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Alan Dettlaff – Leadership Through Values

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Peter Sobota [00:00:10] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork Podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, it's good to have you along. Today's episode sits at the intersection of social work education, leadership, and a set of tensions that many in our field are feeling, whether I'm naming them out loud or not. In late 2022, Alan Dettlaff, then Dean of the Graduate College of Social work at the University of Houston, was removed from his position as Dean. The circumstances surrounding that decision sparked conversations across the profession about academic freedom, about the direction of social work, and about what it means to lead in a moment of profound change. But rather than simply rehash headlines, what we wanna do today is something a little different. We wanna slow this down and use these circumstances to think more deeply about what is going on and especially about the challenges of social work leadership. In the current moment. Alan Dettlaff, PhD, is professor and former dean at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. Hi, Alan, and welcome to inSocialWork!

Alan Dettlaff [00:01:23] Hi, I'm happy to be here.

Peter Sobota [00:01:25] Well, before we get into the specifics of, you know, kind of what happened, if you will, in Houston, I would like to start, if I could, a bit more broadly. When you stepped into the deanship at the University of Houston, how were you thinking about that role? And what did you see as your core mission? And how did your abolitionist framework shape how you envision the school? I know that's three questions. I'll remind you if we skip those. What were you thinking? What did you see as the mission, and how do you think the abolitionist framework would fit into all that?

Alan Dettlaff [00:02:07] Yeah, thanks for that question. Before we start, I want to clarify that I'm speaking as myself as an individual social worker, not as a representative of the University of Houston. I want that to be really clear before we start talking about this. I didn't come into the dean role with an abolitionist framework. That all developed as I was in the role. I began as dean in 2015 and didn't really start to think of myself as an abolitionist until around 2020. Started thinking about it a couple of years before, but when I came in, all of my evolution or radicalization, as I think of it, happened while I was Dean, which in some ways is part of what led to my dismissal because the person that was hired in 2015 was very different than the person that I was in 2022. So when I come into the role, I came into it thinking probably similar to how many deans come into that role thinking that it was my job to work with this College of Social Work to build it to be one of the best social work programs in the country. There was a lot of focus on rankings to move the college up in the rankings to improve our research expenditures, to improve our

publications, to develop our faculty into world-class researchers. And I remember thinking, you know, I wanted us to be a top 10 school of social work. Uh, so, you, all of the things that a Dean likely comes in thinking they're going to

Peter Sobota [00:03:39] It's a very traditional orientation, actually.

Alan Dettlaff [00:03:43] And that was what I had.

Peter Sobota [00:03:45] Yeah, and so just to paraphrase here, I guess no growth, no additional learning allowed once you, once you take the position.

Alan Dettlaff [00:03:54] I don't know that that's the expectation, but I mean, my views about things, even about things like rankings and the importance of them, you know, shifted over time for sure.

Peter Sobota [00:04:03] Of course, yeah, all right. So, okay, so over the course of the time, I love the phrase during my radicalization. But as you kind of got set in your role and thought about things and thought about leadership, you used language and you advanced ideas that have been really influential. I know, back here across the country here in New York state, I didn't know you. But I was hearing about, you know, what you were doing. I know that I heard that faculty and staff and especially students, you know Houston was on their radar for some of the things that you were bringing forward. And so you said things that were influential and at times controversial, obviously. In particular, you're critique of the child welfare system as family policing generated a fair amount of debate. We could do a whole podcast on that idea alone, but for now, and for listeners who might be a little less familiar with your work, could you briefly, I know that's not fair, but briefly summarize your perspective here around child welfare and abolitionism.

Alan Dettlaff [00:05:31] Yeah, well, it starts with you going back to my early years as a social worker. I actually became a social worker because I wanted to work for the child welfare system. And that was my first job out of my undergrad program. I did my undergraduate internship in the child welfare system in Fort Worth, Texas, at T-School. And then right out of my bachelor's program, I went to work for Child Protective Services. And at that time, I really thought that I was helping people. I thought that was helping children and their families. My entire time in that system, I worked as an investigator, or what the system calls an investigator. Which meant that my job was to investigate allegations of abuse or neglect, and then to make decisions about whether the children in those homes could stay in those home or whether they needed to be taken away from their families and put into foster care. And I made that decision to take children away from their family. Please. Many times, you know, I estimate hundreds of times over the five to six years that I did investigations. And during that entire time, I really thought that I was helping those children. I didn't at that time have any language or understanding about the harms that I now think the system causes. After I left the system, I became involved in the state's work to address what it racial disproportionality. Which is the over-representation of black children in the child welfare system. At that time, this was around the early 2000s, black children were made up about 40% of the foster care population, even though they were only about 12, 13% of the child population, meaning they were over-represented at a rate more than three times their proportion of the population. And this was in the early 200s becoming a really important conversation that was happening in the childcare field. I remember the first thing that I thought about that was, why was this never talked about while I was in the system, while I was doing these removals? And I was able to look back then after a couple years away and realize that not only were most of the children that I

removed, black or brown children, but also that many of them really didn't need to be removed. That there were other things that could have been done that just never crossed my mind and were never presented as possibilities. Removal separation was just the go-to option.

Peter Sobota [00:07:56] Yeah, it was kind of a binary thing, right? I mean, I'm not an expert, but that's my understanding. Yep.

Alan Dettlaff [00:08:01] And I never questioned it. And I was, I remember also thinking that there was not one occasion during my whole time in the system where a child ever said to me, thank you so much for taking me away from my abusive parents.

Peter Sobota [00:08:15] Yeah, quite the opposite.

