

Contemporary Issues in Higher Education: Introduction

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Abstract

Once considered an “atheoretical community of practice,” the field of higher education appears to be shifting to prioritize an explicit engagement with theory. This special issue aims to strengthen the forces supporting that shift by providing discussions of topics that are familiar to higher education scholars and practitioners—online education (Selznick & Schafer), race and affirmative action in college admissions (Ward and Baez & Sanchez), student debt (Gildersleeve), student development theory (Smithers & Eaton), and faculty work and educational research (Kuntz)—in new and theoretically rich ways. In what I found to be a series of important, challenging, and at times conflicting arguments, articles in this special issue demonstrate the significance of theoretical engagements as scholars and practitioners attempt to understand and respond to contemporary issues in the field.

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As of 2016, there were 86 English-language academic journals that focused specifically on higher education (Tight, 2017). Together, these journals published more than 40,000 pages, or approximately 16 million words (Tight, 2017). As Tight argues, “On most topics, there is a significant amount of accumulated research of relevance that can usefully be consulted, though practitioners and policymakers often appear reluctant to consult it” (p. 12). These staggering numbers suggest that there are plenty of outlets for higher education scholarship, and the need for a special issue focusing on one of the widest topics available, contemporary issues in higher education, would be quite minimal.

Yet, the need stems not from the lack of publishing outlets, but from the ways in which higher education scholars meaningfully engage with theoretical foundations of their research. To this point, Tight (2004) argues:

while it is possible to identify the theoretical perspective or perspectives underlying any piece of published higher education research, these perspectives are mainly implicit. Higher education researchers, for the most part, do not appear to feel the need to make their theoretical perspectives explicit, or to engage in a broader sense in theoretical debate. (p. 409)

Because it is impossible to conduct a study without *any* theoretical perspective undergirding it, these implicit theoretical perspectives may be so closely coupled with commonsensical understandings that the author can take them for granted. There is evidence to suggest this is the case, as studies on students often implicitly treat them as customers (Saunders, 2014), studies concerning racial climates, access, outcomes, etc. rarely engage with the concept of racism (Harper, 2012) and instead point to individual and community attributes positioned within broader human capital

arguments, and studies of the economics of higher education are decoupled from discussions of the emergence and reign of neoliberalism, commodities, or consumption (Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017), just to name a few of the problematically atheoretical areas within the field. Such an easy reliance on dominant understandings may be difficult for the field to overcome, and may make it difficult for those who are engaged with explicit theoretical perspectives and theoretical debate to find an accepting home for their scholarly creations within academic journals in the field.

Alternatively, higher education scholars may not believe such theoretical explicitness is important. If this is true and a dominant view in the field is that theoretical explicitness is not important, two things may become apparent: 1) for those of us who attempt to engage with theory in a meaningful way, what a bummer of a field to be in!; and, 2) the current composition and priorities of the field are not permanent, and scholars may demonstrate the importance of theoretical explicitness through their contributions to understanding existing literature and research in the field. Combined, the “hopeful bummer” that we may feel as scholars of higher education provides the foundation of this special issue.

Unlike traditional disciplines that have specific shared knowledges, concepts, practices, and exemplars, or what Kuhn (2012/1962) described as *paradigms*, higher education is a field of study that engages with a substantial number of different disciplinary and methodological perspectives (Tight, 2013). Because of this diversity, authors, reviewers, and editors may have the ability to shape the field in ways that alter the priorities exhibited through published literature absent the need of a Kuhnian scientific revolution therein. Indeed, Tight’s (2012) more recent investigations show published studies are increasingly including at least some engagement with theory, and a new journal, *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*, was recently with the broad purpose “to extend conversations on the importance of philosophy, critical social theory, and philosophical method in the study of higher education” (<https://www.peterlang.com/view/journals/ptihe/ptihe-overview.xml>). These two developments point to a shift in the prioritization of theoretical engagements within the field, and this special issue hopes to strengthen the forces supporting that shift.

