

## **PREFATORY: Informing Higher Education Policy and Practice Through Intersectionality**

Donald Mitchell Jr.  
*Grand Valley State University*

Don C. Sawyer III  
*Quinnipiac University*

Intersectionality as a framework has garnered much attention in law, sociology, and education research, and conversations surrounding the framework and its utility now span the globe. Intersectionality addresses the junction of identities, and how the intersectional nature of identities, together, shape the lived experiences of individuals (Hancock, 2007) because of interlocking systems of oppression and marginalization often associated with those identities. Jones (2014) notes,

To only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power. ...intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

In the United States, the demographic landscape of higher education is constantly changing and is increasingly becoming more diverse. There are more people who deal with both racism and homophobia, both sexism and ableism, and both classism and religious discrimination on college and university campuses. However, it appears that the use of intersectionality as a framework to critique existing policies and practices within postsecondary settings has yet to become a salient movement. With higher education becoming more culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse, educators within higher education contexts must think differently about the ways in which they provide services that acknowledge and address those who inhabit postsecondary educational spaces—intersectionality is a useful framework for that realization.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a scholar of law, critical race theory, and Black feminist thought first used the term *intersectionality* to highlight the unique experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) indicated that Black women experience increased marginalization because of intersecting identities that are oppressed—their race and gender. Using an example of women of

color who are “standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion,” Crenshaw created an analogy to depict what happens when the two forms of exclusion collide (as cited in Lindgren, Taub, Wolfson, & Palumbo, 2011, p. 455). In the illustration, Crenshaw noted the responders to a collision scene (i.e., a race ambulance and gender ambulance) would not know how to respond because they are unable to determine whether it was racial or gender discrimination that caused the most damage (as cited in Lindgren, Taub, Wolfson, & Palumbo, 2011), highlighting the interlocking nature of systems of oppressions and hazards of identity politics (i.e., viewing identities in singular ways).

In this special issue, “Informing Higher Education Policy and Practice Through Intersectionality,” the authors build upon Crenshaw’s (1989) articulation of intersectionality to frame their work. We chose the *Journal of Progressive Policy and Practice* (JP3, Center for African American Research & Policy, n.d.) intentionally because of its mission to provide “contemporary and innovative contributions to the ‘Best Practices’ for service provision practitioners at all levels and from all fields” (para. 1). In addition, because JP3 is an open access journal, more readers are provided access to this collection of works, which—in the spirit of intersectionality—was important for us.

After our special issue proposal was accepted by JP3, we issued a call for abstracts in the summer of 2013. The abstracts underwent a peer review process, and authors of the abstracts that were accepted were invited to submit full-length articles. Each full-length article underwent a double-blind peer review process, and the articles that were eventually accepted are the collection of works presented within this special issue.

First, Jennrich and Kowalski-Braum highlight how they are using an intersectional lens to shape the work of three identity-centers at their institution in “‘My Head is Spinning:’ Doing Authentic Intersectional Work in Identity Centers.” In “Black Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions: Fostering Their Academic Success Using African American Motherwork Strategies,” Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson highlight the ways in which predominantly White institutions in higher education contexts can learn from motherwork strategies to help African American women—whose racial-gender identities shape their lived experiences—achieve collegiate success. Smith adds to intersectionality discourse and challenges the ways in which society stereotypes and constricts U.S. veterans’ identities in “More than White, Heterosexual Men: Intersectionality as a Framework for Understanding the Identity of Student Veterans.”

In “Absent Voices: Intersectionality and College Students with Physical Disabilities,” Tevis and Griffen make the case that students with disabilities are missing from intersectionality-based scholarship and uses intersectionality from a strengths-based lens to highlight the experiences of three women with disabilities who are academically successful. Sawyer and Palmer bring focus to the diversity within Black male narratives as they navigate higher education in “A Different Kind of Black, But the Same Issues: Black Males and Counterstories at a Predominantly White Institution.” Finally, Charleston and colleagues highlight unique and marginalized experiences of African American women pursuing or having received degrees in the computing sciences in “Intersectionality and STEM: The Role of Race and Gender in the Academic Pursuits of African American Women in STEM.”

Mitchell (2014) notes, “Intersectionality is valuable as framework because it is not meant to be solely theoretical; it is a critique that fosters conversations for real-world change and progress” (p. 4). In the spirit of JP3 and social change, the aim of this special issue is to introduce readers to multidimensional ways of thinking about students’ experiences and the services institutions offer to inform practices and policies within higher education contexts. Also in the

spirit of JP3, we encourage readers to reach out to the authors to continue these important discussions on the ways in which using intersectionality frameworks might advance higher education practices and policies, with the goal of making higher education more socially just.

**REFERENCES**

- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139, 139–167.
- Hancock, A. (2007). When multiplication doesn't equal quick addition: Examining intersectionality as a research paradigm. *Perspectives on Politics*, 5(1), 63-79.
- Jones, S. R. (2014). Foreword. In D. Mitchell, Jr., C. Simmons, & L. Greyerbiehl (Eds.), *Intersectionality & higher education: Theory, research, & praxis* (pp. xi-xiv). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Journal of Progressive Policy & Practice, Center for African American Research & Policy. (n.d.). *Journal of Progressive Policy and Practice*. Retrieved from <http://caarpweb.com/publications/jpp>
- Lindgren, J. R., Taub, N. Wolfson, B. A., & Palumbo, C. M. (2011). *The law of sex discrimination* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Mitchell, D., Jr. (2014). Introduction. In D. Mitchell, Jr., C. Simmons, L. Greyerbiehl (Eds.), *Intersectionality & higher education: Theory, research, and praxis* (pp. 1-5). New York, NY: Peter Lang.

*Correspondence regarding this prefatory should be addressed to Donald Mitchell Jr., Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Grand Valley State University, [mitched0@gvsu.edu](mailto:mitched0@gvsu.edu).*