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GENDER INEQUALITY, INCLUSIVITY, AND POWER

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As a white Anglo-Saxon male teaching at university, it is vital for me to understand the experiences and challenges that diverse people face in university study. That is why I gravitated to three readings:

- “Gender Inequality Is Preventing Female Students from Success” (Cain, 2023);
- “Inclusivity of University from a Minority Student’s perspective” (Brown, 2023); and
- “The Power of University” (Aftab, 2023).

Each author provides a provocative account of alienation, due to abuse of females (Cain), lack of services for minority students (Brown), and discrimination due to ethnicity (Aftab).

Cain reminds me that female university students are particularly vulnerable to extra-curricular violence in the form of sexual harassment and rape, where both are disturbingly frequent both on campus and in social settings. Cain points out that it is difficult to break the “lad culture,” and that leadership by men and women is needed to bring about cultural change. Cain presents a “Catch 22,” asking how females, heavily affected by a culture of harassment that is “pervasively embedded and reinforced throughout university,” become leaders of change when the culture has “damaging consequences for the overall success of female students.” Despite slow progress in some nations towards gender equity, Cain’s reminder is that there are strong cultural forces in every university that act in the opposite direction to such progress.

Brown (2023, p.1) provides an account of an “outstanding opportunity to work alongside academic staff across different departments to assess which areas could be improved in terms of inclusivity for minority students” (Brown, 2023, p. 2). This positivity is despite Brown’s initial experience at the university, facing the revelation that “I did not know that being a first-generation student from a low-income background made me a minority student.” Moreover, this was not perceived to be an opportunity but rather “did knock my confidence and I felt as though the opportunities that I would be offered would not be equal opportunities” (Brown, 2023, p. 1). This resonated with me as a first-generation student from a low-income background, for I had not really thought of myself as from a minority background, despite various literature I have read on first-in-family at university! Thanks to Brown! However, unlike me, Brown took the opportunities offered in an “internship as student inclusion consultant making the experiences of various minority groups more inclusive!” Brown found the internship enabled each intern to be a “great asset to the university, as it allows for recommendations to be made directly from student experience” (Brown, 2023, p. 1).

Aftab (2023) contemplates “a drawing of a young man smiling, while inside his mind a boy sits alone crying” by an unknown author and sees “barriers that university students face in terms of their mental health, racism, and tuition fees” (p. 1). This imagery and reflection are profound and serve as a reminder to me, when I speak to students in my classes and program, that happy face does not equate to happy life.

Together, Cain, Brown and Aftab gave me a refreshed perspectives of female, minority, and ethnicity challenges that may remain hidden to me and that, even after positive conversations with students, on the inside they “could be burning down” (Aftab, 2023, p. 2).

These essays then highlight the need for me to be tactful in my teaching with pedagogical sensitivity, especially when heavily disturbing elements of students’ lives may be and remain hidden in my plain sight. However, it is not for students to disclose to me their challenges. It is up to me to provide opportunities for partnerships with students that help partners enable others with similar problems to experience the learning environment and the broader university environment as safely and productively as possible.

References

Aftab, Z. (2023). The Power of University. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 40. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/11>

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