Alan Dettlaff [00:08:16] Yeah. Exactly. The only thing they wanted to know when I would go back to see them is, when can I go home? Even in cases where harm was occurring. And that really started to shift my perspective and I started thinking about and coming to terms with my own complicity in harming some of these children and particularly some of the racial biases that I bought into while I was part of that system. And that led to My PhD studies and years of work after that where I focused on the impact of racism and racial bias on decision-making. And I worked with many state systems on reform efforts to try to reduce disproportionality or reduce the over-representation of Black children in the system. And what happened is after I became Dean... I started thinking about ways to have more of an impact in that space, in that work, through my leadership role, but realized that I had been having the same conversations about disproportionality and reforms for almost 15 years now, and not a single thing had changed. And that's when I really started to question what I had done doing, what we all had been doing and whether reforms could really address the issue whether racism was so deeply embedded in the system that it couldn't be reformed away. Around that same time, I had invited Angela Davis to be a speaker at the College of Social Work. This was 2018. And she didn't talk about abolition during that talk. It was more about racism in society and the role of racism and racial justice and white supremacy. But I started to read some of her work, starting with our prison's obsolete. Which is really kind of her foundational text about prison abolition. And I really started to see the parallels between the origins of prisons and the origins of the child welfare system, and the harm that both of these systems cause to mostly black individuals, and how involvement in those systems actually serves as a mechanism of perpetuating their oppression. If you think of the outcomes of children who experience foster care, children who go into foster care then as adults are significantly more likely to experience poverty, violence, depression, substance use, suicidal ideation, imprisonment.

Peter Sobota [00:10:46] Yeah, I was going to say jail.

Alan Dettlaff [00:10:47] Oh yeah, all of those things. So, involvement in the child welfare system actually maintains the oppression of Black people because of their over-involvement in that system. And that's when I really started to apply an abolitionist lens to the system and realize that the problem that, or the reason why reforms had never worked is because reforms had never considered... Ending that particular intervention of forcible family separation. Reforms always tinker around the edges. The way I think about it now, I mean, reforms essentially ask the child welfare system to forcibly separate children from their families in nicer, friendlier ways than they're doing it now. And that's just not possible. The only way that this system is going to stop causing harm to people is if we stop

removing children from their families, if we realize as a society that forcibly separating children from parents just cannot happen in a society where we say we value children.

Peter Sobota [00:11:54] All right, well, you did that a lot more succinctly than I thought was humanly possible, but yeah, that should catch most of us up. So, okay, so building on that, and so you described your experiences and your scholarship and what you were learning. How did you begin to translate those ideas now, now you're a dean, into leadership? So here's my question. How did these ideas actually begin to shape, if it did, the direction of the school under your leadership?

Alan Dettlaff [00:12:41] Yeah, it was part of that evolution of my growth in understanding these issues, as well as the evolution. It significantly impacted on the evolution that I wanted to have with the school, or the way that I want to see the school evolve. You know, when I started in 2015, we began a strategic planning process, which I think has come for a lot of new deans because there hadn't been a leadership change in I think about 15 years. Oh, wow, okay. It had been a long time. That is a long distance. Part of that strategic planning process was developing a vision for the college, which we had not had before. And I remember the consultant we used explaining that the difference between a vision and a mission is that the mission says, what you do and how you do it and a vision says why you do those things. So our mission that we developed through that strategic planning process was something to the effect of preparing ethical and competent social workers to address societal challenges through meaningful innovation, scholarship, practice, something like that. But then the vision was really important to us because as I said, we hadn't had one. This was the why we do what we do. And I remember having a lot of conversations about why we do what we do, and there's some obvious answers to that because there's a need for social workers, there's these different issues that create the need for social workers in society. But what we ultimately came to is that the why we do what we do is because we wanted to achieve social, racial, economic, and political justice. That's what social workers should all aspire to. And it was important for us to have that vision on paper and not just say to aspire to it but say that we were going to achieve through our work we would achieve social racial economic and political justice So that began kind of a process for me of thinking about a space that our school could have in terms of being really bold in that

Alan Dettlaff [00:14:41] What happened then is that right around that time, I remember there were very visible incidents of police violence. The murders of Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, happened in 2016, and we had a student come to me and ask if we could have a conversation about that, about social workers' role in addressing police violence.

Peter Sobota [00:15:05] A school-wide conversation.

Alan Dettlaff [00:15:07] Mm-hmm, a school-wide conversation, which we did. We actually turned that into a series of conversations that was in the fall of 2016. And through those conversations, I shifted in the sense that I realized that having this broad vision of social, racial, economic, and political justice was important. But I felt like because of what was happening in society, we needed to be a little more narrow. To be really able to have a difference. And I really wanted to focus on this issue of racial justice as the signature important issue that our school would be taking on in everything we did, from conversations we have to our curriculum to how we thought about practicum placements, everything we do. So that was really the start of it. And then I continued to bring in speakers, events at that time were really important for us. So I brought, or we, the school, brought Derea McKesson. Who was one of the leaders of the Black Lives Matter

movement. And then we brought in Angela Davis, which was a really important moment for us where we had to move it from a small amphitheater where we were hosting on the school into the auditorium where our graduations took place because there was so much interest in this event. Wow. And as I said, then I started learning more about Angela Davis work and issues of police violence continued. And then of course there's the summer of 2020 and the murder of George Floyd. And all of that really was part of what I call my radicalization. And all that's happening as I'm Dean. I'm realizing more and more that I'm really beginning to understand what abolition is about. And I wanted our school to take that on. To me, I felt that that was, as a leader, moving our school in that direction and talking about abolition. . Not just abolition of the child welfare system, but abolition of police, prisons, child welfare, was an important conversation for the field to be having. You know, when I think about the values of social work and what we should stand for, if social workers truly care about social justice, if social worker's truly care about addressing and confronting racism, oppression, discrimination, inequities, then we have to care about addressing the systems that are responsible for racism, oppression, discrimination, inequities. And to me and to many other people, the systems that are most responsible for those things in society are prisons and policing. Not many people had thought of child welfare in that same context at that time, but just my role in working in that system, what I had come to understand about that system. I thought it, and because of social workers' large presence in that system, and what I could see as very clear parallels, I thought that it was important to add child welfare into that conversation. That then led to the start with colleagues of the Up In Movement, which was an initiative that at that time operated out of, in partnership between the Graduate College of Social Work and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. So all of those things became part of my leadership. Advocating for racial justice initially, and then taking that a little bit a step further, advocating for abolition of harmful and oppressive systems as a means of achieving justice, that became, to me, my responsibility as a leader in advancing those conversations in social work.

