, I do, and sometimes there's a raised eyebrow when I do that. But I always feel like that's my opportunity to do. Explain.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:14:04] Yeah. And I don't know if I have a raised eyebrow. It's just noticeable. You're just consistent. You just never let it go by without adding the A. I can tell you feel strongly about it.

Dean Keith Alford [00:14:18] I do feel strongly about it. And Peter, if you don't mind my digressing, although it's really connected to this very piece. And I think it is okay in this case for me to share this personal experience of the fact that, yes, I am a black man; and, I am a black father of a son with disabilities. And so, yes, when I think about DEIA, I can't help but think about the fact of my own lived experience as a father caring for an adult, young adult son who has disabilities, who I'm extremely proud of, be able to manage in this world given every challenge that he has faced. And so keep in mind, oftentimes when we think about DEIA, we're thinking about it in this kind of global sense. But there are personal stories to everyone, and particularly in my lived experience, their personal stories that I think elevate and that characterize what DEIA really stands for. And so when you talk about the day that I had to die, I added oftentimes thinking about my son, but also appreciating and wanting to pay honor, if you will, to the disability community.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:15:37] Yes, absolutely. And. As long as we're doing stories here, I'll do it myself as an able bodied person. I, and as a white person, I am used to walking around in a world that's largely built for me. And I'm not so proud of saying this. But I didn't become acutely aware of accessibility issues until my father became elderly and wanted to move around in the world, unsteady on his feet. And I began to notice. All of a sudden, all the obstacles that I just walked by every single day. Absolutely. And it doesn't have to be that way, obviously. But I think that's what it took for me. So yeah. So everything that you talked about, oh, wait, I think you had another thought before I jumped in. So yeah.

Dean Keith Alford [00:16:32] No, I just wanted to say I appreciate you sharing that story about your father, because what you just did, Peter, at least as I received it, is to engage in what I believe we'd need to do more of is this whole idea of sharing commonalities, sharing experiences that are similar or at least in the same arena as the other, so that we can fully appreciate where the other is coming from. And so I was able to share a story about my son briefly, and you were able to share the story about your father. And so I felt again, yet another connection.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:17:08] Yeah. Same. Thank you. So everything that you talked about, you know, your descriptions of DEIA and where it came from and really what it's all about. I mean, honestly, on the surface, there's not a lot to argue about there, you would think. Right? I mean, we're on a pretty small planet with a lot of different people.

Dean Keith Alford [00:17:32] And that seems.

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:17:32] Okay. We're all, we should get this. We can all rally behind this. But of course, that's not really I think the the planet that we're living on yet. Yeah. So let me just ask, you addressed this, but I want to see if we can fine tune it a little bit. Why should we promote and argue and value? What's in it for us to valued? I. Why should we do it?

Dean Keith Alford [00:18:03] I mean, we should do it because we are social workers. That. Believe in a value base, and that value base says that we should. Not only appreciate, but do our best to enforce the dignity and I say enforce in the most endearing way, but enforce the dignity and worth of humankind. And when we think about that, we have to think about that from a place of humanity, a place of the. And you referenced earlier, Peter, that. This is an easy concept. This is really, you know, part and parcel of who we are. But yet there is a concern on the part of many that this is not how it should be. We are one nation. We are one sovereign country. Okay, I hear you. While at the same time, every family has family traditions. Every culture or cultural group has a culture that they can reference in terms of customs and mores and the like, right? Why should we dishonor those because of who they are? We actually should celebrate those and look at opportunities to engage even more when we know that there are diverse opinions at the table. Then in my opinion, solutions are just around the corner. Actually, solutions are pretty much in front of us because we will get so many different ways of coming at a situation or problem area. So it makes sense in my opinion. And certainly as social workers who value the worth and dignity of the person who value the worth and dignity of humankind, it makes sense that we appreciate diversity, equity, inclusion. So all of this legislation that's occurring and in states repealing the all of the above. I got to tell you, it is disheartening, but I'm not daunted by it. I am a firm believer that I even said this, particularly when I think about what took place here in our own city of Buffalo, New York, on May 14th, 2022, ten black lives were snuffed out simply because they were going to a grocery store, shopping for groceries, engaging in what we all do every day, right? But it was a calculated plan to target this particular supermarket because it was in the black neighborhood or the black section, if you will, of of Buffalo. And I mentioned that from the standpoint that, yes, we have to be mindful that if we are not appreciating diversity, equity and inclusion, if we're not understanding that we live in a multicultural society, and we also are not understanding that there is a centrality of whiteness. There is a. Feeling that. Individuals are inferior. Some in reference to race. Sexual identity. Sexual orientation. Any number of elements, if you will, of diversity. And we're actually doing ourselves a disservice. We have to recognize that those unfortunate parts of our society still exist. While at the same time we can't be daunted by it. I've said this before, and I even said it at the commencement address in 2022, which was one week after my racially fueled massacre here in Buffalo. I said that racism is alive, but it will not thrive. It will not thrive, Peter, because we won't let it. As social workers, we won't let it as humanitarians. We will need to do our part to make sure that we are acknowledging and engaging and actively looking at ways that we can. Address. Inequities in our policies, in our practices, in our curriculum. All of the above. Because that is how we can move forward as a society. One of the things I got to be careful is that I can go on and on and on. So please, please.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:22:36] I think we're going to revisit those themes over the course of our conversation. But, Dean Alford, I am going to invite you into the hornet's nest here.

