Disrupting the Culture of Silence: Confronting Gender Inequality and Making Change in Higher Education

De Welde, Kristine; and Stepnick, Andi, eds.
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Book Review

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As an African American female associate professor in religious studies, I heard my voice and I felt heard as I read many of the essays in this book. It is intentionally intersectional, addressing race and ethnicity (and to some degree sexual preference) as well as gender. The editors and authors are scholars and administrators in the field of sociology, generally. With this book they interrupt the culture of silence in higher education, which remains the gendered domain of white males where women continue to experience inequality.

Case studies, personal narratives and experiences, qualitative (interviews) and quantitative research raise readers' consciousness about oppressive structures and cultures that impact women in academe. Women have made gains in the academy in terms of their increased presence, but major challenges remain. In this sourcebook each essay builds on existing research and offers suggestions for changing oppressive structures and cultures.

The book is divided into five parts, each ending with a case study, and each chapter includes a list of resources. The final chapter offers models for engendering change. The book was born among scholars concerned with bringing together service, scholarship, and activism. While much is said about women faculty in general, a number of essays focus on nonwhite women and specifically black women as the "double minority" in the academy. They are less likely to be mentored, promoted to full professor, granted tenure, and more likely to leave the academy.

Part One addresses problematic structures, such as exclusionary practices (lower wages and less upward promotions) that require faculty action to address. Also significant are the

horizontal impediments to shattering the glass ceiling and not just the vertical ones (increasing numbers of women). Another example is the uneven, inequitable service burden placed on women and the accompanying fairy tale advice to 'Just say no to service,' which only "exacerbates gender-blind sexism in academia." In the latter case the author suggests that institutions "just don't ask" unless they are prepared to acknowledge and reward women's service labor. Part Two discusses the dissonance between structures and cultures. Often structures like institutional quotas and commitments to diversity work in favor of women's presence, but institutional cultures are resistant, hostile, violent, and unhelpful. Part Three addresses exclusionary cultures, including those that protect disciplinary canons, perpetuate the white male as the "ideal professor," and value problem portable over problem-based research, which devalue women and the interdisciplinary work of nonwhite women. Part Four discusses "chilly climates," "contrapower harassment," incivility, microaggressions, and mobbing that are pervasive and often unchecked. These behaviors have greater negative impact on women with consequences for their physical and emotional well-being and job productivity. One author suggests that women of color consider a "trauma-to-transformation" model that involves redefining self, brain detoxification, sense-making, and reconfiguring the social reality.

I highly recommend this book to institutions that value diversity (without which academic excellence does not exist) and desire to create a healthy, productive environment for a truly diverse and representative faculty and administration. I also recommend it for female and male faculty and administrators impacted by cultures of silence and who are interested in disrupting and dismantling those cultures.

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