Peter Sobota [00:18:47] Yeah. So, all right. Well, here comes, I'm not good at filtering my bias, so here it goes. So, you are leading a school of social work, and you are aligning your school with a vision and a mission that is consistent with historical values and ethics of social work. Ostensibly should be our wheelhouse. The fit seems very clear to me. And you're you're really doing it at, you know, at the ground level. You're really, you know you're, you're moving it into action. And of course. No good deed goes unpunished. I guess that's how that goes. So let's pivot just a little bit to what kind of directly unfolded in Houston a little. You've described in other places that during your time as the dean that. Just reminding everybody, including myself, that schools of social work exist in the broader society, right? So, while you're leading in this manner, opposition emerged from what you've described, I think, as a relatively, or a small group of faculty, and without kind of going into the individuals and all that kind of stuff. But what kind of concerns did you understand? Them to be raising. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Alan Dettlaff [00:20:29] Yeah, absolutely. You know, there were several. I think that we started engaging in a lot of conversations about things like white supremacy culture, anti-racism, what that would look like in social work, how to infuse those ideas into the classroom, and then abolition, abolitionist proxies, and what that has to do, social workers' responsibility. For working towards abolition of harmful systems, but also social work's complicity in some of these harmful systems. And I think that made some faculty very uncomfortable who had not had those conversations before. And particularly, I remember conversations about white supremacy, white supremacy culture were very uncomfortable for some people on our faculty. I think I saw, and I think many deans probably saw similar. That 2020 really changed students. Students became much more aware than they had

been about issues of racial injustice, about things like police violence, about things the harms that social work can cause to people. If you remember in 2020, summer 2020, there was a large conversation about social work's role in policing.

Peter Sobota [00:21:53] Yeah, we were having it in Buffalo during the time period you're describing it. Sorry, but go ahead.

Alan Dettlaff [00:21:59] I think a lot of people were, a lot of social work schools were. And I know our social work professional organizations was, I remember clearly that NASW, the National Association of Social Workers was discussing this. And NASW came out very strongly supporting social work collaborations with police as a means of potentially reducing police violence. I had a very different reaction to that.

Peter Sobota [00:22:22] Yeah, full disclosure, me too. Go ahead.

Alan Dettlaff [00:22:24] I had a very different reaction to that and really thought, you know, if there has ever been a time where social work could do some self-reflection and see that we have been participating with the police for decades and that participation so far has done nothing to curb incidents of police violence, maybe we should start to think that creating change from the inside isn't possible. When a system like the police really doesn't want to change. And maybe this should be our opportunity to say, we're going to remove ourselves from this. The harm is so egregious, we are going to remove ourselves. And I often made a parallel to child welfare saying, you know, social workers cannot be the solution to police violence or to racist policing because social workers have problems with racism themselves. Just look at the child welfare system. Um, that is rife with racial biases and leads to the over surveillance, over removal of black children in the way that it has been doing. Um, I think that conversation made people very uncomfortable. It certainly made, um, NASW uncomfortable because they did not agree with that and didn't have have not to this day embraced abolition at all. I remember having a conversation with the then executive director of NASW about abolition and my hopes for NASW to move in a more progressive. And I had three asks of him, to consider taking a stand against solitary confinement, to consider taking the stand in support of minimum age laws when it comes to the juvenile legal system, meaning that there would be an age threshold where children could not be arrested for or convicted of a crime. And that NASW would walk back their support of the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act because it had not been supported by the broader movement for black lives in the US because it was very reformist oriented and actually gave a lot more money and resources to the police. And the executive director at the time said no to all three of those things and said that he didn't think their members in rural America would like those stances.

Peter Sobota [00:24:56] Oh boy.

Alan Dettlaff [00:24:58] That to me kind of showed that much of what social work says its values are, are performative in nature and dependent on other things like, like membership dues and others, the directions of societal opinion about certain things. But because I was very critical of social work at that time. I think that also made people on my faculty very uncomfortable. Some of the faculty who were uncomfortable with this work had worked for decades in the child welfare system. A conversation that came up often was the fact that we were leading, or I was leading this abolitionist movement at a school that simultaneously had what we call a Title IV-E program, meaning that we are paying students money or stipends to get their master's degrees and then go work for the child. We do too. Most most public schools of social work do. So those conversations, so that led

to some challenges, and I think ultimately, you know, faculty, some of this small group of faculty were concerned that my very visible views about the system would affect their grant money, the grant money that was coming into that 4E program, and you know ultimately I think felt that their work in those systems was being devalued because of my work. Or because of my stances. And then I also, you know, related to that, I know that my views about research began to shift a lot in the sense that I really started trying to move the college in a different way of thinking about impact. The idea of public impact scholarship was really important to me at the time and a number of deans. And I remember trying to, or talking with many of my faculty about what impact really means, and saying very clearly that impact does not come from journal impact factors. In many ways, that's a misnomer, the idea of an impact factor, because many journal articles, if not most, are never read by anyone in the public, particularly not policy makers. And I remember saying an example to my faculty. Oh, boy. If you publish one paper, that is then used by a member of Congress that say is a pilot study about universal basic income and then leads that member of congress to propose a bill to pass universal basic income and that has ultimately passed, that one paper will have more impact than 25 other papers you wrote that year in journals with high impact factors but that led to no real policy change. And I remember not all of my faculty really liked that idea. I remember I changed our evaluation tool, our annual performance review tool for the year. And instead of, in the research part, instead of just asking faculty to list their publications, I asked them to tell me what was most meaningful to you about your research this year. And what- To them? To them, yeah. Yes. And what made the most impact? What about your work this year made the impact?