Dean Keith Alford [00:22:46] And please, Peter, call me Keith.

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:22:48] All right. All right, I will. Thanks. So the hornet's nest for me is that I know you have a clinical background. We'll just hedge it in that way. What do you think folks are so afraid of? Why is this tearing us apart? Rather than making us closer. More conversational, more accepting. What do you think? I guess I'm making an assumption. What do you think? Folks are afraid to oppose these programs. And what do you think they're afraid of?

Dean Keith Alford [00:23:27] Well, that's a very good question. I think for me. Peter, I don't know that I would use the word afraid, I guess. Okay. Is probably a way to, to look at this. But I also feel like we have to be mindful that history speaks for itself. And when we think about our indigenous brothers and sisters and individuals who clearly have been here long before any of us have been here, and what they had endured, when we think about so many groups who have been marginalized throughout history. Certainly, as we know, the enslavement of black people. And now with the rise of anti-Semitism, it is continuing to be more and more of a concern that groups, people who want to live their lives in this country are Muslim friends, brothers, sisters. The number of incidents that we can pinpoint that are still. Incidents of of hatred and even violence. Is enough for us to say. Is this who we are? Is this who we want to be? Regrettably, history tells us that. Yes. This is how it has been. But you and me and so many others, we have to still stay the course. We have to continue to move the needle forward because it won't drive. These efforts will not thrive while they are certainly gaining momentum. No question about it. But in the long run, they won't thrive because we know that it is about humanity. It is about doing the right thing. It is about if I go back to our value base as social workers, competence, you know, service integrity. Those are values that we hold dear. And those are the values that we have to continue to infuse. So someone might say, well, keep that sound. So, you know, pie in the sky, but it's actually not. Because if we were intentional in our efforts, if we're doing what we need to do on a daily basis and being up front about issues of race, being upfront about the fact that trauma is occurring on a daily basis, then we are also working simultaneously to counteract that. I hope that makes sense. I'm not sure.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:25:59] Yeah. Oh, I think it makes sense. And thank you for even kind of taking that question on. I know that that was probably not easy. Like, much of this isn't.

Dean Keith Alford [00:26:12] No it's not. But I appreciate the question.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:26:15] You know, I what I want to do is I want to see if I can get you to, to help us understand your thinking. And I think even probably give us some some practical ideas about. If we want to be allies. How to do this? How do you think about. And respond to positions taken against D-I programs. And when folks argue that these programs and what they represent, they argue that they are racist, which I think is that takes some interesting thinking. And they create a system where basically it reduces people to oppressors against the oppressed, that these programs are exclusionary. And of late here in May of 2024 have triggered. A rise in anti-Semitism. Around the country and especially on college campuses. How do you respond to those kind of arguments?

