Book Notes

Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students' Search for Community at Historically White Universities

by Micere Keels

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. 240 pp. $19.95 (paper).

In the first half of 2020, as higher education institutions scrambled to react to the COVID-19 pandemic and respond to public outcry against state-sanctioned racial violence, reporters, student advocates, and scholars documented the disproportionate harm these intersecting crises were having on low-income, first-generation, and racial minority college students. If *privilege* had previously been an abstract academic term, in the spring of 2020 it became acutely concrete: Who could afford a last-minute plane ticket home? Which students were asked to show their ID by campus security? Whose parents could help them decide whether or not to take a class pass/fail?

The public reckoning with racism and inequality drew attention to the reality that low-income Black and Latinx students had experienced for decades: the size of your bank account and color of your skin make a big difference in how difficult or easy college is for you, regardless of your ACT score. This should not be news for the higher education community. For decades researchers have documented that, holding academic preparation constant, low-income, first-generation, and racial minority students are less likely to graduate from college than their white, continuing-generation, higher income peers (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Cahalan et al., 2020). Despite increasing attention and initiatives aimed at reducing graduation gaps across the sector, recent reports indicate that four-year college graduation gaps measured by income and race/ethnicity are widening (Cahalan et al., 2020; Papay et al., 2020).

In *Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students' Search for Community at Historically White Universities*, Micere Keels attributes the lack of urgency around reducing racial disparities in higher education to the enduring myths of meritocracy and race neutrality—specifically, the myth that since historically white institutions (HWIs) have created equal opportunity for all, lingering racial/ethnic achievement gaps are the result of individual rather than institutional failings. *Campus Counterspaces* tackles this fallacy head-on. Drawing from a rich corpus of longitudinal survey and interview data, Keels introduces readers to Black and Lantinx students at five HWIs who find themselves fighting an unexpected tide of exclusion, neglect, tokenism, and bias. Academi-

Downloaded from [illegible] 2023

cally prepared and motivated to attend college, these students are surprised to encounter more racial tension on their college campus than they experienced in high school. Moreover, due to the historical relationship between racism and economic inequality, many of these students find themselves struggling to meet the high costs of college and in dire need of institutional guidance and support.

Though Keels presents a wide range of potentially supportive (though often ineffective) institutional supports, her research focuses on the role that counterspaces can play in enabling minority student success. She began her ongoing Minority College Cohort Study in 2013, when she and her team recruited 533 Black and Latinx students from 5 HWIs in the Chicago area. Her team has conducted 7 waves of surveys and interviewed a subsample of 70 Black and Latinx men and women 4 times over the course of their college careers. Three years into the study, Keels became increasingly perplexed by the dissonance she heard between the way national news articles and op-eds were characterizing racial microaggressions as "imagined" versus the consistently negative racial experiences her interviewees described. Therefore, in 2016 she began to focus more closely on the role that counterspaces play in supporting students from historically marginalized groups. Keels defines counterspaces as "critical spaces where marginalized students challenge each other to push beyond stereotypical narratives, develop counterstories, and learn adapting strategies from others who are navigating similar struggles" (p. 161). She argues that counterspaces can take many forms and accomplish a range of goals, but, most importantly, they are identity conscious and identity affirming.

The existence of counterspaces, like the Latinx Student Alliance and Black Women Engineers, can be a contentious topic on college campuses, especially among white students. Efforts to explicitly recognize minority social identities interrupt the supposedly race-neutral world that white students inhabit, and the apparent exclusion of white students from these counterspaces contradicts a melting pot ideal of diversity. Sociologist Natasha Warikoo (2016) found that at elite universities, white students are often skeptical of counterspaces because they reduce white students' access to "beneficial" interactions with diverse peers. However, Keels's overarching finding contradicts this either-or view of counterspaces and broader campus inclusion. She argues that counterspaces are microcommunities that provide students with essential identity-affirming support which facilitates their inclusion and integration into the broader campus community. In clubs like Black Women Engineers, Keels argues, participants' race/ethnicity "recedes into the background," allowing participants to explore other aspects of their identities without the stress of hypervisibility (p. 94). These clubs also provide students with opportunities to share, process, and critique the racism they encounter in other parts of campus, ultimately supporting their persistence and willingness to enter new and potentially antagonistic campus spaces.

A core strength of *Campus Counterspaces* is its intersectional approach and refusal to tell “a single story” of minority students’ engagement with counterspaces (Adichie, 2009). In chapters 3–10, Keels and a coresearcher examine either a specific subgroup’s experiences at their HWI (e.g., commuting students) or a subgroup’s experiences of a specific institutional structure (e.g., Latinx men and advising). In each chapter Keels lifts up voices and experiences of students who share similar social identities but employ different strategies to navigate higher education or experience different consequences as a result of the strategies used when they transition into college. For example, in chapter 3 we learn about the different strategies Tanya and Dave took to mitigate their financial distress and, in chapter 5, about the contrasting activist identities Cindy and Faith adopted in response to the 2015 Black Lives Matter protests. Later, in chapters 9 and 10, we learn about the specifically gendered challenges Latinx first-generation college students face when navigating home and school. While first-generation Latinas described the difficulty of meeting their families’ expectations of household and care work while keeping up with school, their male counterparts struggled with familial ambivalence about whether attending college was a sound economic choice. In many chapters, students end up turning to counterspaces to find belonging, purpose, and encouragement. In these spaces students were relieved not to be the “black sheep” in the room and received affirming messages like “This is possible for you. You can do this” (p. 77).

