In this chapter, the authors discuss how understandings of individuals and groups in higher education research are limited by overreliance on one-dimensional analyses. They also underscore the importance of intersectionality research as one method to address such limitations.

Mapping the Margins in Higher Education: On the Promise of Intersectionality Frameworks in Research and Discourse

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Both qualitative and quantitative research that categorizes students along singular dimensions of identity provide limited information, which can restrict the ability of higher education scholars and institutional researchers to fully—and sometimes accurately—understand and respond to problems that exist in postsecondary education. Consider these two scenarios:

A faculty member is troubled by the disproportionately high number of Asian American students leaving and failing his classes, so he requests data on this group from his campus's institutional research office. The following week, the office sends him a statistical report, which indicates that Asian Americans have grade point averages, a persistence rate, and a graduation rate higher than all other racial groups on campus. The faculty member concludes that his observations must not be representative of the population from which his students come and ceases his investigation.

During a qualitative climate assessment at an institution at which black students constitute more than 50 percent of the student body, a researcher interviews a first-year black male college student. The student tells the researcher that he cannot find other people like him on campus and is thinking about dropping out. The researcher probes with questions about why the interviewee feels this way but is unable to uncover the reasons behind those feelings. Given that the other black participants in the climate
assessment did not report a similar problem, the researcher concludes that this student is an outlier and his statements do not require further inquiry.

There are differences in these two scenarios. In the first example, the institutional research office analyzed quantitative institutional data, while the researcher in the second scenario conducted an interview for a qualitative campus climate assessment. However, the examples also have much in common. First, in both cases researchers relied on the socially constructed and commonly used concepts of race and racial categories to label students, investigate student-related problems, analyze student data, and interpret their findings. Second, as a result of this unquestioned reliance on data disaggregated or understood through the lens of race and racial categories, individuals in both examples had questions that went unanswered. Finally, and perhaps most problematic, the students’ problems in these two scenarios went misunderstood and unaddressed.

If the researchers in these two scenarios had thought about the multiple aspects of their students’ identities when conducting their inquiries, they might have asked different questions and generated different conclusions. What if, in the first scenario, the students who take courses in the faculty member’s department were disproportionately low-income Cambodian refugee students who were the first in their family to attend college, and the institutional research office analyzed data primarily made up of a large number of affluent third-generation Asian Indian and Korean American undergraduates? And what if the student in the second scenario was a gay black male who could not find a safe and supportive environment on campus in which he could comfortably express both his black and gay identities? In these cases, researchers exploring the intersections between race and ethnicity or race and sexual orientation might engage in more critical analyses of their data and generate more accurate conclusions about their students’ experiences and the larger issues that exist on their respective campuses.

Delineating and Defining the Types of Intersectionality

In her important work on intersectionality, Kimberé Crenshaw (1991) discussed identity politics and asserted that “the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences” (p. 1241). She also discussed how such conflation is problematic because it fails to capture the ways in which multiple social identities shape the lives of oppressed individuals.

Since Crenshaw’s illumination of the utility of intersectionality perspectives, scholars have argued that there is a unique experience at the intersection of individuals’ identities, and efforts to isolate the influence of
any one social identity fails to capture how membership in multiple identity groups can affect how people are perceived, are treated, and experience college and university environments (Berger and Guidroz, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). This reality sets the foundation for the current chapter, which is focused on discussing the problematic conflation of intragroup differences in higher education research and discourse and the role of intersectionality in addressing that problem.

Before moving forward with our discussion, a few definitions are warranted. Intersectionality can be defined as the “relationships among multiple social dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (McCall, 2005, p. 1771). In simpler terms, it can be defined as the processes through which multiple social identities converge and ultimately shape individual and group experiences (Shields, 2008). Structural intersectionality refers to how multiple social systems intersect to shape the experiences of, and sometimes oppress, individuals (Crenshaw, 1991). In higher education, for example, structural intersectionality can be used to make sense of how both racial and gender inequities converge to shape the experiences of women of color in higher education. Political intersectionality refers to how the multiple social groups to which an individual belongs pursue different political agendas, which can function to silence the voices of those who are at the intersection of those social groups (Crenshaw, 1991). For example, political intersectionality would explain a case in which racial minority students refuse to address discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students of color to avoid having those issues become public and risking tainting the image of those communities of color. Finally, when we use the terms intersectionality research, intersectionality framework, or intersectional analysis, we are referring to the utilization of intersectionality to approach and conduct empirical social science research. In the following sections, we discuss how higher education researchers can use intersectionality and intersectional analyses to develop more informed understandings of the experiences of students, as well as faculty, administrators, and staff in higher education.