Peter Sobota [00:28:21] Sounds eminently reasonable and supportive, Alan, so far.

Alan Dettlaff [00:28:25] I remember several of the faculty still listed their publications and said something to the effect of, I know I had an impact this year because I had 10 publications in journals with high impact factors. So I know that my shifting views about research were not several of my faculty did not agree with those and that was part of it too, because one of the reasons that was given to the acting provost at the time for my dismissal was that I was undermining the research goals of the university by devaluing things like impact factors.

Peter Sobota [00:29:04] Well, that's a lot. Um, so if I could, and you've addressed this, but I'm just really drilling down a tiny bit, I, it's going to seem kind of silly, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Is it safe to say that these concerns then in your opinion, that this is really not about governance. It's really not so much about how decisions are being made. I didn't, I didn't hear you saying that. But more about the direction that you were taking to the school and how that was trickling down into impacts on individual members, perhaps. And you just mentioned the larger universities. Is that fair?

Alan Dettlaff [00:29:50] Yeah, absolutely. It was about impacts to individuals, or potential impacts to individual, as well as potential impacts, to the university. And I know one of the arguments that was given to the acting provost was that my views were harming our relationship in the community, the community broadly. Really? I've never had evidence of that. I know that our, when you look at objective members like admissions and things like that, those had been steadily growing. But, you know, there were members of my, I had a dean's advisory team since I started in the program. There were several members of that advisory team who resigned from the team because of my views about abolition, particularly as they related to the police. I had, in collaboration with our practicum faculty, made a decision to not have any internships in policing criminal legal system organizations. So not just police departments, but like district attorney's offices or victim

assistance offices, things like that. We didn't have many to begin with, but that was somewhat controversial. So there was a, it was about impacts to people, but there was I think a decision making aspect it in the sense that people felt I was making decisions. Too unilaterally, without their input. Whereas I felt that that was my role as dean. I always believed in what was a, what I had a very strong administrative team in the sense that I had an associate dean for academic affairs that handled all aspects of our curriculum and teaching assignments and student affairs. I never involved myself in those things. We discussed them, but I never inserted myself into those decisions. That was that person's responsibility. We had an Associate Dean for Research and the research that our faculty did was that persons responsibility. As I mentioned, our 4E program, I would get questioned about that often, but I always maintained that that was an issue of academic freedom, that as dean it is not my role to decide what kind of grants faculty get, and if faculty want to apply for grants to pay for stipends to people working in the child welfare system, that's their right to do. But there was concerns about that I wasn't involving faculty enough in decisions, say, about the speakers that we would bring in. Which always focused on issues of racial justice. Other faculty wanted speakers to come in that were focused more on, their issue was maybe substance abuse or gerontology or something. And I was very clear that we were always gonna have speakers talk about racial justice issues. And then, the broader issue of the direction of the school. I think people felt that my outspokenness And because of my role or title led to a perception that I was speaking on behalf of the school, not myself as an individual or as dean, and that was harming them in some ways or potentially was harming in some way. So there was a decision-making aspect to it in terms of some of the decisions that I felt were my responsibility to shape the direction of the School. There was disagreement about that.

Peter Sobota [00:33:09] And these are all the reasons why I wanted to focus our podcast or our conversation really about leadership, because I think that's really what's running through this whole conversation so far. But if I could, one more, and so you're talking about, you know, I guess for lack of a better term, some of the discomfort or maybe even resistance, but just to complete the whole picture. Um, I guess I'm not going to assume that that was everybody. And so what I want to ask you is, could you, um, how would you describe like the broader faculty, you know, the, the big picture climate at, at, during this period, does that make any sense?

Alan Dettlaff [00:34:01] Yeah, absolutely. You know, it was challenging in some respects because, again, the other thing that I haven't mentioned yet is that all of this was happening during the pandemic, too, or the early years of the pandemic. So we were not face-to-face. We were all remote. We were not having faculty meetings in person. They're all on Zoom. That was very stressful for a lot of people to begin with. And I think it leads to some disconnect. Or led to some disconnect among the faculty that we hadn't had before because we were all walking into each other, running into each other in the halls and having conversations and things like that. That became very difficult too. But broadly, I felt that the faculty supported the direction that we were going. I think many faculty didn't entirely understand what abolition was about, but I tried to do a lot to bring about that understanding. I had small study groups with groups of faculty where we would go through an abolitionist type curriculum just to build their understanding of what abolition was about. And because I understood very clearly, this was a new topic. It's not something that social work has been talking about for years.

Peter Sobota [00:35:10] And one you had gone, I'm sorry for interrupting, and one you had gone through yourself.

Alan Dettlaff [00:35:15] Yeah, absolutely, yeah, absolutely. So I felt that it was important to do that. So I thought that most people were really on board with the direction and I definitely saw that students were. I mean, our enrollment had increased dramatically. The types of students that we were bringing in had shifted because we had students coming to the University of Houston specifically because they wanted to learn about abolitionist work and social work in an abolitionist space. But there were also tensions. Because there was, were some faculty who didn't understand it. I think abolition generally is misunderstood by many people, not just social workers, which leads, which is beyond my school, has led to a broader tension, I think, in social work about the place.

Peter Sobota [00:36:01] Yeah, we'll get to that.

Alan Dettlaff [00:36:02] Yeah, so I don't think, you know, a tension that was happening in my school about really not understanding, being a little bit scared of what abolition is about, being a little afraid that that's going to offend or bother some people. I think that conversation was happening more broadly in social work and still is to some respect. So there was noticeable tension because of that as well. So yeah, there was tension in the faculty.