Dean Keith Alford [00:27:22] Thank you Peter. I think for me, it's important to first hopefully be able to frame whatever the discussion. May be at that moment and with whomever that. Individual is or group may be to frame it as. A dialog versus a debate. Because oftentimes in these situations as you. Clearly indicated in terms of. The views around Dia, and that its pitting individuals against each other or even races in and of itself, which I totally fine. One of the biggest falsehoods I'll write, if I can just say that. But when

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it's hit it in that way or when it's framed, should I say in that way? It's framed almost like a debate. And I'm unconcerned that when you are debating, while I understand debate has a place in our society, and when you frame it in that particular manner, then it becomes very problematic, because then we lose the possibility of really anyone gaining on both sides, right? Because it's all about winning. And there's in debate, there's a winner, and then there's a loser in the dialog. Everybody grows. Everyone grows in dialog. And the opportunity then, for me is that I would want to frame these conversations if I have the opportunity. And I will take the opportunity whenever those. Possibilities present themselves. But frame it as a dialog so that I begin to help and and share. And even in my role as an academician and in this case as a leader or an administrator, to frame it from the vantage point of let's learn together, right? And so when I think about the benefits of they, they are just enormous. And I'm not sure if everyone, particularly those who are, naysayers. And that's actually putting it mildly. Right. Those who are naysayers, I'm not sure if they understand the benefits, and I'm not sure if they fully appreciate the fact that. Better health outcomes are associated when there's a focus on diet, because we already know that there are certain communities that are in need of certain areas of. Growth around understanding what this means to actually care for myself and to care for my family. From a health perspective. Social determinants of health have taught us right that we need to zero in on those areas so that we can fine tune and elevate the communities in need. Other outcomes. We know that decision. I've already alluded to this earlier, that decisions, particularly when there is a diverse group of people at the table. Decisions are that much more. I think beneficial. And if I can use the word fruitful from the vantage point that we have so many opportunities to hear different sides and different ways of coming out, whatever the situation, whatever the problem or whatever the conundrum might be. Right. And just as important, we are able to address racial and social injustices by way of the programs of a initiatives. We know that we live in a society where injustice, unfortunately, is happening on a daily basis. If we're not tuned in to that from this space of. Dia. In other words, appreciating the fact that there are so many inequities out there. They are also in contention to. Diversity issues. Then we're going to ignore the injustices that take place. We can't do that. We have to be on the front lines, if you will. So I just see that there are so many benefits and yes, I'm coming from my own space here, but I would also come from the space of educating and trying my best to engage in dialog so that we all grow.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:31:33] I don't know if I've ever told you this, but I recall that before I even knew you were a candidate to come to UB. I was reading about you.

Dean Keith Alford [00:31:42] Yeah, I'm afraid to ask. What were you? What were you reading, Peter? I'll tell you.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:31:45] I should have warned you about this part I was reading, you know, in *The Usual Suspects*. I was reading in *Inside Higher Ed* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and I was coming across, I don't remember exactly what was going on at the time, but you were at Syracuse and I kept reading about like, well, you know, Syracuse is kind of like our neighbors, you know, in Buffalo, we know Syracuse, we like Syracuse, you know, we like their basketball team and all that kind of stuff. I remember there was some kind of tension. I believe there might have even been some incidents on campus. And I kept reading about the chief diversity officer, and I just thought, oh God, oh, he's in the article. He's brand new, relatively brand new. And, Doctor Keith Alford and you kept being characterized as this kind of, like, earnest. Patient. Collaborative presence. You know, they kept quoting you. And I said, this guy sounds like. Somehow he's walking that razor's edge through this, likely very difficult situation. And I, you know, and correct me if

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I'm wrong. But then I remember reading about a shift and then it seemed like all of a sudden things started being person centered rather than system centered. And then it seemed like things got weird and, and the wheels kind of came off. So. Yeah, I know you've been at this for a while.

Dean Keith Alford [00:33:36] Yeah, yeah, that's.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:33:37] Probably not too much that scares you at this point?

