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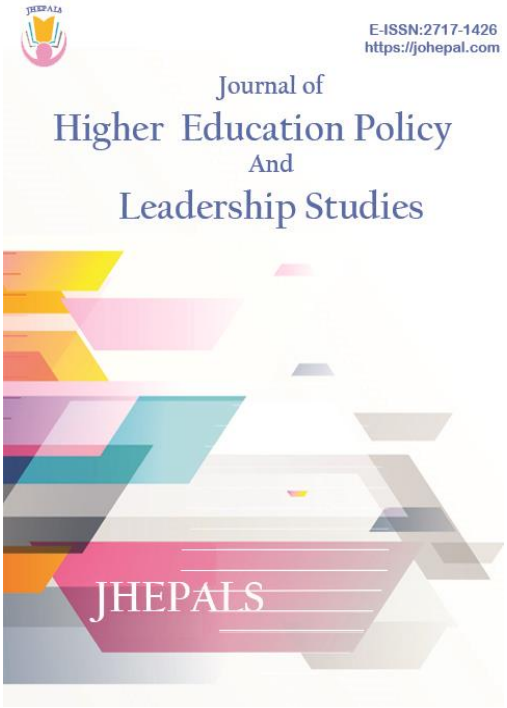

Book Review: Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education

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Students First: Equity, Access, and Opportunity in Higher Education

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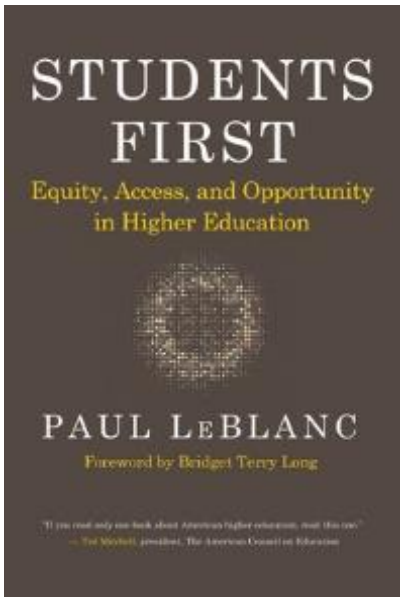

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U.S. higher education is reevaluating its foundations, purposes, and organizational structures, due to shifting demographics and worldviews among undergraduates. The pandemic revealed virtual or hybrid educational modalities' feasibility alongside pervasive social inequities. Relatedly, higher education is grappling with the pursuit of "normal" operations (e.g., in-person, on-campus, credit-based programs) or the uncharted territory of applying pandemic lessons and interrogating taken-for-granted features of the collegiate experience. While not an entirely new query, the particularities of surviving a global health crisis provides an apt moment to interrogate some of the taken-for-granted features of the collegiate experience.

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Book Review

LeBlanc (2021), Southern New Hampshire University's (SNHU) president and author of Students First, proposed one alternative to traditionally formulated undergraduate degree programs, described in Ch. 2 as low-cost, flexible, self-paced, online, and competency-based, education for non-traditional aged (e.g., 18-24) undergraduate students to obtain associate's or bachelor's degrees (LeBlanc, 2021). Competencies derived from workplace needs are presented as a solution to LeBlanc's (2021) claim of graduates' writing and numeracy deficits. Generative features of this text are attempts to rethink higher education's structure and function for equitable participation of students for whom the traditional college model is a challenge and prioritization of employability post-completion. However, a major limitation of the proposal is its deficit-based framings of faculty as incompetent and impediments to innovating higher education and equity for students only in accessibility and employability.

Major Themes

LeBlanc (2021, Ch. 1) discussed adjustments in content deployment and work readiness responsive to shifts in college students' degree-completion needs. This claim's foundation is that contemporary U.S. undergraduate education is outmoded vis-a-vis students' demographics and needs (e.g., working, past/current professional experiences/parenting, caretaking, ages24+). LeBlanc (2021) argued that the credit hour falls short in measuring learning and assumes learning investment based on an imaginary "average" students' classroom and studying time: contemporary postsecondary students require time and flexibility to successfully obtain degrees.

LeBlanc (2021, Ch. 2) proposed a competency-based, flexible, and asynchronous degree program to address these limitations, like the one he developed at SNHU. LeBlanc (2021) highlighted competency-based programs without penalties for short or extended time to completion, and SNHU received authorization for enrolled students to be eligible for financial aid. This was possible through the language of "direct assessment" included in the Higher Education Act (HEA). In response to existing forms of learning in higher education and competencies, LeBlanc (2021) contended that competence is predicated on "doing something. …to perform" (p. 48). This perspective is further clarified through competency evoking managerial expertise, like scheduling meetings, and performance is students' ability to schedule and hold the meeting. Notably, the reliance on major employers and companies in the design phase, rather than faculty, directly relates to this deployment of competence. LeBlanc (2021) argued in favor of this a priori application of workplace skills to ensure degree holders' employability and work-readiness.

Another theme, assessment (Ch. 3), entailed evaluating students' work as "mastered or not yet" (LeBlanc, 2021, p. 50) and students' ability to repeat, as long as-needed, until achieving mastery. Productively, this flexible approach responds to students' responsibilities beyond education, e.g., working or caretaking. Not being time-bound to content proficiency within the somewhat arbitrary confines of academic semesters means that students in competency-based programs are not unnecessarily pressurized or threatened by loss of financial aid. Adaptations of this flexible approach hold particular relevance for retention and degree completion efforts in higher education institutions with increased numbers of non-traditional students.