Placing these short chapters side by side highlights important individual and institutional variation. Yet, there are pros and cons to this approach. On one hand, the book vividly illustrates that there is no one minority experience and that some HWIs are better at recognizing and supporting minority students’ needs than others. On the other hand, given the large number of chapters and numerous subthemes within them, I yearned for a more consistent throughline across the book. An overarching theme that does emerge is that institutions which create structural diversity—defined as “enrolling students from a diverse range of social categories” (p.153)—but do not actively support their underrepresented students once they arrive on campus are failing their core educational mission. Keels illustrates that institutions must actively embed diversity in all aspects of the college environment by creating opportunities for meaningful intergroup interactions (interactional diversity); a wide range of cultural clubs, activities, and social spaces (cocurricular diversity); and courses that integrate “the intellectual contributions of members from all social groups” (curricular diversity) (p. 159). As she writes, “The expectation that students will somehow figure out how to overcome a lifetime of explicit and implicit biases and engage with diversity with minimal institutional supports is negligent” (p. 155).

Another limitation of highlighting so many spaces, experiences, institutions, and themes in one short book is confusion about what a counterspace

Downloaded from http://meridian.allenpress.com/her/article-pdf/[illegible] 2023

is (or is not) and how counterspaces should be considered alongside other potential instutional responses to the challenges first-generation, low-income, and minority students encounter. Throughout the text, Keels and her team argue that spaces as varied as one-on-one advising meetings, classes, faith-based affinity groups, and friend groups all have the potential to function as counterspaces. While the students highlighted certainly receive affirmation and adaptive coping support in all of these spaces, they are not always populated by "others who are navigating similar struggles" (p. 161), nor do all of these spaces seem to allow students' racial/ethnic identities to recede into the background. This conceptual inflation may create challenges for researchers hoping to build on Keels's work and for practitioners hoping to identify, support, or create counterspaces on their campuses.

With practitoners in mind, I also wondered whether thinking more narrowly about the purpose of counterspaces in relation to other campus supports and reforms would be useful. For example, at the end of chapter 3, Keels asks readers to imagine what a counterspace for financial aid might look like. While it would certainly be helpful for peers to share their insights on navigating the hidden and winding roads of the financial aid system, a simplification of that system, combined with replacing merit aid with need-based aid, would support many more students. Ultimately, rather than reducing the conceptual value of counterspaces, I hope Keels's expansive definition inspires university actors to support a variety of identity-affirming counterspaces alongside institutional reforms to build more structurally equitable and socially inclusive campuses.

For institutions in need of clear recommendations, the concluding chapter details a path forward: (1) conduct a campus racial climate survey; (2) create institutionally supported opportunities for intergroup social interaction; (3) increase curricular and faculty diversity; and (4) foster counterspaces. Importantly, Keels warns that higher education leaders must not perpetuate a culture in which racial/ethnic minority students are faced with "the false choice of identifying with and belonging to the larger institution versus finding their micro-community of local campus belonging" (p. 164). For Black and Latinx students, these microcommunities provide necessary, but not sufficient, spaces of support, affirmation, and growth.

Of course, each of these recommendations will seem daunting for administrators planning for an online, hybrid or limited in-person school year. But *Campus Counterspaces* reminds us that counterspaces are not defined by their format, size, or meeting place but by their honest acknowledgment of marginalization, provision of identity-affirming supports, and space to form relationships that facilitate radical growth. No matter the format this academic year takes, if colleges and universities aim to provide a relevant, high-quality, inclusive education to their diverse student populations, actively supporting student counterspaces will be critical to their success.

BECCA SPINDEL BASSETT

Downloaded from http://meridian.allenpress.com/her/article-pdf/... 2023

References

Adichie, C. N. (2009, July). *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The danger of a single story* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., & McPherson, M. S. (2009). *Crossing the finish line: Completing college at America's public universities.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cahalan, M. W., Perna, L. W., Addison, M., Murray, C., Patel, P. R., & Jiang, N.. (2020). *Indicators of higher education equity in the United States: 2020 historical trend report.* Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, Council for Opportunity in Education (COE), and Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy of the University of Pennsylvania (PennAHEAD).

Papay, J. P., Mantil, A., Murnane, R. J., An, L., Donohue, K., & McDonough, A. (2020). *Lifting all boats? Accomplishments and challenges from 20 years of education reform in Massachusetts.* Providence, RI: Educational Opportunity in Massachusetts, Brown University.

Warikoo, N. K. (2016). *The diversity bargain: And other dilemmas of race, admissions, and meritocracy at elite universities.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

American Higher Education Since World War II: A History

by Roger L. Geiger

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. 400 pp. $35.00 (cloth).

Roger Geiger's *American Higher Education Since World War II* is the second and final volume in Geiger's ambitious historical study of American colleges from their founding to the present. Geiger expertly condenses a large literature into eight chapters, at a pace of roughly two chapters per decade. Those familiar with the history of higher education will recognize the shape of the narrative that Geiger presents. Enrollments boomed in the immediate post–World War II period due in large part to the GI Bill, at the same time as funding for scientific research skyrocketed with the intensifying of the Cold War. The expansion of public higher education, desegregation, the civil rights movement, and coeducation then changed the demographics of American academia in the 1960s, and newly minted PhDs could easily find tenure-track positions in the burgeoning sector. The 1970s brought an economic downturn and a rising distrust of academics from both the Right and Left, resulting in a contraction of funding and status for higher education. The 1980s deepened the competition between colleges, leading to an "arms race" in selectivity. It also marked a turning point in the "culture wars," with conservative politicians framing colleges as the battleground for the minds of American youth. The 1980s and 1990s recentered the importance of research in American universities, further encouraging privatization efforts. In the past twenty years, student debt has become a national crisis, public trust for higher education has deteriorated, and predatory colleges with low graduation rates further obfuscate the value of a postsecondary degree. This book is an important contribution to the field not because it challenges the historical work on American higher

Downloaded from http://meridian.allenpress.com/