Dean Keith Alford [00:33:40] Well, no, I yeah, that would be one way to say it for sure. But but yes, I do remember that time. And I am so honored to have. Served at Syracuse University as the Social Work School Social Work Director, as well as. The first chief diversity and inclusion officer. And you're exactly right. Yeah. There was that time where there were some incidents on campus that we had to fully address, while at the same time. As you well know, in any situation it can move in various or move. Should I say various points throughout the process? Right. And that's exactly what happened, with the student protests that were occurring at that time. But the one thing that I do remember about that and the one piece that I want to pull from that and. Actually talk about it. In reference to what? Well, we are addressing right now is the fact that. I was able to really hang in and stay the course, and really do my best to make sure that I was in that moment, at that particular time, right, and not run away or skirt any responsibility or even the possibility of our students feeling at that time, feeling that they did not have someone that can at least hear where they're coming from, whether they believed that person was hearing them authentically or not or not. That's the piece that I think is still critical today in terms of not only my work in the Dia space, but also what I try to convey in my position as dean of UBC University of Buffalo School of Social Work, of which I am so very honored to serve in our in our 90th anniversary year. I want to make sure that we're always in the moment, and we're trying our best to work through and address so that our efforts are intentional. We have to think about the fact that all of us in this deep space serve as orchestrators. We serve as catalysts, and we also serve as transformers. So at any given time, we could be orchestrating, pulling folks together, trying to address whatever the matter may be, while at the same time, we have to continue to be the catalyst to keep it moving forward as best as possible, and do so as collectively hearing the voices of everyone, hearing the stories of everyone, and then be transformative or transformational in our thinking because we want whatever the situation is to improve, to ameliorate, to actually be better, right? So to me, that's transformation. So that's what I was able to take away from that experience and still utilize today here at UBC School of Social Work.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:36:34] Thanks. If we could, let's stay in. Kind of like the university, educational, even social work educational setting for a second. If you're going to talk about these kinds of issues out loud, it's a fair bet that some people are going to be uncomfortable. And also in that kind of discussion, there are going to be people at the table who say. Oh, God. I think about this every day. This is the story of my life. I don't have a choice. Do I have to sit here and listen to this? Like this is some kind of new idea, and that this is something, you know, that we're brave to talk about. So. And, you know, I feel that sometimes in my classroom, quite frankly. And. I think I want to say something and then just have you react. Sure. Universities. If they're going to do what they do best. We can't promise all of our students that they will be comfortable at all times.

Dean Keith Alford [00:37:49] No we can't.

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Prof. Peter Sobota [00:37:50] How? How much discomfort. Do you think it's a part of learning? And maybe even even just to go even further. Can you learn without being uncomfortable to a certain extent? How much discomfort is. Is a part of the learning process from your. I hope.

Dean Keith Alford [00:38:11] A great deal of this.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:38:13] Of okay.

Dean Keith Alford [00:38:14] A great deal of discomfort is a part of the learning process. Peter, and I hope that answer didn't throw you off in any way because no.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:38:21] No, I like it. I didn't think you were going to say it. Yes.

Dean Keith Alford [00:38:26] Simply because when we are in this kind of space of, I'll even use the analogy of this kind of not a ball in our, in our belly. Right? Then that means that we might possibly be growing, that we actually might be moving from a space of this kind of status quo to a new space beyond the comfort zone. Right. And that's where we want to move in terms of our appreciation for race and how race plays such a pivotal role in our society. You know, I am reminded of the phrase that says, in order to be trauma informed, you have to be racially informed. And that is so true, right? So we have to be uncomfortable. But let's also look at that. Kind of discomfort in a way of growth as and also in a way of how do we then capitalize. And I'll use that phrase in a general sense or term, if you will, in a general sense on that, so that we now can use it in a proactive way. Right. And so to me, that's what education is all about. Now, I am not a proponent of someone. Feeling that. They have been treated poorly. I say in a classroom experience or in a in a group setting. Yeah. Or in a large meeting, you know, singling that person out. But I am someone who believes that. Yes. Let's talk about the ouch that may have occurred in the room. Let's talk about. Something doesn't feel exactly where it should be, and I don't think we can go any further until we address that. To me, those are those teachable moments. Those are those opportunities where growth occurs that you just cannot make up. You have to just take advantage of it and move forward.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:40:20] Right. Yeah. And if I could just insert myself into your response here. You know, you just lit a light bulb above my head in terms of. And in this context, the person standing in front of the room. Including me. Sometimes gets humbled. And is wrong. And if you will or limited let's put it that way. And I think needs to. Owe him that and apologize. And that's. That is very true. That is it. Well, it's not pleasant. It's humbling. But I am learning more and more even at this point that it's. Helpful because it sets the stage for the next conversation. That it's possible that people can disagree and maybe even. Certain levels of discomfort. But if it's genuine and earnest. People are very forgiving in general, and that's what gives me hope. Sometimes.

