Chapter 1
Equity and Diversity in the 21st Century University:
A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the extensive, yet dispersed, research literature on what is variously termed access, equity, or diversity in higher education. The initial scholarly works on the history of higher education, which touch directly and indirectly on gender, race, and class, are discussed. Research, often conducted by governmental and professional organizations, and which provides data on participation rates of students, faculty, and university leadership, is examined. Academic fields and linked scholarship on gender and ethnic studies are summarized. The chapter also presents public policy milestones and documentation as well as the larger international political context. Finally, the author considers significant gaps in the current research, especially focusing on the complexity of the intersection of gender, race, and class in contemporary society.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter embraces the general topic of the book collection in providing an overview of the extensive research literature on what is variously termed access, equity, or diversity in higher education. The initial scholarly works on the history of higher education, which touch directly and indirectly on the topic, are discussed, especially in regarding to gender, race, and class. The research often done by government and professional organizations providing data on participation rates of students, faculty, and university leadership is examined. Academic fields concentrated on gender and ethnic studies, and the linked scholarship, is summarized. Additionally, some of the research considers best practices in regard to teaching-learning and curricula. The chapter also presents public policy documentation and debate, as well as the larger

international context. Finally, the author considers significant gaps in the current research, especially focusing on the complexity of the intersection of gender, race, and class in contemporary society.

The student composition of colleges first became a topic of discussion in the middle of the 19th century in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Up until that point, it was generally accepted and understood that college was intended for a very small group of White upper-class males pursuing specific religious and legal professions, intended to prepare them for leadership in society. Social class and gender absolutely limited access to advanced education (Berg, 2020).

By mid-19th century America, social and practical pressures began to push open the doors of the academy, especially to prepare young women to become needed classroom teachers. The funding of land grant colleges after the Civil War accelerated the new form of gender-mixed coeducational higher education. By 1920, women had made prodigious progress to the point of equaling men in raw numbers in post-secondary education in America (Berg, 2020).

As a result, early research on the increased access and diversity of the American university focused on women in higher education. After World War II, with the enormous influx of returning soldiers into higher education, scholars increasingly looked at other dimensions of diversity including race and class. However, it wasn't until the 1960s, spurred by the social movements of that period, that a distinct area of research began to develop on access and diversity in higher education. Since then, researchers have written extensively about various aspects of what might be broadly described as "diversity" in higher education, yet the field remains somewhat amorphous. One factor in the development of this research literature is the increase in doctor of education programs in America with students of diverse backgrounds often choosing topics related to diversity for dissertation projects (Berg, 2020).

In scanning the field from a global viewpoint, one sees a pattern in the term "diversity" often used in regard to affirmative action and public policy issues, while the term "equity" is employed more broadly to analyze the distribution of different student groups in higher education. Additionally, some of the research considers best practices in regard to teaching-learning and curriculum, as well as administrative practices designed to influence positively student success. In order to better understand the trends in higher education scholarship regarding this broad field, peer-reviewed journal articles from the ProQuest database were counted by decades using the subject terms of "higher education" and the variables "equity," "diversity," "inclusion," "affirmative action," "adult learners," and "sexual identity."

One can see from this figure (Figure 1) that scholarship on "equity" and "diversity" has increased greatly in the past two decades. At the same time, "affirmative action" plateaued in 2000, and has declined since as an academic subject for study.

When considering academic discipline areas and prevalence in research journals, the following figure (Figure 2) shows the occurrences of "Gender Studies," "Black Studies," "Chicano Studies," and "Feminist Studies."

Gender Studies, as a subject phrase in journal articles, has in the last decade far surpassed the other traditional academic areas of study. One wouldn't want to over-estimate the significance of this subject keyword analysis, but it does provide an indication of the changing concentration in relevant scholarship.

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Hannah King, Fiona Meashamand Kate O'Brien (2019). *International Journal of Bias, Identity and Diversities in Education (pp. 66-81).*

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Linda Greening (2022). *Handbook of Research on Practices for Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education (pp. 333-353).*

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