



Volume 6, Issue 1

Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs

Higher Education Path or Barrier to Opportunity?

RESEARCH-IN-BRIEF

Amanda JD Simpfinderfer

The University of Vermont

ISSN 2377-1306

© 2020

All rights reserved for the authors of this study. Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs is an open access journal and all pages are available for copying and distribution under a Creative Commons Attribution/Non-Commercial/No Derivative works license. Any authorized work must be properly attributed to the author(s). Work cannot be used for commercial means or changed in any way.

Throughout the past decades, scholars, policymakers, educators, students, and their families have debated whether higher education should be a right of a privilege. Concurrent with this debate, the landscape for employment and socioeconomic opportunity has changed. High paying jobs once only requiring a high school education have declined (Yamaguchi, 2018), and today, a high school diploma is no longer sufficient to gain access to vocations in which individuals can earn a living wage and support a family. Despite the shifting trends in workforce requirements, as of 2016, bachelor's degree attainment was still limited to 1 in 3 adults (Ryan & Bauman, 2016).

As the United States continues to move from an industrial economy, dominated by manufacturing, to a knowledge economy, centered on the creation of goods and services, those without a college degree are likely to experience diminishing access to social and economic opportunities. The importance of degree attainment is especially salient to students from traditionally underserved populations, including Students of Color, Indigenous people, women, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, whose access to higher education has historically been denied and/or limited (Bailey & Dynarski, 2013; Bensimon, 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Unverferth, Talber-Johnson, & Bogard, 2012).

The shifting nature of the U.S. economy necessitates a critical reexamination of higher education and its role in society. Specifically, examining how the forces of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and the privileging of dominant cultural capital intersect to mold higher education into a tool of oppression, which especially limits the opportunities available to historically underserved populations. In this article, I provide an overview of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital, the impact of these forces on higher education, and how underserved student populations have been disproportionately impacted. Following this overview, I present potential frameworks for those within higher education to resist and disrupt

the current system and, moreover, the perpetuation of inequality.

Postcolonialism, Neoliberalism, Cultural Capital, and Higher Education

The concepts of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital are closely intertwined, both historically and contemporarily. Although these concepts differ in terms of focus and impact, each force compounds the power and privilege of those who hold power in society as well as their ideologies. For purposes of this RIB, I clarify these terms, offer examples of their influence on higher education, and their disproportionate impact on underserved student populations.

Postcolonialism

The marks of postcolonialism both within U.S. society, as a former colony of England, and within U.S. institutions of higher education, modeled closely after the English and German university systems, are still ever-present (Noftinger & Newbold, 2007). European colonialism was a materialistic force driven by a motivation to amass resources through the construction of "Otherness," which enabled the dehumanization and exploitation of Indigenous people (Andreotti, 2011; Shahjahan, 2014). This construction of "Otherness" allowed European colonizers to establish themselves as superior to and more intelligent than the Indigenous populations they sought to subjugate, justifying the dehumanization and exploitation of these populations. Postcolonial theory looks at issues of power and knowledge production related to the colonial domination of other groups and critiques the normalization of Western or European knowledge (Andreotti, 2011).

Postcolonialism and Higher Education

The influences of postcolonialism are evident in (a) the historical foundations of access to higher education, (b) the "Othering" of those outside the dominant norm, and (c) the privileging of certain

types of knowledge over others. Institutions historically created barriers to access for those considered separate from the dominant group to prevent them from participating in higher education. A contemporary example of such barriers is the importance placed on standardized test scores in college admissions. By overly relying on standardized tests, institutions privilege students who come from the dominant culture (i.e., White, middle/upper class) and maintain continue to subjugate those deemed “Other.”

The continued impact of postcolonialism can also be seen in the conversation around bachelor’s degree attainment where White, middle-class students, are established as the norm and marker by which all “Other” identity groups are measured. The implicit message is that those considered “Other” lack the ability to achieve the same outcomes as their “normal” White counterparts, overlooking cultural assets of individuals outside the dominant norm (Yosso, 2005).

In addition, institutions have historically and contemporarily privileged knowledge directly connected to the labor market. Fields of study such as business and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are privileged within institutions, while liberal arts and cultural studies programs are discounted (Mohanty, 2003; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). In so doing, colleges and universities fuel the idea that knowledge is valuable only to the extent that it generates profit and cements the power of capitalist economies.

Neoliberalism

Early colonialism laid the foundation for neoliberalism through its preferencing of Western or European values, which paved the way for the market-driven capitalist society of today (Andreotti, 2011). Through the neoliberal lens, the purpose of education is to produce self-enterprising individuals only interested in improving their economic contribution. In recent decades, colleges and universities have seen the market-based philosophies of neoliberalism creep into their missions, policies, and practices. Shahjahan

(2014) highlighted the trends of marketization, privatization, and the intense focus on human capital development as markers of the influence of neoliberalism within higher education. The growing influence of neoliberal principles has prevented institutions from focusing on issues of equity, as most administrators must focus on institutional survival amid today’s increasingly competitive environment (Harbour & Jaquette, 2007).