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Regarding assessment and organizational decision-making, LeBlanc (2021) presented a contentious stance that faculty governance is a hindrance. Specifically, SNHU's program for competency-based programming applied a business management concept of "disruptive innovation" (Christensen, 1997, as cited in LeBlanc, 2021, p. 43) to substantiate side-stepping SNHU's faculty senate for direct program oversight. As explained through the development process at SNHU, this manifested as physically and structurally separating the competency programs from other areas of campus and faculty senate relinquishing control over which programs would shift to the online modality (LeBlanc, 2021). While this afforded rapid growth, this model opens competency-based programming to contributing to rather than disrupting structural inequity, particularly regarding instructors and faculty.

Critiques

LeBlanc (2021) advocated removing faculty involvement, which afforded rapid programmatic growth, yet this model represents a central critique of the text, by adopting a narrow view of equity. LeBlanc's (2021) competency based model demonstrates a narrow view of equity as a structural process via reducing faculty agency and foregrounding a student-as-consumer model. LeBlanc (2021) conveyed disdain for highly-trained faculty experts and favored insights from industries and companies that only prioritize competency skill acquisition over other important elements of learning such as critical thinking, to develop these programs. This approach mirrors a neoliberal disposition toward higher education counter to its public good possibilities in developing well rounded graduates.

LeBlanc (2021) criticized faculty as the culprits for grade inflation and poor assessment, or assessments that did not meet a rote application of quantitative standards without consideration for the equally evaluable components of qualitative insights. This position reductively posits that systemic issues in Higher Education can be rectified by naming and blaming just one group, faculty members. Most notably absent, is acknowledgement of the structural inequities that shape faculty experiences, given the book's emphasis on faculty as roadblocks to LeBlanc's (2021) competency-based model.

LeBlanc (2021) approached but did not achieve this perspective in chapter 3 by acknowledging assessment challenges in higher education but through the claim that faculty are untrained or improperly equipped. Instead, equity foregrounds interlocking systems of oppression (see e.g., Patricia Hill Collins) present in systemic educational inequities: the exodus of historically minoritized faculty and staff, predatory lending mechanisms and for-profit institutions, persistent reliance on minoritized groups for campus maintenance, increased reliance on adjuncts in favor of institutional savings, punitively deploying student evaluations (privileged in tenure and promotion processes), and the precarity of pre-tenure faculty in fighting to keep their jobs, even with terminal degrees in their fields. LeBlanc (2021) claimed adjunctification was not integral to competency-based programming, yet the proposed model relies on a general disregard for highly-trained educators and their labor, evidenced in SNHU's (2022) employment opportunities at the time of writing, only for adjuncts. Higher education's ecology and, ultimately, student success is predicated on connections among students with campus personnel, specifically among students and faculty. At a rate of pay of up to $13,000 for undergraduate adjuncts (contingent on teaching the 6 available terms in a year) and only up to $12,500 for graduate adjuncts (contingent on teaching the 5 available terms in a year), this is not a living wage (SNHU, 2022). When

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instructors are exploited, devalued, and targeted, then their capacity for holistically contributing to students' success is threatened. At the time of writing SNHU's open employment opportunities were for adjuncts. At a rate of pay of up to $13,000 for undergraduate adjuncts (contingent on teaching the 6 available terms in a year) and only up to $12,500 for graduate adjuncts (contingent on teaching the 5 available terms in a year), this is not a living wage (SNHU, 2022).

Additionally, competency-as-work-skill is questionable. Employability of graduates of these programs is laudable and is likely relevant for some. However, LeBlanc (2021) described working backward from workplace skills, evocative of the empty vessel idea that students need to be filled with knowledge, or in this case performance ability. Scholars (see e.g., Magnussen, 2008; Rodríguez, 2012) problematized this approach as functionalist and not student-centered. Establishing competence first suggests that all relevant knowledge is already known and evaluable. While potentially true for employability, it poses a challenge to higher education as an accelerator for innovation, critical thinking, and new knowledge creation.

Relevance to a Higher Education and Student Affairs Audience

Educational pursuits toward equity and student success are necessary to transform higher education, and LeBlanc (2021) challenged traditional structures to promote student accessibility and argued for student equity but overlooked equity throughout higher education. Equity for students cannot be advanced by denigrating educators nor esteeming neoliberalism. Student Affairs faculty will recognize overtones of casualization and condescension toward their expertise and faculty governance, in favor of workforce-oriented priorities. This work is not directly relevant to Student affairs practitioners; however, they might find relevance to learning how to connect student supports to strengthen students' development in areas overlooked by the competency-based model (i.e. developing critical awareness and critical thinking skills, student agency, etc.). A cautionary note for all scholar-practitioners is evident by reading the subtext: equity can lead to transformation among multiple parties if we deploy it by resourcing and advancing those most impacted by social injustices.

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Dr. Cathryn B. Bennett engages the discipline of Higher Education across issues of equity and access with historically minoritized populations, including refugee/formerly resettled, first generation, and Latina/o/x/e college students. Dr. Bennett's research agenda prioritizes disrupting social inequities replicated in higher education. As a queer, white, anti-racist woman, she endeavors to imagine and create other futures for minoritized communities to be welcomed, respected, and valued as learners and contributors in co-creating new knowledge. Her favorite courses to teach feature foundational critical theory, community engaged and participatory research methodology, and critical perspectives on access and success in higher education. Dr. Bennett is an administrator at Guilford College, instructor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and evaluation consultant with Every Campus A Refuge (ECAR). She is based in the US and maintains close relationships with colleagues around the world.

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