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Some Best Practices for Inclusive Environments in Higher Education

Berg, G. A., & Venis, L. (2020). Accessibility and Diversity in the 21st Century University (pp. 1-300). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. doi:10.4018/978-1-7998-2783-2

A significant and diverse volume has been compiled by two American editors, which targets individuals seeking current research on enhancing diversity in higher education systems. In the context of the Inclusive Excellence – Inclusive Universities, an initiative which started in the USA in 2005 and has gradually spread to European academic practice, we can benefit from studying the book for several reasons: firstly, it provides a vital resource to broaden the research focus on equal access, equity and inclusion by adding new aspects of intersectionality; secondly, it can deepen and expand the methodologies and questions we are researching, and it assists teaching staff in acquiring English terminology used in international research and literature in this field, which is essential for the internationalization of university courses.

The 14 chapters in this volume connect the latest studies of twenty prominent American academics and scholars with the main focus on increasing diversity of students and faculty in universities. Narratives from non-dominant culture, students, and faculty deepen and personalize the research. Underrepresented minority students whose daily experiences include discriminatory comments, images and actions tell stories about their motivational sources, attempts to combat prejudices, and the good programs they benefitted from. The researchers reveal the patterns behind the personal experiences and arrange the independent deeds into strategies or recommendations for further research and solutions. A broad set of themes are defined in the collection with the focus of diversity as social multiplicity, equity, and intersectionality of different identities. The participation of women, ethnic minority groups, people with physical or mental disabilities, and low-income students has increased exponentially in higher education, which is a positive development. Consequently, the universities face the challenge of making changes in campus culture to meet the needs of those belonging to this heterogeneous group, now identified as a new majority. It is essential to recognize the institutional barriers that make it difficult for them to achieve their goals and the personal or external drivers that support their persistence, engagement, and performance.

The first chapter of the volume (BERG, 2020) provides an excellent overview of a wide-range of literature on the terms, policy milestones, and political context of access, equity, and diversity in higher education from an international perspective. The writings and research presented in this chapter explore patterns behind the inequalities experienced in practice, rather than identifying patterns already described in the philosophy and sociology of education. In contrast, Bourdieu's theory of capital is indispensable in European

research on inequality and inclusion, such as in the Hungarian context of Roma youth (VARGA & CSOVCSICS, 2021).

Four chapters present the effects of intersectionality on individuals in underrepresented minorities from low-income families or living in undocumented status in the USA (BRYANT, 2020; DOMINGUEZ & FROLOW, 2020; KUEHN, 2020; WILLIAMS-WATSON, 2020). The phenomenon of intersectionality described here has been similarly reported in research on school success and access to and retention in higher education of Roma youth in Hungary. In their case, the overlap between socio-economic background and Roma minority affiliation has been confirmed by several longitudinal studies (VARGA et al., 2020). All the research studies emphasize the importance of recognizing the characteristics of vulnerable students in relation to the higher education environment and understanding the challenges they face. This helps the university staff and administration build trust and create appropriate supporting programs, and it also assists students in overcoming obstacles and persisting in their studies.

Four additional chapters focus on the barriers and obstacles women face in their staff, administration, or leadership roles in higher education (ATKINS, 2021; STEWART et al., 2021; THOMAS, 2021). While women exceed men in enrolling and obtaining degrees, a continuous unchanged gender inequity in high-level executive positions at the universities is experienced. Belonging to an underrepresented minority, socio-economic class and family, or queer community as a woman exacerbates the imbalance in representation and results in disparity in salary, teaching and service loads, lack of mentoring, challenges to authority in the classroom (especially among white male students), disproportionate benefits, double standards, and even types of office spaces. The dominant white male culture and imbalanced hierarchical structures of power domains are responsible for *voice dispossession*, meaning that women often adopt a self-muting strategy or make attributional accommodations to gain promotion and recognition. New insight is offered by a study that reveals the difficulty in the challenge of teaching about privilege, power, and inequality as a minority female sociologist (ATKINS, 2021). The exploration of teaching about inequity from an intersectional perspective moves the focus to classroom actions and marginalized faculty. The research published here contains some very exciting analyses and conclusions that could stimulate gender inequality research, which is still in its infancy in Hungary.