Neoliberalism in Higher Education

Neoliberal principles can be seen in the changing discussion around higher education. Where once higher education was touted as beneficial to democracy and society (The President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947), the individual is now seen as the primary beneficiary. Focusing on the benefit to the individual has led to higher education being viewed as a service, where students are the consumers, and institutions are subject to supply and demand (Jacob, McCall & Stange, 2011). Positioning higher education as a service, where students purchase their education, has reduced the student–teacher relationship to that of a service provider responding to consumer needs (Bottery, 2016). Students being positioned as consumers has, in turn, led institutions to compete for students’ tuition dollars on the global market. This growing competition among colleges and universities has contributed to the further stratification of higher education institutions. Selective institutions continue to enroll a disproportionate number of White, high-income students. Institutions with a legacy of enrolling high achieving students are more likely to continue to do so, and in so doing, further segregating students along racial and socioeconomic lines (Choi, 2015). Institutions also compete for rankings, such as those found within U.S. News & World Report, Times Higher Education World, University Rankings, Princeton Review, which run counter to promoting issues of equity. Instead standardized test scores, acceptance rates, per-student spending, and alumni giving serve as performative criteria, which

collectively act to commodify higher education with a set of measurable outputs (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

Cultural Capital

Colonial and neoliberal frameworks established criteria for determining whose knowledge counts and whose does not, (Bernal, 2002)—not just in the academic sense but in terms of cultural capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) referred to cultural capital as the accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities held by privileged groups. Individuals without the cultural capital valued by the dominant majority struggle, as society does not value their ways of knowing or being and, in fact, considers them inferior. The concept of cultural capital is closely linked to colonialism in that those with different ways of knowing and being are viewed as lacking the appropriate cultural capital needed to succeed in society, which reinforces their “Otherness.”

Cultural Capital in Higher Education

Within higher education, these dominant values associated with cultural capital are largely construed as a benefit of the dominant population’s (i.e., White, middle class, and male) ways of being and knowing. As higher education has diversified to include students from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, institutions have inadequately adapted to meet the needs of these students outside the dominant norm, leading to outcome gaps between traditionally underserved populations and their White counterparts. This is especially problematic for first-generation students, many of whom are Students of Color and/or immigrants (Unverferth et al., 2012). In examining the experiences of college students from underserved backgrounds, many scholars have taken a deficit minded approach to students’ engagement in curricular and co-curricular programming. In this deficit approach, researchers present students as being lacking in their engagement, rather than looking at systemic barriers to participation. Examples of this include, first-generation students being less likely to participate in

co-curricular activities, such as internships or research with faculty (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016), taking fewer liberal arts courses, taking fewer total credit hours their first year, and being less likely to enroll in honor’s colleges, all factors correlated with higher rates of degree completion (Unverferth et al., 2012). Although statistically speaking these findings might be correct, they tend to blame students for their educational outcomes, rather than questioning institutional practices that inadequately support students.

Yosso’s (2005) cultural wealth model pushed back on the deficit mentality around Students of Color as “lacking” social and cultural capital by elevating the array of cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities possessed by minoritized groups. Yet, much of the research around student engagement continues to center dominant values, characterizing students who do not adapt to these norms as unengaged, even though they may engage deeply with their families and communities outside of campus (Yosso, 2005). In short, this continued privileging of traditional campus involvement compounds stratification of social class by reinforcing dominant forms of cultural capital.

Higher Education as a Form of Resistance

As the impact of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital pervade throughout the current higher education system, institutions need to determine if their purpose is to reinforce systems of oppression or to serve as an equalizing force, which disrupts the dominant culture. Using Shahjahan’s (2014) cultural resistance framework, the following sections provide examples of how institutions can resist the influences of postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and dominant forms of cultural capital engrained within institutions.

Resistance as Rewriting and Undermining Colonial Narratives

To resist postcolonialism and neoliberalism, institutions must not just disrupt but oppose and rewrite “dominant cultural values, codes, narratives, and be-

haviors” (Shahjahan, 2014, p. 222). Within institutions, this could take the form of in-depth questioning of the dominant norms that are often taken for granted to broaden access. First and foremost, this would mean disrupting the practice of “Othering” students who are not 18–22-years-old, White, and middle- or upper-class as well as redefining the image of the typical college student. Institutions should also reexamine what it means to be “college-ready,” to encompass more diverse experiences and broaden access to students with different ways of knowing and being. Admissions offices should (a) rethink established norms and find innovative ways to honor and recognize the value of diverse experiences, and (b) reconsider their overreliance on applicants’ standardized test scores, class rankings, and the number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

This shift to broaden access will require additional training for faculty, staff, and other students across college campuses to re-norm their expectations of students to be more inclusive. Finally, institutions and policymakers will have to rethink and redefine established outcomes, recognizing that students will have varied goals and pathways to and through higher education. These new goals and outcomes should not be defined for students from diverse backgrounds, but with these students and communities to avoid dictating what they should achieve or assuming what they need.

