

# Introduction

Joshua S. Smith, *Humboldt State University*  
Meredith Conover-Williams, *Humboldt State University*

Higher education is at an important crossroad. Enrollment and student debt are increasing at a rapid rate while the culture and structures of higher education remain slow to change. As the students and learners who make up the academy diversify along social identities of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and other lines, deep-seated inequity remains. At the same time, a college degree has become more and more important for earning a living wage. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (Vilorio 2016), those with a four-year degree earn approximately 70 percent more per week than those with only a high school diploma and have nearly half the unemployment rate. Reacting to this increasing need for a degree to earn adequate pay and stable employment, applicants have flocked to postsecondary institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2016), enrollment in degree granting postsecondary institutions has grown 17 percent from 2004 to 2014, reaching nearly 20.2 million students.

Public and private colleges have spent significant resources in support of a variety of efforts to increase enrollment and graduation rates. Meanwhile, the price of education has continually increased, with students borrowing nearly \$100 billion in 2007-2008 compared to only \$23 billion in 1992-1993 to finance their education (Woo 2013). New York State recently passed legislation making college tuition free at state colleges, while the Betsy DeVos nomination as Education Secretary sparked strong protest, in part due to her position regarding student debt. The passion and stakes behind these high profile stories show the growing importance of college in today's society.

Despite this passion, effort, and expense, only 39.8 percent of students in the 2009 cohort of

incoming first time, full time undergraduates actually graduated with a college degree in four years. These numbers are far worse for different racial and ethnic groups. While self-identified white and Asian students graduated at rates of 44.2 percent and 49.4 percent respectively, black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native students graduated at rates of 20.6 percent, 30.5 percent, 26.7 percent, and 24 percent, respectively. Looking at intersections of gender and race, the picture becomes even more stark. Only 16 percent of black males graduate in four years while American Indian/Alaska Native males graduate at a rate of 20.5 percent (NCES 2016). Clearly, despite growing enrollment in college from all groups, not all groups are as likely to succeed (as far as "success" is measured in degree completion). Far too many students leave college with significant debt and no degree to show for their work and expense.

With this special issue of the Humboldt Journal of Social Relations, we attempt to pull back the curtain of the academy and expose some of the practices and processes that perpetuate or counteract inequity. Through exposition and research, this edition examines the issues of social justice and diversity in higher education. The articles, editorial pieces, and multimedia content weave research with activism, experience with theory, and practical recommendations with sweeping analysis. Students, faculty, staff, and administrators present wide-ranging and honest perspectives from all levels of the higher education structure, while research from across North America provides a glimpse into the college world of today. Topics range across a wide spectrum including intersections between sexuality and race, environmental justice and diversity, protest movements and pedagogy, and many more. Through it all, a picture of the challenges, triumphs,

and realities of higher education in the first decades of the 21st century emerges.

We begin the issue with a 360-degree view of diversity and social justice around campus in a series of Vantage Points. We feature thoughts on the theme from many levels of a university campus: an undergraduate student, a graduate student, a professional staff member, a member of faculty, and an administrator. We follow this with an important piece from Abby Ferber on the current debates around academic freedom, which certainly shape interactions around campus. In her editorial, Ferber explores how the changing funding structure of colleges and universities, and activism from the Right, have shaped academic discourse. She outlines her own story of being attacked publicly, while exploring the trauma, harassment, and uncertainty she shared with other women colleagues experiencing similar attacks. Based on these experiences, Ferber shares concrete recommendations for universities, and individuals, to be prepared for such attacks. We then feature 18 articles on the theme, organized into three subthemes: Framing the Research, The Classroom and Beyond, and Making the Invisible Visible. We explore each of these below.

### **Framing the Research**

Research on diversity in higher education takes a variety of approaches. We start by presenting articles that frame some of the issues, methodologies, and research in higher education related to social justice and diversity. In addition, these articles summarize some of the overarching themes for understanding the interaction of diversity, social justice, and higher education. Samura begins by critically examining the methodological approaches used in research on postsecondary education. Specifically, this work questions the description of settings and space when researching diversity in college. Demonstrating the effects of different methods on findings, Samura suggests that a different approach is warranted to capture the new reality of college campuses. Using an intersectional analysis, Walkington critically

analyzes the research on black women's experiences as graduate students and faculty members in post-secondary education. Through a detailed examination, Walkington shows that many of the challenges facing black women in college have not significantly changed over the past thirty years. Bringing an international perspective, Cunningham, Henry, and Michalski examine the connection between inequality and education in Canada. Utilizing an analysis of educational access in Canada to highlight the experiences and challenges for students, they conclude that as higher education continues to diversify, further support services and a more welcoming environment are needed to promote student retention.

Young and Ramirez discuss faculty perceptions as they relate to the need for cultural competency training for students in the sciences. They find there is, generally, support for this type of training along with uncertainty on how to implement these types of programs in the context of higher education. Gleditsch and Berg examine faculty racial attitudes and perceptions in relation to student performance, demonstrating significant difference between groups based on previous contact with diverse populations.