As a new research target group in the context of equity and accessibility, non-traditional older learners have proved to face different issues in universities, such as filling in the academic gaps, having access to scarce services suited to their needs, and dealing with age discrimination by faculty.

McGaha and Jain found in their research (MCGAHA & JAIN, 2021), that a multitude of reasons explain why this generation decides to return to school, while Balakrishnan and Buchanan, emphasize that non-traditional learners' potential contributions should urgently be recognized in order not to lose an important, diverse, and experienced cohort from the universities (BALAKRISHNAN & BUCHANAN, 2021). Adult learners also need to be supported to gain relevant knowledge so the community can benefit from their life and professional experiences. The authors express the increasing difficulties in retention in case of intersectionality of race, gender, and disability.

Students with disabilities encounter a different attitude in higher education even if they belong to the traditional age group. As Orr L., Brillante P., and Weekley L., highlight in their study *Accessibility, Self-Advocacy, and Self-Efficacy of Students With Disabilities in the 21st Century University*, during the K-12 educational system federally mandated rights are given to the disabled children and accessibility is almost fully guaranteed (ORR et al., 2020). However, transition to higher education raises specific problems – especially for those with less apparent mental disabilities. Confidence, self-efficacy, and self-advocacy are the main skills that faculty should support and improve in students with disabilities.

The major theme of the book is social multiplicity and intersectionality, and how intertwined social identities of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, and abilities can lead to inequities in the opportunities of academic and professional attainment for students, faculty, and administrators. The qualitative research methods applied in most of the studies strongly emphasize patterns of individual perceptions, stereotype-based misunderstandings, and internal psychological work that help to understand the notion of equal and equitable access from the perspective of vulnerable group members. Each chapter presents first the theme according to the combination of the barriers to accessibility, and then a selection of institutional and personal solutions and strategies to overcome them for creating an inclusive environment. Brown L. C. deals with peer mentoring as one of the agile and efficient way to help non-traditional, high-need, and at-risk students with overlapping identities and needs.

Nevertheless, each study includes good examples to promote retention while insisting that multilayered programs lead to real results including counselling, advising, tutoring, learning communities, financial assistance, midsemester evaluations, and academic workshops, that are consistent with the mission and the practices of the Inclusive Excellence Research Group at the University of Pécs in Hungary. It has become clear in the higher education context that developing academic excellence is also linked to the issue of inclusive excellence. The systematically provided services and resources help to build trust, nurture self-confidence, and generate identity as members of the university community in addition to different minority identities. Belonging and feeling valued are key to persistence and academic attainment. A number of qualitative and narrative studies (VARGA et al., 2020; BRYANT, 2020) affirm that personal qualities, family support, and appropriate learning strategies are also key factors. Minority and non-traditional students need to have strength and to find resilience either built-in or gained from peers and their own community.

Although the phenomenon of intersectionality is not new to Hungarian researchers in the sociology of education and inclusion, the studies in this volume offer a number of inspiring areas, methods, perspectives, and new dimensions. Many of the recommendations made at the end of each chapter have already been incorporated into the framework of Inclusive University of Pécs program, especially practices and incentives targeting disadvantaged and Roma students such as mentoring, tutoring, and counseling. However, some new approach would be required concerning female students, staff, administration, and non-traditional students. As an example, exploring the masculine connotations of university professor and leadership positions could be a thought-provoking area of research with more quantitative studies and comparisons to business life as Stewart et al. (2021) present in *A Critical Review of Gender Parity and Voice Dispossession Among Executive Women in Higher Education Leadership*. Another new shift in the approach, presented in Sabharwal's *Organizational Inclusive Behavior Theory* (2014), quoted by Sapeg (2021) in *Underrepresentation of Latina Faculty in Academia* that first identifies the barriers and the implication of organizational exclusionary practices and then seeks to distinguish inclusionary practices that enable all employees and students to partake equally.

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