Being the guest editor for this issue, I found myself in the strange position of having my opinions on the field matter (beyond the classroom, my colleagues, and the small circle of folks on which I hope my opinions have some impact) in terms of the ideas and approaches that will occupy a small space within the academic literature in the field. Grounded in the belief that there are multiple and conflicting understandings of many foundational concepts in the social sciences, I made a deliberate effort not to be the arbiter of arguments, theories, and definitions within the issue. Instead, this issue (hopefully) demonstrates that conflicting and/or overlapping understandings of foundational concepts can differently inform the ways we make sense of specific issues and are important as the field continues its emerging prioritization of theory within published works.

The articles included in this special issue engage with topics that are familiar to higher education scholars and practitioners—online education (Selznick & Schafer), race and affirmative action in college admissions (Ward and Baez & Sanchez), student debt (Gildersleeve), student development theory (Smithers & Eaton), and faculty work and educational research (Kuntz)—though authors engage with these topics in what may be some unfamiliar and, at times, conflicting ways. I believe the conceptual tensions some readers may detect across articles can be the foundation of productive disagreements within the hopefully emerging theoretical explicitness in the field of higher education, and demonstrate the need to reject reductionist approaches to theory/philosophy that close off new ways of knowing and coming to know.

The issue begins with the most traditional philosophical investigation among the articles. Benjamin Selznick and David Schafer “apply a continental philosophical perspective to certain conceptual challenges presented by the spread of online education” to explore the relations between technology, education, and society (p. 7, this issue). Far from treating online education as a transactional educational modality narrated by discourses of individual student access and success, Selznick and Schafer promote online education as a relational and community-oriented educational practice. By engaging with Honneth’s work on social freedom, the authors present a compelling argument concerning the problematic outcomes of an online education focused on “individual achievement at the expense of intersubjective engagement” (p. 17, this issue). Opposing essentialist arguments that present online education as a necessarily problematic practice that supports commodification and exploitation or as an inevitable outcome of a long march of technological innovations in higher education, Selznick and Schafer ask those engaged with online education to challenge normative orientations of online education and construct potentially emancipatory alternatives within their work.

The issue then moves to two articles that share a concern for affirmative action in college admissions, though this concern is approached in two meaningfully different ways. First, LaWanda Ward investigates Supreme Court oral arguments in recent affirmative action cases by embracing the conceptual roots of Critical Race Theory (CRT) within legal studies and attempting to demonstrate the normalcy of White privilege and its (re)production through the legal system. Supported by a critical discourse analysis of five Supreme Court oral arguments involving race-conscious admissions, Ward challenges dominant discursive representations of that are argued to be grounded in recycled narratives of interest convergence between White students and Students of Color. In place of such narratives, Ward calls for a more explicit commitment to race-conscious admissions that are not grounded in such transactional logics, concluding “Candid declarations of inclusion and explaining how the legacies of most institutions of higher education require race-conscious admissions policies is warranted in order to combat the prevalence of the normalcy of White privilege” (p. 37, this issue).

While Ward’s argument is grounded in CRT, the third article in this issue, authored by Benjamin Baez and Gerson Sanchez, approaches affirmative action through neoliberal governmentality. Their approach enables different understandings, conclusion, and implications than those found in Ward’s argument, which demonstrates the ways that “thinking with theory” (Jackson & Mazzie, 2012) can result in meaningfully different outcomes of inquiry. Engaging with the Court’s decisions as well as amicus briefs filed by the AFL-CIO, ExxonMobil, and General Motors, among others, Baez and Sanchez reveal that the logic supporting affirmative action has fundamentally changed from the liberal ideal of individual liberty, justice and equality to the neoliberal rationality of the self-governing and economically-driven individual. As “diversity” becomes an instrument of neoliberal rationality, its benefits are understood through the logic of individual skill development and an “investment” in both individuals’ “human capital” and the subsequent value of that capital within a “global marketplace.” With the collapse of the traditional liberal ideology upon which many narratives concerning affirmative action were built, affirmative action in college admissions becomes problematically “saved” by neoliberal governmentality by understanding diversity as a form of human capital. The authors

end with a call to have us imagine different ways of rationalizing social life, and, to begin, we should refuse the economic rationalizations of education that are so pervasive today, even though the imperatives of late capitalism appear to compel them. (p. 52, this issue)