Dean Keith Alford [00:41:35] Absolutely. Absolutely.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:41:38] If I could just keep on this because. Relatively recently, you and I both attended a panel discussion on DEIA here at UB. I believe there was a university representative there as somebody from the community and one of our students, and in that conversation there was raised quite a bit. And and I'll put this in quotes DEA phobia were mentioned. And one comment that really struck me that I want to ask you about. Was the statement that one of the limitations of DEA efforts in educational settings. Was a tendency to transfer responsibility for implementation and and follow through.

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Regarding DEA efforts to students. While at the same time allowing systemic problems to continue to exist and to not have to bear. The responsibility and maybe even the the effort. You and I didn't have a chance to talk after that. I wanted to ask you what you thought. What were you thinking? If that sounds familiar to you, those statements. What do you think about that?

Dean Keith Alford [00:43:11] Let me say this. Peter, thank you for posing that. And again. This is going to be a statement that I think is critically important to unpack. Racism is a function of our society. And when I think about the fact that we live with the isms, if you want to refer to that racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, we live with those on a daily basis, right? And I know that if we are not. Intentional in terms of our efforts to address those. Systemically. In our own. Systems policies are practices as a school of social work. Just utilize our own the canine unit as an example then. We're not doing what we need to do in terms of being good stewards of the profession, right. So. Absolutely. We should have committees. We should have actually every committee should have a lens of of trauma informed. Here in terms of how we engage and communicate and understand trauma in the lives of the people and even our own interactions with each other. At the same time an appreciation for and not only an appreciation, but I would say an inculcation of diversity, equity and inclusion and accessibility with respect to how it's played out in that committees function, in that programs function in that particular units function, so on and so forth. So that helps, if you will. Does it solve? No, but it helps get at some of the systemic pieces that are always present for us. And so, you know, our society is ever changing. Our society is ever growing. So we have to always have these processes, if you will, in place. That's that's a given. And then the other piece too, in terms of. Addressing this. Fear factor. We're social workers, Peter. We got it. We understand the competencies of reflective listening. A validation of feelings of even effective use of silence. Right. We understand how to utilize those in a way that will dismantle fear, that will dismantle this sense of, oh, I don't think I can go there. Social workers are the ones on multidisciplinary teams that will be able to address this better than most, simply because we do come at it from this ecological systems perspective and the appreciation of those. What I would refer to as foundational skills and competencies that can be utilized at the macro level, as well as the micro level.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:46:09] Thanks. Yeah. Lots of thoughts. Listen to that.

Dean Keith Alford [00:46:13] I don't know if you can hear that. I am a social worker and DEA and trauma informed care lens prospective thinking person, and that's where I'm coming from in my answers.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:46:26] Yeah, absolutely. And forgive me for this, but to keep harping on it and. I'm kind of struck. Buy a couple things in, like in the here and now. We're we're doing a podcast. We're talking about DEIA. You're a black man. I'm a white man. It reminds me of a of a quote that I think it was. I think it might have been Toni Morrison. I'm not positive. I remember when everything was. We were still fresh and on the heels of George Floyd's murder, you know, and they interviewed, I believe it was interviewing Toni Morrison. And she was kind of distraught in the moment. And finally, at the end of her comments, she said something to the effect, you know what? I'm kind of tired of this. This is not my problem. And and I think she she might have said, I think very directly, you know, this is this is a white person's problem. And. When I heard that comment at that panel that you and I were about, that the DIY efforts are have a tendency to fall on students. I think what wasn't said that is part of my experience, that that responsibility seems to

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disproportionately fall on the shoulders. Of students who are not white. And I also read recently that.