Resistance as Subversion

Resistance as subversion takes the rethinking of higher education one step further, subverting the current purpose of higher education from a pathway to jobs and marketable credentials to promoting social justice and active participation in a democratic society (Shahjahan, 2014). This would require institutions to critically examine the metrics and performance goals they use as currency. These new metrics and outcomes should focus on non-market driven goals, such as student learning and growth as well as societal level benefits derived from education.

Subverting the mission and goals of higher education would also mean re-envisioning the relationship between institutions and individuals beyond students gaining employment credentials (Shahjahan, 2014). Institutions would need to abandon the neoliberal valorization of only skills and knowledge of direct value to the labor market. Instead, institutions should refocus on preparing individuals to critically engage in democratic society and contribute to their communities. This shift would also necessitate challenging the colonial mentality that institutions are the keeper of knowledge, which they must impart on “uneducated” students—those who do not conform to dominant cultural norms. Indeed, institutions and students should engage in a mutually respectful and beneficial relationship centered around critical discourse. Such relationships could aid in re-envisioning higher education to serve all students.

Resistance as Opposition

Resistance as opposition most often takes the form of protests and social mobilization (Shahjahan, 2014). Today, we see students protesting to advance the rights of marginalized populations and protesting market forces encroaching upon higher education. During my time in higher education, I have seen students protest funding cuts to liberal arts education, in support of faculty union contracts, to protect the rights of adjunct faculty, and the treatment of Students of Color. These protests are often met with frustration from institutional administrators who see such protest as disruptive to “Other” students’ ability to learn, and protestors are dismissed as too ideological. This type of response to student protests warrants consideration through the lens of what types of cultural capital are valued within institutions. Students without dominant forms of cultural capital might find the only way campus leaders will hear them is through organized protests, especially if they are part of a minoritized group. Rather than seeing these protests as disruptions, institutions should embrace their role in questioning practices and view protests as an

opportunities to engage students in critical dialogue around societal and institutional issues.

Resistance as Transformation

Resistance as transformation require higher education to not just push against current systems of oppression, but entirely transform themselves (Shahjahan, 2014). What such a radical transformation might look like and entail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Stein (2019) discusses how such a transformation requires institutions to look beyond the current systems and frames of reference, with their underlying colonialist and neoliberalist foundations, because otherwise any solutions offered will likely only address symptoms and not the root causes of oppression. Stein further explains that this process requires not just rethinking the system of higher education, but rethinking the orienting questions and purposes of higher education, as well as how we answer those questions and achieve those purposes. Transforming higher education would also involve openly recognizing past mistakes and injustices perpetuated by institutions and opening ourselves up to being taught by difference rather than learning from difference (Bruce, 2013; Stein, 2019). These are lofty undertakings in the current socio-economic climate and within the United States, which holds steadfastly to the notions of meritocracy and individualism. However, if institutions truly seek to serve as a pathway to opportunity rather than as a barrier, these questions are integral.

Conclusion

Through this RIB and in my paper, I examined how postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and cultural capital intersect, serving to mold higher education into a tool of oppression, which limits the opportunities available to historically underserved populations. By continuing to let these forces dominate higher education, institutions hinder students, particularly those from underserved groups, from not only thriving, but engaging in what Shahjahan (2014) terms “new

humanism,” whereby new ways of being, knowing, and doing focus on freedom and power. As economic and social inequality expands in the United States, institutions must decide if they want to perpetuate or disrupt systems of inequality. While Shahjahan’s (2014) cultural resistance framework presents ways in which higher education can disrupt neoliberal and colonial influences, it leaves unclear whether it is possible within our current system of higher education to create institutions that work for all students. This is a question that higher education scholars and administrators must continue to wrestle with, while also attending to their role in either upholding or resisting the current system.

Author Biography

Amanda Davis Simpfenderfer, M.Ed., is a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy studies program at the University of Vermont, in addition to serving as the Director for Assessment, Data, and Accreditation for the College of Education and Social Services. Her research is focused on the socio-economic impact of higher education, especially as it relates to promoting equitable outcomes for students.

Recommended Citation:

Simpfenderfer, A. J. D. (2020). Higher education: Path or barrier to opportunity? *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, 5(2), 23-38.

