

Letter to the Editor of *Counseling Today*
Pamela F. Foley

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To the Editor-

How sad that Robert Hunsaker (Social justice: An inconvenient irony, *CT*, April 2008) sees social justice as something that “can be practiced only by those on the political far-left.” As a faculty member at a university whose religious sponsor is often characterized as “far-right,” I find that claim absurd. Hunsaker asks repeatedly for concrete examples of how issues of social justice affect counseling practice. Here are but a few examples, which the counseling profession cannot ignore.

Counselors working in schools and career centers should be aware that students of color are disproportionately placed in lower-track classes and kept out of advanced classes, even with test scores similar to those of white students (see Tim Wise’s 2005 book *Affirmative Action: Racial Preferences in Black and White* for a discussion of this data). Should counselors advise these students as if their placements reflected their true potential? Further, those who qualify and could benefit from special services in the schools often do not receive them; zero-tolerance policies for behavior have taken issues that could have been addressed by counselors and shifted them to law enforcement, thus contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (for more information on this, see the online report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, <http://www.splcenter.org/news/item.jsp?aid=282>). Counselors working in prisons should also be aware that racism in the criminal justice system is alive and well; a fact widely documented and acknowledged by respected sources including the American Bar Association. Counselors working in community mental health centers may encounter clients who are anxious and depressed because they have been forced from their homes by “economic development” projects, which benefit local developers and politicians at the expense of those on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. If these counselors approach their work as if their clients face a level playing field, and as if individual interventions could fully solve these clients’ problems, their clients are not well served. Finally, counselors in private practice are not immune from these issues – those working with middle-class clients should be aware that racism continues to pervade the lives of people of color, even after they have “overcome” the barriers to income and education. Just ask any black professor how often she or he is followed by security officers when attempting to shop at the local mall, or how long it takes to hail a cab on a city street. These persistent micro-assaults can and do affect both mental and physical health.

These are systemic problems, and counselors who work within these systems do bear some responsibility for them. If counselors and the programs that train them uncritically accept the status quo, then counselors perpetuate these injustices.

Pamela F. Foley, Ph.D., LPC