Dean Keith Alford [00:48:04] Peter the go ahead and I and I apologize for interrupting you, but to that point we can't put oh, we should not put students in a space or place of having to defend or feeling like they have to explain, when in fact they are the ones who are living and breathing. This experience of living in a racially conscious society on a daily basis. Right. So. We have to be mindful of what Toni Morrison has said, but what so many others have said that the responsibility lies with the adults in the room and yes, speak live fully, if you will, in terms of our ability to be able to communicate that, whether we're white or black. But I do appreciate the fact that you and you've said so in terms of your own work, Peter. As a white male, I believe that it's important for you have to be able to, or should I say to have to be that person, to say yes. Let me own this and figure out a way to address this. And even if I don't know the answer, I'm going to come back and let you know later as best as possible, right? Yeah. And to me, that's earnest and that's that's authentic.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:49:19] I heard what you said loud and clear about. We shouldn't put students in that situation where they have to be the voice and always the representative of the ideals or the aspirations. But I've also recently read that half of all diversity officers in universities in the US are African-American. And two thirds of them are women.

Dean Keith Alford [00:49:52] But it's interesting because. As you were sharing those statistics, I almost wanted to switch roles and be the interviewer. Yeah, yeah. And say, well, what do you think about that?

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:50:02] I was sure, let's do that.

Dean Keith Alford [00:50:04] That's fair. Because, you know, I think at this juncture for me and I would like to hear your thoughts for sure, no question about it. But for me. Each diversity officer, each person in these leadership roles, particularly if they are charged, if you will, with carrying out and making sure that the fire is understood as the ethos of their organization, they have to also come at it from their lived experience. And so. This may be the opportunity, then, that they share, not in the sense of trying to. Receive support for themselves, but share their personal experience or their lived experience in a way that it is an education while at the same time. Respectful of what could be a commonality or even a transferable peace. For other groups who are in a similar situation or a similar background are from a similar background, so on and so forth. So I don't necessarily see that there is this large percentage of, of African-American or people of color, if you will, serving as diversity officers as, as negative, actually see that as positive and certainly. Women serving in that role as well. It's an education. But keep in mind this is a point in time and so we have to still continue to. Do our best to fight for these roles to be maintained. What I am hoping that over a period of time we will see. More expansiveness of how we understand what the role of diversity officer really means. Or should I say the CIA officer really means well? Also appreciating the fact that whoever is in that role, whether he, she or they may be black, white, Latinx, indigenous, Asian. Whatever their racial background may be. We appreciate their lived experience. We appreciate their uniqueness.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:52:18] Yeah. Thanks. And, you know, I think you're. Your turn around back to me, I think was fair and. I want to do that. I'm asking you to to take a lot of chances here. And I think it's it's entirely fair. And I think what I think of it is, is partly buried

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in the observation, in the question, especially on the heels of of what you said earlier, of of what I think about it specifically, it seems to me like an incredibly. Double edged sword. Where the person in the position is really they can't win, you know, they they it is great that they are in these positions of influence and leadership. And I think for them to draw on their lived experience is crucial and probably a main part of the a role in the job. And yet what I see is when they do it. And somebody doesn't like it. All of that is used against them to discredit them. And I think that's what I walked away with watching what went down with, Claudine gay.

Dean Keith Alford [00:53:39] Yeah.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:53:40] You know, those are the people in Congress where we're looking for ways to to trip her up and to discredit her. They wouldn't let her talk. I watched the hearings. And what was she? Cautious. Did she equivocate? I thought she did, but what else was she supposed to do in that context? And now, of course, you know, then like, then there's all this stuff about plagiarism that I think was just window dressing for. They wanted to get her anyway. So that that's my answer is that I, I just am sensitive to how almost you can't win. And maybe people. Like me, need to step up more and to be supportive and to be the voice at the table, rather than the person who is led around by people at the table, I guess. But thanks.

