Multiculturalism in Higher Education: Increasing Access and Improving Equity in the 21st Century

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol20/iss20/8

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Within American colleges and universities, issues of equity, access, and inclusion are at the forefront of scholarship about the future of U.S. higher education. Unfortunately, the conversations at most schools often focus on solutions via external quick-fixes like diversity programming and recruitment. Too often, schools do not address the root causes of the exclusionary systems and monolithic cultures that make up many American colleges and universities. Higher education in the United States is rapidly diversifying. As a result of changing student demographics, as well as an increased societal examination of systemic racism, and a growing discourse on inclusion and tolerance, traditional campus cultures are destabilizing. Schools require a multicultural consciousness in order to maintain social and academic relevance in the 21st century. The collection *Multiculturalism in Higher Education: Increasing Access and Improving Equity in the 21st Century* offers numerous articles that expertly address these dynamic issues.

*Multiculturalism in Higher Education* provides a unique and fresh opportunity for readers to delve into the varied experiences of marginalized student communities. The book contains 14 chapters that explore the realities of students and faculty through
the lenses of gender, class, race, sexuality, and institutional policies. Key chapters focus on Hispanic Serving Institutions (“Exploring the Racialized Context that Shaped the Emergence of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) in Chicago: Implications for Research and Practice”), students with disabilities (“The Higher Education Disability Experience”), global travel experiences (“The Value of Intentional and Mindful Global Immersion Experiences for Multicultural Awareness”), and White student integration at HBCUs (“Multicultural Education and Diversity Outcomes at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs”)”).

The chapters are written in an array of formats, including question-and-answer sessions with faculty, fieldwork by professors, and traditional scholarship. The book models its commitment to multiculturalism by incorporating a range of topics, an inclusion of diverse experts, and a variety of writing styles.

The book does an exceptional job of taking familiar subject matter and addressing it in new ways. For example, conversations about American diversity often focus on the Black/White binary. Multiculturalism in Higher Education does not ignore this topic, but it does render it in new ways. In their article, “Black Male Honors: The Experiences of Black Males in the Honors College,” Sandra Green and C. Spencer Platt, both faculty at the University of South Carolina, offer a counterargument to what they call deficit-laden scholarship regarding Black male success in college. The chapter does not ignore the disproportionate success gap that exists between Black and White college males. However, the authors utilize student narratives to illustrate that a focus on shortfalls is an incomplete picture of Black male college success. One of their study’s participants, Seth, explained his surprise at encountering the racism of low expectations by saying,

> When I was like eight-years-old in elementary school, I was a gifted student. They would say to my parents, “Oh my god, your son is so smart”….And something about it threw me off….But looking back, it was like they were really enthralled with my intelligence because I’m Black. Because Black people, especially Black males, are not supposed to be intelligent. (p. 103)

The inclusion of Seth’s experience is important because it highlights the incongruity between the lived experiences of Black men in America and the larger narratives that the culture has designed around them.

Although Multiculturalism in Higher Education is centered on the 21st-century discourse of multiculturalism, there is one particular
group that is noticeably underrepresented: female students. There are no chapters devoted to this topic and only passing references throughout the book. Moreover, there is no explicit focus on the experiences of Black female students in the book. The collection would have benefitted from contributions by Ohio State University Professor Lori Patton Davis and Professor Natasha Croom of Clemson University. These scholars are at the forefront of scholarship on the intersection of African American women, critical race theory, and student development in higher education. The lack of inclusion of female student experiences—especially women of color—further reinforces a longstanding marginalization of women’s realities in the literature of higher education. The presence of women of color is particularly bereft.

Although the book lacks a chapter devoted to the experiences of undergraduate women, this absence further elevates the voices in Chapter Two, “Why Professor and Student Identities Matter in Diversity in Higher Education.” Three female professors author this chapter—one Black, one Filipino, and one White—who offer first-person narratives about their racial identity awareness and how it influenced their individual teaching practices. Thandi Sulé of Oakland University, Rachelle Winkle Wagner of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Claremont Graduate University’s Dina C. Maramba reflect on their individual teaching practices by examining how identity impacts faculty and student relationships and teaching pedagogy when teaching diversity classes. Their use of the first person is powerful because it offers an intimate, less prescriptive look into how identity awareness is necessary for faculty to build trust and rapport with their students. Multiculturalism in the 21st century is everywhere. It is no longer the provenance of special topics-related courses. The significance of this chapter is that it underscores the pervasiveness of self-identity in today’s college students. Consequently, it is imperative that faculty invest an equal amount of commitment to understanding and articulating their own identity in their pedagogy and teaching practices.

The historical marginalization of multicultural issues in American colleges and universities has created a niche for Multiculturalism in Higher Education, which is a follow-up to the earlier monograph Comprehensive Multicultural Education in the 21st Century: Increasing Access in the Age of Retrenchment. This book underscores the diverse demographics in higher education, which is something these institutions cannot escape. As the book’s four editors write in the Introduction:
When high school graduates walk onto a college campus that first day to attend freshmen classes, it can be overwhelming.... Pile on racial diversity, LBGTQIA, and students with disabilities, as well differing religious, cultural, and political ideologies while adding financial aid and housing issues to the mix, you have higher education in the 21st century. (p. ix)

The chapters in this collection are secular; however, they provide essential insight for educators and administrators in Christian higher education. Christian colleges and universities were founded on the principle of Oneness in Christ, but that unity has not always embraced diversity in all of its forms. More and more these schools are wrestling with ways to provide inclusivity that reflects the myriad differences of their student bodies. Multiculturalism in Higher Education offers a broad and deep collection of scholarship that will help Christian faculty and administrators better understand and accommodate the vast experiences of their diverse student population.

To prevent institutional unpreparedness, this book broadens the multicultural conversation and the approach to equity and access. However, this book is not a how-to guide. Rather, it is a dialogic and reflective examination of multiculturalism in the 21st century. No longer is this conversation only about the Black/White binary. No longer are these conversations relegated to the Office of Diversity. What Multiculturalism in Higher Education makes explicit in its 14 chapters is that no one is apart from this discussion. We are all a part of making diversity, equity, and inclusion a more sustainable part of our campuses.

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