### **The Classroom and Beyond**

How do diversity and social justice play out in the classroom? After framing the research, we move into the classroom and explore how diversity and social justice are incorporated (or not) in instruction, curriculum, and beyond. Brignall III and Van Valey use critical pedagogy (Freire 1980) to examine how diversity related topics are discussed in textbooks and within classrooms. They conclude that significant work remains in addressing diversity and equity in higher education in the classroom, textbooks, and beyond. Guadalupe-Diaz, Rincón, and Rutter discuss the development of a teach-in model, grounded in Critical Race Theory, that explicitly incorporated topics related to the #BlackLivesMatter movement into course content. This approach resulted in measurable changes in faculty approaches in their classrooms and

curriculum, suggesting this approach may be effective at promoting social justice in higher education. Hartwell, Cole, Donovan, Greene, Storms, and Williams discuss their collaboration across a variety of disciplines to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion related learning objectives. The authors provide their experience and specific strategies for faculty to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion in their classroom across disciplines and institutions. Chepp discusses the use of ‘high-impact’ pedagogical practices, specifically collaborative research between students and faculty, to create spaces of equity and inclusion in higher education. Smedley-López, Johnson, and Amarante discuss the use of service learning and research, framed by critical theory, to engage students, faculty, and community in diversity related topics. The authors show how this framing can be applied to course content and community engagement to create opportunities for professional development and civic engagement.

### **Making the Invisible Visible**

The classroom exists on the surface of the college experience. In a series of articles, we examine the invisible work that often goes along with and burdens individuals in higher education. DeWelde addresses the continuing stratification of academia as it relates to intersectional inequities, demonstrating the variety of ways in which higher education practices maintain structural inequality. DeWelde offers strategies for change and resistance to combat inequity. Grauerholz and Turner discuss the experience of black male professionals in post-secondary education and demonstrate several critical areas of need in transforming colleges into spaces of true diversity. A collection of researchers from the Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group seek to demonstrate racial and gender imbalance in higher education faculty through research on the invisible labor required from faculty based on their gender or racial self-identification. Sahl studies faculty job satisfaction across multiple groups, finding significant differences in satisfaction between different racial,

gender, and tenure categories. In their piece, Roberston and Chaney examine the effects of microaggressions on African American students attending predominantly white institutions, showing that more progress is needed to address microaggressions within the academy. Lenning examines the intersection of Queer and racial identity by reflecting on the establishment of LGBTQ resources at a historically black college, concluding that more work is needed to support and promote LGBTQ resources. Freitas presents research on the experience of transgender students at women’s colleges and co-educational institutions. Freitas show differences in overall experience and support between the different college types. Brooks and Murray examine whiteness as ‘cultural practice and institutional discourse’ in higher education and, in doing so, challenge the notion of a post-racial higher education landscape.

Each of these pieces pulls back a bit more of the curtain of the university to see some of the hidden reality that keeps our post-secondary institutions structurally unequal. The works presented here also demonstrate ways to make real change. Colleges may be slow to change, but with intelligent dedication that change can happen, bringing a new approach to diversity and social justice.

### **Multimedia**

We conclude the issue with a series of multimedia pieces. A poem from Longstreth touches on a lifetime identity, difference and education on rollerskates. Tinoco Oliveros created an infographic from her senior thesis, showing the impact of cultural centers on the experiences of Latinx students. She shows how students considered the cultural centers to be a “home away from home” during their college experience, and how they were able to use those spaces to develop their identities as they built community and worked on their academic success. Two student video projects show two different aspects of student life on campus: Flores discusses how the lingering impacts of colonialism can be felt at the institutional level, while Clark talks about how mental health issues impact students’

experiences. Stone explores the experience of being fat in academia, as a graduate student, straddling the student and academic worlds. While one might hope to find more fat acceptance among sociologists, Stone explains this is not necessarily her experience.

Collectively, these pieces come together to showcase the tremendous work around diversity and social justice happening in institutions of higher education across North America, show us where more work may be needed, and offer opportunities for growth and to learn from each other. As the importance of a college education grows, the moral imperative to transform institutions of power and inequity grows as well. This issue and the collective effort of this work continues this conversation with hopes of fostering colleges and universities that promote social justice and build a better, more equitable future for all who work, live and learn in these communities.

---

### References

- Musu-Gillette, Lauren, Robinson, Jennifer, McFarland, Joel, KewalRamani, Angelina., Zhang, Anlan, and Wilkinson-Flicker, Sidney. 2016. Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups 2016 (NCES 2016-007). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC. Retrieved May 3, 2017 (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>).
- US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections “Unemployment Rates and Earnings by Educational Attainment.” Retrieved May 3, 2017 ([https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_chart\\_001.htm](https://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm)).
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Spring 2002 through Spring 2013 and Winter 2013-14 through Winter 2015-16, Graduation Rates component; and IPEDS Fall 2009, Institutional Characteristics component. (This table was prepared October 2016.)
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2016. “Digest of Education Statistics, 2016.” Retrieved May 3, 2017 ([https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16\\_326.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_326.10.asp)).
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2015. “Digest of Education Statistics, 2015.” Retrieved May 3, 2017 ([https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch\\_3.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/ch_3.asp)).
- Vilorio, Dennis. 2016. “Data on Display: Education Matters.” Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Labor. Retrieved May 3, 2017 (<https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2016/data-on-display/education-matters.htm>).
- Woo, Jennie H. 2013. “Degrees of Debt. Student Borrowing and Loan Repayment of Bachelor’s Degree Recipients 1 Year after Graduating: 1994, 2001, and 2009. Stats in Brief. NCES 2014-011.” National Center for Education Statistics