Ryan Evely Gildersleeve authors the fourth article in the issue, which extends Baez and Sanchez's discussion of late capitalism and focuses on the role of debt in shaping student subjectivities. Gildersleeve assertively states,

I contend the subjectivation of students is made possible only via the debt economy, as the radically neoliberal version of late capitalism has become the ubiquitous epistemic technology of contemporary academe. That is to say, one cannot be "known" outside of neoliberal ideology in contemporary American higher education. (p. 56, this issue)

This assertion is supported through a critique of the liberal humanist foundation that grounds many discussions of students, combined with an exploration of Mario Lazzarato's writings on immaterial labor and debt, and situated within assemblage theory. Gildersleeve not only provides fantastic overviews of the complex theoretical foundations upon which the discussion is built, but also weaves a fascinating argument which situates debt not in relation to money as it is traditionally understood in the field. By engaging with debt as a source of student subjectivity, this argument brings forth both methodological and theoretical challenges those who aim to explore economics of higher education and address issues of social justice created through the debt machines that shape much of higher education finance.

The fifth article in this issue, by Laura Smithers and Paul Eaton, continues the focus on student subjectivities and engages with one of the cornerstones of the field of higher education: student development theory. Providing both an historical overview of the development of student development theory within the field and a critique of the dominant understandings of students and subjectivities therein, the authors engage in a substantial discussion of problematic discipline/control and dividualization regimes that undergird much of the literature. They offer the concept of nomadic subjectivity as articulated through Braidotti's work to counterbalance these regimes, and call upon higher education practitioners and scholars to "unlearn student development theory as it is in order to think of what it might be" (p. 81, this issue). In what is an extremely comprehensive and nuanced engagement with student development theory, Smithers and Eaton declare,

Unlearning student development theory does not mean we (r)ject the important insights and perspectives it offers, but asks us to critically examine the cuts and structuring proclivities it places on our practice, our imagination, and envisioning of student affairs educators' ethical responsibility to college students. (p. 81, this issue)

With their thorough engagement with theorizing students within student development theories, the authors provide an extremely important contribution both the literatures on student development theory and the emerging theoretical explicitness in the field.

The final article in the issue, by Aaron Kuntz, presents an extended engagement with the Foucauldian foundation of Baez and Sanchez's argument, shares a foundation in Lazzarato's work with Gildersleeve, and grounds a critique in the dividualization occurring within higher education in ways similar to Smithers and Eaton. Kuntz presents

a particular reading of governing, one that succeeds through turning humans, relations—all matter—into *calculations*: a quantification of *things* that include affective states. This

contemporary context encourages an anti-materialist ethical positioning that severs activities from bodies and asserts logics of preemption as necessary and normal. (p. 94, this issue)

These calculations are complicit in the “thingification” of faculty and educational research that is made possible through the extractive and preemptive logics that foreclose the potential of critical interventions within the University. Arguing “resistive practices must extend from a different relational logic and a more robust sense of materialism else they accelerate the very processes they are invoked to disrupt,” Kuntz “asks how one might productively intervene in such circumstances in ways that challenge the extractive and preemptive logics of our contemporary time” (p. 96, this issue). This question is at the heart of critical research in the field, and must be taken seriously if we are to disrupt the normative patterns of reproduction upon which much of higher education is built.

I found the articles included in this issue to be extremely challenging. They challenged my understandings of theories I thought I knew well, introduced me to new theories I had not yet known, and repeatedly made me pause and reflect on my own research and educational practice. After reading the articles I felt almost as if I knew less than I had known before I started; that I had engaged in the process of “unlearning” that Smithers and Eaton call for. I hope readers will find themselves engaging in a similar process, and see these articles as examples of an expansive potential within the field of higher education to think with theory.

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