



Transforming
Understandings
of Diversity in
Higher Education

DEMOGRAPHY, DEMOCRACY, & DISCOURSE

EDITED BY PENNY A. PASQUE, NOE ORTEGA,
JOHN C. BURKHARDT, & MARIE P. TING.
Foreword by Philip J. Bowman

Transforming Understandings of Diversity in Higher Education: Demography, Democracy, and Discourse

Pasque, Penny A.; Ortega, Noe; Burkhardt, John C.; Ting, and Marie P., eds.

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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Heather Vacek, *Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

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The National Center for Institutional Diversity at the University of Michigan invited contributors to this volume to share work that “pushes the edge of [the] latest conceptualizations of diversity” (xiv). Scholars of education, sociology, organizational leadership, policy studies, communication and speech, and social work contribute to the book’s study of “diversity issues in higher education,” offering a range of disciplinary vantage points (xvi). Diversity, the volume argues, is a natural state, not a problem to be eliminated. The book invites readers to consider multiple diversities in order to avoid generalizations that hide the complexities of difference. An introduction and conclusion outline how higher education has approached diversity over the past century (for example, as a variable to be controlled, a goal to be achieved) and point toward avenues of continued research. The book’s subtitle points to the volume’s claim that attention to the details of demography and democracy (“the arrangement of the distribution of power”) is “central to...public and political discourse” (226).

Chapters appear in pairs, with the first in each set written by accomplished scholars who have “entered their professional careers after the twentieth-century framings of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and ability have lost their authority” (223). These primary chapters address: diversity at historically black colleges and universities; college access for low-income students; inclusion of LGBTQ students; pathways to college for Latin@ students; the experience of space on campuses for students of color; disability; media influences; and Black male student athletes, African American female faculty at community colleges, and the mandate rhetoric of historically black colleges and universities.

Reflections by graduate students form the accompanying chapters and develop from interviews with each author. These secondary chapters highlight each author's "research and career trajectory" and attend to topics including social agency and the power of resistance, the value of uncertainty and the need for nuance, visibility, the value of alternate vantage points, racial battle fatigue, and safe spaces (13). Together, the paired chapters provide engaging research and unique insight into scholarly agendas and motivations.

Religion appears in a handful of unexpected places in the volume. Biblical notions of the diversity of creation as a gift provide the editors' first example of diversity as a productive good, not a problem to be solved (1). Reference to the Black church as a positive influence on educational attainment appears in an interview with one of the book's contributors and another interview includes note of a Bible verse that summarizes the scholar's sense that divine help supplements human effort in working toward the creation of safe spaces (119, 204). A primary chapter investigating religious diversity in higher education would have enriched the volume.

Though undergraduate classrooms and campuses are the main focus of the book, for those who teach in graduate programs (whether secular or religiously-affiliated) the volume offers insight about the prior educational landscapes that shape students who pursue advanced study. In addition, the text draws attention to the complexity of diversity alongside the need for students to understand potentially negative implications and for instructors, researchers, and institutions to recognize blind spots.

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