Dean Keith Alford [00:54:36] Yeah. No, no, thank you for sharing. I appreciate your points of view and how you were able to share that. So genuinely, when I think about it, you're exactly right, Peter. Four individuals and you reference of course quoting gay, which again, when I think about all that took place in that experience, you know, I have to sit back and say, wow, she is still standing. She is still moving forward. It did not defeat her. She was not defeated. However, when I think about her and I also think about others like her, this pattern is all too familiar. Right? Yes.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:55:23] Yeah.

Dean Keith Alford [00:55:24] So your point is certainly well-taken. But also to your point, there needs to be support for leaders of color. There needs to be built in mechanisms that actually support leaders of color so that their, approach, their style is understood as just as real and authentic as the next person and credible. Right? As opposed to being questioned that their style, approach is not this, that or the other, right? I am a collaborative leader. I do check-in with folks. I come from an Afrocentric perspective in that way, because it is about survival of the tribe. It is about the interconnectedness and the mutual aid that we all share. So, I'm sure that, you know, it may be questionable for some in terms of my approach, but nonetheless, I have seen dividends. I've seen growth as a result; while I've also appreciated the fact that I've remained true to myself. But there needs to be support for leaders, black leaders, indigenous leaders, Latinx neighbors, LGBTQ+ leaders. There needs to be support for diverse leaders. So that they feel that they have kind of this ongoing affinity group that, frankly, believes in them. Frankly believes. Yeah, yeah. And that's a whole other piece in terms of ethnic group affiliation and, and how those have been so helpful in the whole DIY space, right? And I'm sure that there are the critics out there, don't get me wrong. I know they are, but I can attest to how that has not only fortified leaders of color; it has also helped organizations, institutions of higher education move in a forward direction.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:57:26] Absolutely. All right. We are getting kind of close to our goal in terms of of time.

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Dean Keith Alford [00:57:33] And we have to finish though we have so much more. Right.

Prof. Peter Sobota [00:57:37] You know, and I really do want to wrap this up in a nice, tidy package, you know, and then we won't have to talk about it anymore and it'll be great. But I do want to leave out a chunk of time. And you've done this along the way. You've done this. But I really want to make it like super explicit here and at the end because. I think we need to talk about how to move forward and how to be practical. And so we've covered a lot of ground here. And I know you to be a dedicated, optimistic, committed person who is prepared to play the long game when it comes to all of the issues we've been talking about. So I'd love to just spend some time and giving you one more chance to either amplify or to come up with new ideas to talk specifically. About the role of our profession and also the role of social work education in acting in accordance with our values. And our ethics. So when it comes to dialog and our profession in social work education. What do you see as the way forward that you maybe you haven't talked about or you want to talk about some more? Especially given that we might be in a in a period of, you know, pretty robust pushback.

Dean Keith Alford [00:59:18] Absolutely. We have to make sure. And this is certainly a part of our [...] competencies in terms of the Council on Social Work Education. We have to make sure that we are constantly attending to anti-racism and what that means, right? We know that there are a number of resources that are still available. To organizations, to institutions of higher education. But social work our profession. We actually the National Association of Social Workers, we have a website that is replete, I believe, with a number of valuable resources that we can utilize to help us in our individual as well as collective efforts. Oftentimes we're kind of in the mire of whatever we're doing, and we may not necessarily see that we have. What we have in front of us. That could be of value. But there are outside organizations like the NAACP and. Anti-Defamation League, any number of organizations, entities, if you will, that can partner with us in our efforts to move forward. So, again, as a social work profession and also as schools of social work in higher education, let's partner with others. Let's engage in that effort to coalesce so that we can utilize best practices going forward. To me, that's part and parcel. The research is available to us. We have a number of scholarly articles; studies that have been done that we can utilize. That will help us in the process as well in all of our efforts. Let's use those. Right? I just. I know I may sound like I'm repeating myself, but it's one of those pieces where, Peter, we end up talking in these various meetings, and we're scratching our heads and we say, wait a minute, wait a minute. You know? The answers are there. We just need to tap those answers, right, and support each other in the process. But, we have to remain. We have to maintain intentionality in everything that we do and not be afraid to call it what it is. While at the same time saying this is how are we going to address it going forward, so that the kind of tiptoeing is not tiptoeing. It's actually really saying, hey, this is what I see, or this is what I've experienced, this is what I've been made privy to so that we can move the needle forward. You know, racial trauma is omnipresent, right? As a black man, I'm constantly reminded that every day when I wake up and I look in the mirror. I see my black identity. I'm very proud of my black identity. I embrace my black identity. While at the same time, I also come to a predominantly white campus and realize that I might have to engage a little differently here or engage a little differently there. I choose that. Other people may not choose that, right? Understanding and appreciating the dual socialization that so many people of color engage on a daily basis; engage in, should I say, on a daily basis, is also important. And what does that mean? Some may say, well, it's just part of life. Others, it will require them to kind of think twice. Do we appreciate this kind of back and forth that occurs and how that plays out also in the workplace? So, I just believe that if we can