Peter Sobota [00:36:26] Fair enough. So again, again, in this kind of in the spirit of leadership here, this feels where this feels like to me where some of the deeper tensions lie. So I'll speak broadly, generally here, there are folks in in our field who would say that a school of social work should hold kind of multiple perspectives, you know, including reform oriented approaches, and that leadership should be careful not to align an institution too strongly with any one framework. I'm sure you've heard this. How do you respond to that? I think I know. How do your respond to that? And how did you think about that concern in your role as dean specifically?

Alan Dettlaff [00:37:22] I disagree with that perspective, as you probably imagine. It actually was one of the reasons that the provost gave me in his dismissal of me that when we have conversations in the college, say if I bring in a speaker to talk about an issue of racism or racial justice, that conversation should involve point to counterpoint, that they should always involve an alternative view. I still disagree with that view. If I bring in someone to talk about racial justice, I'm not going to also bring in a white supremacist to talk their view of it. I think that's just ridiculous, particularly given SocialWork's supposed commitment to racial justice. So I disagree with the perspective that at least a dean should hold multiple perspectives or be somewhat neutral, which was what I was told. A dean should be neutral. Yeah, I disagree with that. I think, you know, a faculty should hold multiple perspectives. And as I said, I never tried to stifle any of our faculty from sharing their perspectives. As I said we have faculty who are very invested in the child welfare system, very invested and working with at least the juvenile legal system. And I never try to infringe on that in any way. But I always thought that it was my responsibility as dean. Particularly as Dean of the School of Social Work, to make decisions that I thought aligned us with the direction that social work should be going in, or a direction that Social Work should be going in using racial justice as the foundation of that. I always felt that as long as the decisions I was making, the direction I was trying to take the school, was very firmly grounded in a purpose of achieving racial justice, that it was my responsibility as dean to make those broader decisions about the direction of the school, to bring in speakers that may be controversial, but who are talking about issues of racial justice. We would have a kind of book club every summer for incoming students to read. And I would pick those books and they would be books about topics related to racism and white supremacy and racial justice and I thought that those were my decisions as Dean. So I disagree that

deans should be neutral. I don't, I think we'll get into this later. I don't think that that's a role that, or a view that provosts or other university administers, but I disagree with the idea that a dean should be a neutral and I think it's unfortunate that that seems to be a direction that many, many schools of social work are going in.

Peter Sobota [00:40:05] You know, it just occurred to me that when you were talking about NASW and, you know, the mission and the vision and social work values and ethics and the role of critical thinking, what neither of us gave voice to is, I think it wasn't 22, the E-pass changed as well, and more specifically addressed. Racial justice and anti-racism, I believe, is in the wording. I should know that off the top of my head, but so I mean, these are not, you know, it's interesting that you on a number of occasions have used the term radical, when it's really not terribly radical in a lot of ways. But anyway, so Yeah, go ahead.

Alan Dettlaff [00:40:55] Respond to that, I think it's important for people to understand. I mean, one, I agree. I don't think those views are radical. I think they're views that social work should hold. But I don't know that everyone knows that CSWE added that competency about anti-racism because they were pressured to by students.

Peter Sobota [00:41:16] I would think. It wasn't.

Alan Dettlaff [00:41:17] Wasn't done necessarily, it certainly wasn't conceived by them. There were student groups all over the country, particularly students led at the University of Michigan that lobbied very hard, wrote letters, had petitioned signature campaigns to get CSWE to add a competency on anti-racism and diversity, equity, and inclusion. So it's not like social work just... Went there on their own because they knew how important it was they were pressured to go there by students and I think that speaks to how how there is a segment a big segment of the field particularly parts of the profession that are in leadership roles professional organizations who do view this work as radical in many ways and are not comfortable with.

Peter Sobota [00:42:06] Yeah, thanks for that context. So we're gonna address this a little bit. Well, I plan to ask you about this later, but I just can't resist given some of the things you just said. So again, a little more broadly. From where you sit, do you think institutions, let's say, let's call them universities, schools of social work, however you wanna take it, do you thinks they're actually equipped to support leaders who take strong public positions uncontested issues. I know. I know

Alan Dettlaff [00:42:40] No, not at all, but I think it's an important question in the sense that, you know, one, I think we've, there hasn't been a more clear example as there has been in the last couple of years related to the complete silence that schools of social work have had related to genocide happening in Palestine. There have been no leaders or people with leadership titles that I know of who have spoken out about that. And it's largely because they feel they've been silenced by their institutions. So I think that's a very clear example. But beyond that issue, and even before that issue became very relevant in society, I think what happened to me, my dismissal, because of my abolitionist views. In some ways is the reason why there aren't any other schools who have adopted an abolitionist framework because I think there's some hesitancy or concern that going in the direction that I went could lead to consequences for them. So I don't think it's entirely about institutions being equipped to support leaders. I think that, ultimately, there are... People in social work with leadership titles who are not willing to take strong public stances, independent of what their leadership thinks about it. Or I guess it is related to

what their institutions think about it because they're afraid of consequences to their leadership roles. And I think that's disappointing in socialwork.

Peter Sobota [00:44:24] Yeah, I think you were very diplomatic. I think fear is a very effective tool. Yeah, and you just have to read the paper to understand how that works. But that's another podcast. Um, so you've met, you've mentioned this, you, you kind of already addressed this, but just a reminder to everybody that this is happening. All this, your experience is all happening in the environment. You know, we're the, the person in environment profession, right? And this is all, happening in Houston, Texas, um, at a time where, as you've mentioned, where there are lots of conversations around policing, race, DEI, and they, that's all highly charged, right. I'm going to assume that you thought that that broader context shaped what unfolded with you and your decision. And I think you've addressed this, but I'm I'm going to maybe just revisit it if if you think it's worthwhile. And this is somewhat cynical, but I think it is a very important one. And you've you've talked about fear and that's kind of more of an ethereal thing. But to what extent do you think... The concerns that you mentioned, for example, about funding and partnerships and public perception, influence the response, not only from faculty, but from the administration, right? Because I think if people don't know, they should, that faculty don't dismiss deans.