**Intersectionality as an Integrative Concept**

Although higher education researchers may often compare the experiences of men with those of women, heterosexuals with those of LGBT individuals, or white and racial minority groups, such comparisons are limited in their ability to illuminate individuals’ and groups’ unique experiences accurately or holistically. In reality, when asked “Who are you?” most students, faculty, and administrators in higher education would not respond with a single identity. Rather, an individual’s sense of self can be based on many groups with which he or she identifies, and people can be defined simultaneously by their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other aspects of their identities (Jones, 2009).
In response to the limitations of focusing on a singular social identity in understanding individual experiences, researchers in some academic fields are paying attention to intersectionality (e.g., Choo and Ferree, 2010; Shields, 2008). Indeed, a growing number of scholars, particularly in women’s studies and critical race theory (CRT), have used principles of intersectionality in their analyses (Berger and Guidroz, 2009). Those employing intersectional analyses strive to understand the unique ways in which multiple intersecting social identities come together to shape one’s experiences, making distinctions in how individuals experience and engage their environments as a result of their unique position at particular intersections, rather than focusing attention on a singular identity (e.g., Choo and Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005; Ramachandran, 2005; Shields, 2008).

Women’s studies and CRT scholars have traditionally focused on the intersection of racial and gender identities, and how racism and sexism jointly shape individual experiences. For instance, critical scholars have considered how the convergence of gendered and racial oppression shape our notions of family dynamics, roles, and responsibilities (Collins, 1998a, 1998b), as well as the societal responses to women of color who are subjected to domestic violence (Crenshaw, 1991). The work of those researchers has illustrated how women are marginalized in our society, while also highlighting the different—and at times compounding—stigma or discrimination that is experienced by women of color who often come from a less affluent socioeconomic background.

Some advocating for this approach would argue that the experiences within groups are distinctive according to the extent to which they are members of other marginalized or privileged populations, but the goal of intersectional analyses is not to develop a hierarchy of oppression that is based on the assumption that having multiple marginalized identities simply equates to more experienced discrimination (Berger and Guidroz, 2009). In other words, some might think that intersectionality suggests that a homosexual Latino male faculty member would experience double the discrimination of a heterosexual Latino or homosexual white male faculty member, but this is not the case. Rather, intersectionality suggests that the confluence of one’s multiple marginalized and privileged identities is an interaction that creates a unique experience, distinctive from those with whom they may share some identities but not others (Choo and Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1991). Put another way, a homosexual Latino male faculty member might not be more or less oppressed than his heterosexual Latino or gay white male counterparts; his experiences are uniquely shaped by his multiple identities and are distinct from those of his counterparts.

In the following sections, we discuss the promise of intersectionality in advancing the current state of higher education research. First, we delineate some of the salient limitations of one-dimensional analyses in
higher education research. Then we discuss the role of intersectionality frameworks in addressing these limitations. Finally, we provide examples of intersectionality research in higher education to illuminate how such frameworks can advance our understandings of experiences in higher education.

One-Dimensional Analyses and the Role of Intersectionality in Higher Education Research

Although intersectionality has been a central theme and salient framework in critical feminist theory (McCall, 2005), its influence on many other academic fields, including higher education, has been limited. We do not attempt to argue that higher education researchers do not examine intersecting identities; in fact, as we discuss later in this section, researchers have advanced knowledge in the field by doing so. However, we do argue that the emphasis on intersectionality in higher education is limited and a greater emphasis on employing intersectional frameworks can contribute to important advancements in the field. For example, those who study college students are increasingly disaggregating samples by singular social identities (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). However, in many ways, research focusing on the unique experiences of individuals who belong to two or more social groups is still in its infancy in the field.

Overreliance on the comparison of one-dimensional analyses of individuals and groups perpetuates several limitations of higher education research and discourse. Moreover, intersectional analyses can offer a critical tool in addressing those limitations. Intersectional analyses can advance research in the field of higher education in at least four primary ways.

