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Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education (review)

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Cover Page Footnote

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Title: Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education

Author: Adrianna Kezar (ed.)

Publisher: Routledge, New York

ISBN: 9780415803229, **Pages:** 266, **Year:** 2011

Recognizing and Serving Low-Income Students in Higher Education, edited by Adrianna Kezar, aims to “examine institutional policies and practices, and critique and make visible practices that negatively affect the success of low-income students” (p. ix). To this end the authors utilize a post-structuralist theoretical foundation. Kezar states that her rationale for choosing post-structuralism was that this theory has been used to historically understand issues of class and socioeconomic status, make visible hidden assumptions, and offer strategies and perspectives for rethinking institutional policies and practices (p. 9).

This book is a collection of empirical studies that examine the policies and practices of postsecondary institutions organized chronologically by the student experience. Following an explanation of post-structuralist theory, the authors examine issues relating to student access to higher education, entering and transitioning into college, persistence and graduation, and transitioning into graduate school.

As noted earlier, the first chapter is devoted to examining post-structuralist theories and their application. Post-structuralism places the focus on the system rather than on the individual and a typical post-structuralist analysis consists of revelation, deconstruction, and reconstruction. Revelation entails the identification of institutionalized privilege of one group over another. Deconstruction involves the breaking down of institutional policies and practices in order to investigate the impact of structure, policy, and practice on populations. Reconstruction provides recommendations for revised policies and practices to address the inequalities found in the institutional structures (pp. 16-17).

Part II discusses issues relating to access to postsecondary institutions and begins with Edward St. John’s examination of the University of Indiana’s 21st Century Scholars Program. St. John argues that institutions cannot simply reinforce the discriminatory practices at the K-12 level and that higher education must attempt to alleviate these inequalities. In chapter 3, Chambers and Deller discuss postsecondary educational options for students in Canada and England. They find that the way an individual internalizes “low-income” poses major problems for early intervention programs. The discussion of institutional financial aid policies in chapter 4 illuminates ways in which elite private institutions use language and barrier to access by hiding important information about financial aid policies or making financial aid information vague or confusing.

Part III analyzes issues of entering and transitioning to college. In chapter 5, Walpole argues that postsecondary institutions must shift the focus away from utilizing deficit models, which assume that low-income students are somehow lacking, and instead should focus on analyzing the ways in which campuses privilege some students at the expense of others. Chapter 6 examines the ways that programs such as summer bridges and specialized sections of courses

designate some students as “others”, leaving the very students they are serving to question whether they are capable of succeeding in higher education. In chapter 7 the authors discuss federal and state policies aimed at assisting welfare students in community colleges that in reality inhibit educational attainment for these students. In particular, the authors take issue with work-first models that value quick turnover in the workforce and minimize educational opportunities and long-term enrichment.

Issues relating to persistence, success, and graduation are the topics addressed in Part IV. Engle and Lynch, in chapter 8, discuss their findings following a study of public four-year institutions that serve large numbers of low-income students and graduate these students at higher than expected rates and provide suggestions for how other institutions might follow suit. Chapter 9 examines minority-serving institutions and identifies how they attempt to serve a significant number of low-income students within their budgetary constraints. In chapter 10, Kezar and Yang discuss issues relating to the absence of financial education in higher education as well as offer suggestions for ways in which colleges and universities might institute financial education programs.

Part V consists of an examination of issues relating to transfer students and post-baccalaureate preparation and access. In chapter 11 the author argues that although community colleges and transfer to four year colleges are “the embodiment of democratic opportunities” (p. 219), transfer is still an action primarily exercised by affluent students. She then outlines a plan showing how faculty members can act to improve access for transfer students. Chapter 12 claims that graduate education is “the new Bachelor’s degree of the previous generation – compulsory for the elite few and a significant accomplishment for those of little means” (p. 234) and attempts to debunk the myth of a level playing field for low-income students pursuing post-graduate education. Finally, in chapter 13, Kezar highlights some of the major themes of the book. She addresses issues of access, partnerships, transition, and agency as well as theories and models such as deficit models, human capital theory, and theories of social capital.

This book, designed primarily for practitioners and policy makers, does wonderfully in its efforts to reach its target audience. Faculty, staff, and administration from all corners of campus and all types of campuses should be able to find something of use in this text. This book discusses aspects of admissions, financial aid, advising, and student support among others from the point of view of community colleges, four year colleges, and minority serving institutions.

In the preface, Adrianna Kezar states that the purpose of this book is to utilize post-structuralist theories to assist college and university faculty, staff, and administration in thinking differently about their institution and to think of ways they might change the institution to better serve low-income students rather than relying on the traditional deficit model. I believe this book clearly achieves this goal. Each article in this volume adheres to the post-structuralist method of revelation, deconstruction, and reconstruction and offers clear, succinct, and realistic recommendations for institutional change.