Alan Dettlaff [00:45:57] Hmm, right.

Peter Sobota [00:45:58] Um, provosts and presidents do, right? So, um, you know, I'm sorry for the repetitive question, but if you want to address that a little bit more, um given some of the comments you've said since then, I think it might be helpful.

Alan Dettlaff [00:46:11] Yeah, absolutely. I think that concerns about funding, potential loss of funding, particularly from state institutions like child welfare or criminal legal systems and work in those systems. I know that there were concerns about our 4E program being impacted because of my views about that system. For partnerships as well. I'm sure there were concerns by some that some of these systems, child welfare systems in particular, would be not be willing to partner with us on different projects because of my very vocal views against that system. Again, there was not evidence that that was happening because we didn't lose any grants or lose any partnerships that I know but the but the fear of that was there. You know, I also know that One thing that I know happened is I was interviewed by CBS Sunday morning about my views on the tele-welfare system. Erin Moriarty was the host. I was on there, Dorothy Roberts, who's another tele-warfare abolitionist was on. Oh.

Peter Sobota [00:47:18] Oh, yeah.

Alan Dettlaff [00:47:19] But she was on at the same time? Yeah, it was a segment for them, about a 15 minute segment on CBS Sunday morning. That got a lot of exposure and I was removed from the role 10 days after that aired. So I'm sure that had an impact too. I mean, it wouldn't be surprising to me at all that someone who knew nothing about what we were doing, what was happening at the University of Houston. Someone made a call to someone with influence and said, do you know what that school of social work dean is doing? Yep. And that then impacted decisions that were made. I'll never know that, but I think the timing of that is.

Peter Sobota [00:47:58] None.

Alan Dettlaff [00:47:59] Not coincidental.

Peter Sobota [00:48:00] No, not likely. All right, thanks. Well, thanks for even entertaining that one, but let's kind of move ahead just a little bit and what again feels at least to me like another one of the core tensions, and you mentioned this earlier, academic freedom and again, leadership. So, correct me or comment or disagree, but to me, faculty have academic freedom. And for example, the deans that I've worked for over the years have been dean and professors. So they've been they've kind of been both. So faculty have academic freedom, but deans are seen as speaking, as you've mentioned, for their institution. So when you were speaking publicly and writing about abolition and about child welfare, How did you understand your role in those moments? Yeah.

Alan Dettlaff [00:49:02] Tricky. I get that. I definitely understand that there is attention there. And as I said, I know there were some faculty who had concerns about that. That my views about these systems, that my outspokenness about these systems reflected on the entire school rather than being seen as just my views. And I think that that's... Difficult to, it is difficult to separate because I was the leader or at least in title of the school. But I felt and still do feel that as Dean it was my responsibility to use the leadership platform that I had to advance what I thought were very important conversations for the school to have. I think that's a responsibility to me that comes with leadership. I mean, that's... One of the most beneficial positive things that someone could do with a leadership role that gives them a platform is try to exist.

Peter Sobota [00:50:06] It exists, it's the plat- yeah, exactly.

Alan Dettlaff [00:50:08] Try to advance issues of social or racial justice, advance issues that haven't been discussed in the field as much as they should have and move those into a much more public conversation. And that's what I always understood my role to be. And again, as long as what I was saying was grounded in a very firm value for racial justice. Yeah, fair. It was my responsibility to be saying those things.

Peter Sobota [00:50:34] And sometimes, you know, I'm going to argue, I am not a dean, that it's really okay to say because I'm the dean.

Alan Dettlaff [00:50:45] I felt that when it came down to this particular issue and having these conversations, I knew that some of them were controversial, I knew that not all of the faculty were entirely on board with them, but I felt it was my responsibility as the dean to be putting these conversations forward. And I don't regret those at all because I think that it really did change the conversation in social work in a lot of ways conversations we're still having today.

Peter Sobota [00:51:15] Yeah, that sounds like a great example of servant leadership to me, but, um, how How would you describe, like today, we're talking about 2022 and the aftermath and all that kind of stuff, but let's talk about now, if we could for a sec. How would do you describe the kind of the current tension between abolitionist and reform oriented approaches in social work? I think you said earlier you didn't think much had changed.

Alan Dettlaff [00:51:51] Well, I think it's, no, I don't think much has changed. I think, it's still a very real tension in the social work profession. Largely because it is a conversation that students want to be engaged with and something that we can't just put back into a box and pretend like the conversation about abolition and social work never happened. Students responded to that. Very strongly and wanted to learn more about it and are

increasingly identifying as abolitionists or at least interested in abolitionist related work. Students I think understand the harm that social work can cause more than they may have 10 years ago and they also understand that the harms that systems cause in a way that they may not have been talked about in a lot of social work programs many years ago. So I think that part of the tension... Comes from people who hold reform-oriented views knowing that the abolition movement is growing very rapidly and that their work and some of the systems that they've spent decades upholding and defending, like child welfare specifically, are now starting to be viewed in a very different light than they were viewed five to ten years ago And that's. Understandably troubling for some people that these systems that they have spent their life's work upholding and defending are now viewed as systems that social workers don't want to go working. So I think that's part of where the tension comes from. But I think there's bigger issues at play. I always think of Dylan Rodriguez who talks about reform as being a logic rather than an outcome, basically meaning that reform is an approach to institutional change that sustains the status quo, that maintains these systems, ultimately maintains the systems exactly how they are. And that status quo is very comforting for some people. And so I think the tension comes there. You know, I think abolition calls into question a sense of rightness in the world. It calls into a question an idea that the systems in our society and the government broadly, are here to help us. And here to protect us. Abolition challenges that idea, whereas reform works to preserve that sense of safety. The idea that our systems and our structures are here to keep us safe and to protect. So I think that brings about part of the tension too.