First, intersectionality frameworks more accurately reflect the diversity in higher education. Research that simply disaggregates college faculty by gender or college students by race does not reflect the actual diversity that exists in higher education. Racial backgrounds and sexual orientations influence the experiences of female faculty. Socioeconomic origins and citizenship status can have profound influences on the experiences of students of color. Racial categories include mixed-race individuals who identify with two, three, or four racial and ethnic backgrounds. If higher education researchers are to maximize understanding of their students, they must explore the experiences of these groups situated at the intersections of various social identities and groupings.

Second, intersectional analyses facilitate the excavation of voices and realities at the margins. Overreliance on one-dimensional categories, even though giving space to the voices of racial minorities and women in higher education, fails to establish adequate space for individuals who are situated at the margins of multiple groups. A few scholars have begun to explore the identities and experiences of those who occupy
these spaces (e.g., Cooper, Ortiz, Benham, and Sherr, 2002; Cho, 2003; Harper, 2005, 2007; Museus and Kiang, 2009; Teranishi, 2010). Cho (2003), for example, demonstrates how racialized and gendered stereotypes converge to shape the unique experiences of Asian American female faculty who experience sexual harassment in the academy. Specifically, she highlights how stereotypes of Asian American women contribute to inappropriate sexual advances made by male faculty toward Asian American female faculty. Similarly, in a forthcoming counterstory, Museus (2011) highlights how a low-income female Vietnamese American student’s racial, ethnic, gender, and class identities all interact to shape her unique experiences and the unique challenges that she faces while navigating the environments of a predominantly white institution. Griffin and Reddick (forthcoming) also illuminate how the racialized and gendered experiences of black male and female faculty differently influence the expectations and demands, the frequency, and the sometimes guarded nature of their interactions with students. Thus intersectional analyses can constitute a critical tool for understanding how identifying with multiple marginalized or underserved populations uniquely shape experiences and realities among individuals and groups in higher education.

Third, intersectionality promotes a greater understanding of how converging identities contribute to inequality. The failure of higher education researchers to make the intersections of social identities and groups more central in research and discourse limits the existing level of understanding of and progress in addressing equity issues in higher education. Indeed, it was not until after the beginning of the twenty-first century that many researchers in higher education began to pay attention to the intersections of race and gender. Emerging from this greater recognition was a better understanding that black male college students have the lowest graduation rate compared to all other racial and gender groups (Harper, 2006). As a result, there have been many efforts to address this inequity in higher education research and discourse (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005, 2006, 2007), and those efforts have led to insights that inform the work of institutional leaders in higher education as they construct strategies to promote success among this population.

Although there is a growing body of research on black male college students, there is a dearth of research illuminating the experiences of other groups at important identity intersections, such as women of color and LGBT students of color. We believe, however, that such attention has much to offer to the discourse that revolves around groups at the intersections of race, gender, class, and other social identities who suffer inequities in areas such as developmental outcomes, psychosocial well-being, and occupational attainment. Thus intersectional analyses can enable higher education researchers to make more prudent decisions about where to invest their energy.
Finally, intersectionality avoids simultaneous advancement and perpetuation of inequality. When researchers rely on one-dimensional categories, even their efforts to address inequities in higher education can function to perpetuate assumptions that actually contribute to other inequalities (Museus, 2009). Several scholars, for example, have highlighted the fact that discourse around addressing racial disparities in college access and success have historically functioned, whether intentionally or inadvertently, to racially exclude Asian Americans because of their high college entrance, persistence, and graduation rates relative to other racial groups (Museus, 2009; Museus and Kiang, 2009; Museus, 2011; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education [CARE], 2008, 2010; Teranishi, 2010). Those scholars have noted that most discussions of such disparities ignore that several ethnic subgroups within the Asian American population (e.g., Southeast Asian American and Pacific Islander subpopulations) suffer from drastic racial and ethnic disparities in educational attainment. Intersectional analyses can move beyond more simplistic one-dimensional analyses to ensure that particular groups are not being excluded from discussions of equity in higher education.

**Conclusion**

Although higher education researchers have conducted research that examines populations at the intersections of various social identities and groupings, such intersectional analyses are not yet commonplace in research and discourse in the field. Consequently, much of the promise of intersectionality research has yet to be realized in higher education. The remaining chapters in this volume constitute one small step toward realizing the potential of mixed-methods research in better understanding how multiple identities shape the experiences and outcomes of populations in higher education.

**References**


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