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maintain this this mindset of intentionality in terms of calling it what it is, while at the same time making sure that we put programs and processes in place to address systemic issues, as well as engaging the individual one on one connectivity. That dialog that I talked about earlier, that is, I think, the beauty of how we can move forward, because appreciating the lived experiences of the other is really what social practice is all about.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:03:41] I have one more for you. Well, actually, it's two. If I could ask you a kind of, yes, somewhat a personal question. You strike me as an incredibly optimistic person. What keeps you optimistic, especially, especially when it comes to ideas and aspirations of DEIA? How do you do that?

Dean Keith Alford [01:04:12] Well my answer may be viewed as rather simplistic.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:04:17] So, I'll take it.

Dean Keith Alford [01:04:18] I'm just going to give it to you. What keeps me optimistic is that every day is a new day. And I'll be able to wake up again tomorrow and start over again, and hopefully do it better than the day before. I could elaborate, but I think that [...].

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:04:34] But I don't know why you would. I mean, I think, I like to see things in the most practical way, and that sounds pretty practical to me.

Dean Keith Alford [01:04:44] Thank you. Peter.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:04:46] I kind of satisfied a lot of my own curiosity in talking with you today. Is there anything that we. We didn't talk about that you would want to? Address here before we. Say goodbye.

Dean Keith Alford [01:05:04] Thank you for that opportunity. We covered a great deal while at the same time there's so much more that could be up there as well. As you well know. I guess for me. Being able to talk about the fact that there is a multicultural appreciation that we still need to have. But also, what does that appreciation mean? To me, it's inculcation in terms of understanding the lived experiences of the other, and also appreciating the fact that there is this kind of centrality of whiteness that exists in our society that we have to be mindful is a piece, that if we don't pay attention to, we can view everything from this lens of what would be viewed as normative white, normative versus. And again, maybe I should say, in addition to appreciating what I might experience from my racial background and from my cultural background, and what someone else might experience from his or their cultural background, their racial background. So we have to understand that it is not a one size fits all. And I think the other piece, too, is that you are so appointed at the very outset of this interview by acknowledging and calling out the names of Trayvon Martin and of. George Floyd. But I am reminded of Breonna Taylor. I'm reminded of Ahmaud Arbery. I'm reminded of Walter Scott. I'm reminded of so many other names that we did not call. And lest we forget, those individuals and their lives. And also what we have to do in terms of carrying on a legacy of uplift, while at the same time a legacy that says we will continue to work so that racism does not. It is alive, but it will not thrive.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:07:07] Dean Keith Alford. Thanks so much. Thanks for joining us. There are probably more reasons to avoid this conversation as a recorded one than to do it. And I, for whatever it's worth, I'm really grateful, and I'm really glad to have the

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opportunity for our show to give a platform to hear people talk about your point of view and your ideas. Thanks again.

Dean Keith Alford [01:07:36] Thank you for having me, Peter, and I really appreciate it.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:07:39] Thanks again to Doctor Keith offered for joining the In Social Work podcast team is an optimistic and hopeful mix, including Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, our GA production assistant, guest coordinator and audio editor, amongst many other things. Nic DeSmet say hi Nic.

Nic DeSmet [01:07:58] Hey everybody.

Prof. Peter Sobota [01:07:59] And I'm Peter Sobota. Thanks for listening to our show and we'll see you next time everybody.