Peter Sobota [00:54:36] Yeah, you know, as you're speaking, I'm really thinking back of my kind of evolution as a social worker myself. I think I've been a social worker for about 40, over 40 years, and I had my you know, not the same as yours, but very similar. Kind of awakenings, if you will, that you only get by going out into the field and doing what you do and doing it with real people and seeing how it affects them. I'm also thinking about some of the, the, books that speak to that spoke to me in my thinking my critical thinking about the profession that I still love, you know, my, my quarrels are lovers quarrels with social work. I'm proud to be a social worker in many ways. But I remember, you know, reading about how Saul Linsky thought about social workers, which was not complimentary. I remember reading under the cover of Kindness, and also The Careless Society by John McKnight, who, you, know, really kind of took social work to task pretty hard, but I think made me a better social worker in the end. So to go back your question, I mean, to your statements about, you know, the the current tension. Let me be a little dramatic here. Powell, what do you see as being at stake for us here as social workers in how we engage that tension that you just described?

Alan Dettlaff [00:56:15] I don't think you're being dramatic because I think it's an important question and really what I think is at stake is the future of social work. The future of the profession and what it is and who we are as social workers and who we say we're going to be. Really, when it comes down to it, I think the distinction between people who hold an abolitionist perspective toward these systems and people who advocate for reform comes down to what is really a very simple truth, that we do not want the same thing. That's sometimes perceived to be adversarial, but it really isn't. It's just an acknowledgement of the vast Gulf, what I think is a very vast Gulf that exists between us within the social work profession. And I think that Gulf is really important to acknowledge and talk about, because I've seen, over the last years, there have been advocates of reform that have occasionally sought to emphasize commonalities. Between an abolition approach and a reform approach, or say things like, we all ultimately share the same goals. We all ultimately want the same thing. And I wanna be very clear that we do not. And that's what's at stake here. And I think it reflects. A fundamental, what I would say, again,

tension, just an orientation to the world, I think, or to the US, at least. If you believe that the United States was founded on the idea that everyone was created equal and that the systems established by the state were established with benevolent institutions or for benevolent purposes, then you might think that change can come from reform. If you think that the Unites States was built on genocide, theft, slavery, racism, militarism, xenophobia, and that the whole project of the United States requires the oppression of some people to maintain the system of racial capitalism that governs the U.S., then you're going to have more of an abolitionist view. But it's that gulf, I think, that threatens what is going to ultimately become social

Peter Sobota [00:58:34] Yeah. And again, in terms of leadership in this context, you know, I think the question becomes, can social work sustain leaders, not tolerate, but sustain leaders who are one hand transformative in the way that they think, and on the other hand, kind of like institutional stewards, right, who can have to operate, I guess, in real constraints. And it sounds to me like those expectations are inherently tense.

Alan Dettlaff [00:59:11] Fair, I would say inherently in opposition.

Peter Sobota [00:59:16] In that position, yeah, maybe that.

Alan Dettlaff [00:59:17] That's a better way of saying it.

Peter Sobota [00:59:20] So with the time we have left, let's spend some time, more time actually, doing more exploration about what does successful leadership look like in this moment. So now you've had at least, I think, a little bit of time and distance from your dismissal. And I guess I have to remind everybody who's listening is that. You are no longer the dean, but you're on the faculty there. Yeah. So with, with time and distance, is there anything that you Have approached differently in terms of navigating these dynamics? I mean, can you sit here and talk about lessons learned or maybe not? Let's be open to that.

Alan Dettlaff [01:00:14] You know, if anything, a lesson learned is that I could have spent more time trying to get faculty on board with the direction I was trying to take the college in terms of recognizing how challenging an idea abolition is and doing more to build faculty's political education around that. In many ways I just decided we were going to be a school that leads with abolition and then tried to bring the faculty on board with that and I think there could have been more of a parallel process in terms of trying to do that and doing more just to build faculty's understanding about that I was always very clear or I believe I was always very clean that faculty didn't have to identify as abolitionists or even believe in abolitionist work. But that I expected that they would try to understand what it is so that they could have meaningful conversations about that in class with their students. That never translated entirely. And it may have been related to the way that I communicated about it. Because I would get asked often by faculty, do I have to be an abolitionist to work here? If I'm not an abolitionists, do I need to go somewhere else? And I never believed that I consciously did anything to convey that. But that was the perception of some people. How I approach decision making, like we talked about, I don't feel that there is a lesson to be learned there. I think that it was my responsibility as dean to determine the direction of the college and to speak boldly about these issues and to set the agenda for the college.

Peter Sobota [01:02:05] So, you know, and again, sticking with the leadership theme, I, you know, there's, I don't know if I'm going to get this right, but I, there is an, an, uh, an old saying that you always know you're leading when you have the arrows in your back. Um,

and I think, you know, the, the more bold the leadership is probably, you know, more arrows. So with the time we have left, let's spend a little time talking about. You know, what we can do and what we can learn not only from you, but from ourselves. Again, you know I just reminded everybody you're on the faculty there and I'm going to bet a fair amount of money that you have not abandoned being a leader. There are different ways to lead. I think that's that's an important thing for all listeners, I think, to consider. If with the perspective that you have, which I think is unique in, in many, many ways, what kind of, what conversations do we need to be having right now in social work that we're not, that we are avoiding?

Alan Dettlaff [01:03:20] Yeah, I think there's several that are important. And one has to do with leadership, like you're saying. I think one thing that we have to have more conversations about is clarifying the difference between a leader and someone who has a leadership title. Because I don't think those are the same things. And I think we need to clarify that difference. Having a title doesn't make someone a leader inherently. So just having a conversation about that, about what leadership means is important. And how someone should use leadership that they have, whether that's bestowed from a title or in some other way, the responsible use of that to advance the issues that social work should really care about. Related to that, I think a conversation that we need to be having is related to our curriculum. I don't think that social-work curriculum focuses enough on the reality that most of the urgent challenges in the society, poverty, houselessness, joblessness, health disparities, mental health concerns, are all ultimately the direct consequence of racial capitalism. I still think that we tend to individually pathologize people for their problems. Even though I know that social work probably does a better job at looking at structural issues more than other professions, I don't think we're really focusing on capitalism as the broader structural issue there. And I think that's what we need to be talking about a lot more. The idea of reform, I think, is something we need to be taking about a little bit more in the system. In my work in telewelfare, when we think about reforms and when questions are happening in classes about reforms, We're still asking things like. How can the child welfare system provide better services for children to families, instead of why do families need to be surveilled and separated in the first place? Those are the questions that we never get to the bigger question. And then ultimately, I think that the last thing I'll say about this is I think, I don't think there's disagreement that social work is a political profession. I don't think anyone really views social work as neutral. Social work takes stances about important issues all the time. And I think we need to, one, lean into that, but also recognize that to the extent that social work is about policy change. Policy change is limited by the duopoly that currently runs our political system, recognizing that the two parties that are currently in charge of our government, regardless of which one of those parties is in power, that they do not share different views at all about capitalism and the role of capitalism in perpetuating poverty. And until we start to try to dismantle that, we're never going to really bring about the societal change that social workers say they want to bring about. As long as capitalism is flourishing, as long as our political leaders are embracing capitalism, we're not gonna see really meaningful policy change to bring the kind of changes social work says they wanna see.

Peter Sobota [01:06:48] I don't know if you're familiar with the work of Stephen Pimpare. He's over at the Vermont Law School now. We just finished a actually, I think we released it this month about social work under authoritarianism. And he is speaking to many of the things that you just spoke about right now. So if if any of our listeners were turned on by that, what you just said, you might want to take a peek at that one as well. And so here we're near the end of our conversation. So not all of our listeners, probably most of them are not deans or directors of MSW programs. You know, many of them are students,

practitioners, and faculty members, academics in social work. I actually think there are a lot of lessons to be learned that the parallel process that you kind of referred to earlier, we have a lot we can learn from what, quote, happened to you. So if you agree with that, what does your experience suggest about the kinds of leadership skills. And capacities. Social workers of all kinds are going to need in this current moment to stay grounded, like you started this conversation, grounded in the mission and ethics of this profession.

Alan Dettlaff [01:08:29] It's a difficult question because I know that everyone has to make risk calculations.

Peter Sobota [01:08:36] Mm-hmm.

Alan Dettlaff [01:08:37] Because we live in a society governed by capitalism and because people have to make this thing that we call money in order to have a place to live and to eat. But given that the difference in risk calculations, I think that what social work leaders need to have is an understanding that self-censorship is inherently oppositional to what leadership looks like. I think that social workers have to be, social work leaders have to be willing to speak out about social injustices. And what social work as a profession and social workers should be doing to address those injustices. And if we're not going to do that, then I think the entire value base in which the profession's based is crumbling around us.

Peter Sobota [01:09:31] Mm-hmm. Yeah, you used the term performative earlier as well Yeah, just a quick thought here at the very end before I give you a last word. I'm thinking about our own program here in our MSW program here in Buffalo. And for those of you who are listening who aren't social workers, in social work, the MSW is the master's degree is the terminal degree. It's kind of what enables you to practice and obtained licensure in a lot of places. And, you know, I have to be honest and we don't spend a lot of time in our MSW curriculum… literally exploring, thinking about, and training social workers to be leaders. And one of the things that often scares me is that when a lot of social workers, especially those who are clinically oriented, rise up through the ranks, they start applying what they know, which is clinical skills, to what are actually leadership situations and that to me smells like a disaster, a recipe for disaster. So I think in terms of what I think we can do better is devote more of our curriculum explicitly to leadership and across the levels. My hunch is you would probably agree with that.

Alan Dettlaff [01:11:09] Absolutely. And leadership not that comes from titles, leadership not that comes- (**Peter Sobota:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's for sure.**)** But what leadership actually is.

Peter Sobota [01:11:17] So I just really want to thank you, Alan, for taking the time and being and, you know, practicing humility and strength at the same time in talking about, you, know, not only our theme, but also kind of what happened to you in many ways, what you experienced. So I want to thank you for that. And I also would like to give you the last word if you'd like to take it.

Alan Dettlaff [01:11:44] Yeah, well, thanks again for inviting me to be on the show. I've really appreciated it. You know, as a last word, I know it's a really difficult time in society right now. I would want to encourage people to continue to speak out, to continue, to not self-censor and to know that there are many, many other people out there, like them, who are feeling the same challenges that they're feeling and feeling the same pressure put on them to self-censor and to not give into that, to give not into that. If anyone hasn't read

Harney and Mouton's The Undercommons, I would recommend that. They talk about what it means to be a subversive intellectual inside a university system. And I think that and the idea of fugitivity within an institution are concepts that I've learned a lot from. I highly recommend that

Peter Sobota [01:12:50] All right, that sounds like a great place to leave it. Alan, thank you again so much. Really appreciate it.

Alan Dettlaff [01:12:59] Absolutely. I'm really happy to be here. Take care. Thanks, Peter.

Peter Sobota [01:13:03] Okay. Bye-bye. Thanks again to Alan for joining us today. The inSocialWork Podcast team trying to lead via the world of ideas includes Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA Production Assistant and guest coordinator, say hi, Ryan. (**Ryan:** Hello!). And I'm Peter Sobota. We'll see you next time, everybody.