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College Campuses as the "Great Equalizer" – Or Are They?: A Critical Perspective to Sustainability

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Introduction

College campuses have often been touted as the great equalizer, a place where those who are marginalized, either racially or economically, have as much ability to succeed as their non-marginalized counterparts. After all, the thought is that everyone has access to the same professors, same computer labs, same residence halls, and eats the same food, more or less, when living on campus. Yet, the disadvantages that accompany many students when they attend college, coupled with the Eurocentric positioning of the college learning environment, makes this equalizer elusive. As colleges seek to integrate sustainability into the explicit and implicit curriculum, they must pay attention to the factors that hinder the equalizing effect of education for disadvantaged students. We purport that a lack of attention to factors that stifle opportunities for those most marginalized actually undermines the sustainability agenda of "changing our ways of being and working collaboratively to create regenerative, interconnected, just, and thriving systems and communities" (Burns, 2016, p. 250). For example, it becomes challenging for individuals from minoritized groups to focus on the sustainability agenda if they are grappling with limited resources and opportunities, or experience violence that threatens their physical, social, and economic survival. The focus on meeting their immediate basic needs therefore makes it more challenging to attend to sustainability in a holistic sense. Hence addressing factors that may hinder opportunities for some is critically important for advancing the sustainability agenda. Should higher education remain serious about integrating sustainability into the curriculum with the aim of creating change agents among students who can address sustainability issues (UNESCO, 2014), they must take a critical view of the context in which this sustainability is taught. This paper uses a critical perspective to highlight the student and institution-related factors that impact student outcomes and reshape the context for sustainability education.

Student Backgrounds

Students from economically depressed areas are often plagued by inequities that stretch far beyond simply lower income. Oftentimes, these areas have lower water or air quality due to the lack of investment in infrastructure or the neighborhoods are closer to highways or manufacturing pollution. Minority families in general are less likely to have health insurance than their counterparts (Breslau et al, 2017). Medical services in some of these regions may not even be readily available, or overstressed and inadequate. In addition, these areas are sometimes located in what is increasingly referred to by food justice advocates as "food apartheids", where the only convenient source of food may be attached to a gas station (Brones, 2018). These areas may have populations that are fraught with lower life expectancy and higher cases of disability than communities that have better environmental quality and more robust infrastructure. The concept of sustainability in these disadvantaged environments may be a foreign concept as the primary focus for individuals in these communities is on striving to keep their heads above water.

Students who come to campus from these communities are entering a very different kind of world. They are exposed to the same overall higher level of environmental quality as their counterparts. At least on the surface, they have convenient access to the same healthy foods as all the other students. What they were lacking in technological advantages in their previous schools regarding out-of-date computers and software or calculators that may not have all the capabilities needed for courses like trigonometry, is seemingly available to them in computer labs. However, overall, these students are less likely to be able to afford a meal plan on campus that would provide for them all semester long, reducing their access to food. In fact, hunger is reported to be far more prevalent with minority students (Dubick et al, 2016). In response to the high rate of student hunger, many universities have developed on-campus food banks designed to serve students. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be able to afford technology on par with other students. While computer labs are available on campus, they can sometimes have hours that do not agree with the students' combined class and work schedule, especially since these students are more likely to report that they are not able to attend college unless they also work significant hours in addition to classes. In some cases, students may drop a major altogether that requires significant material purchases like art supplies, laptops capable of processing mathematical modeling, or even just requiring students to attend course or program related activities outside the normal class times. These challenges may hinder many minorities from fully integrating into the University and taking advantage of the resources that are available.

College Environment

Concomitant to the students' backgrounds is the learning environment on campus, which can impact success for disadvantaged students. The university learning environment is defined as the physical spaces, approaches to teaching, social supports, available technology, and contextual learning places outside the campus, in which students learn and thrive (Valtonen, et al. 2020). These elements can work independently or collectively to hamper the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

When discussing colleges as the great equalizer and its implications for building a sustainable agenda, the diversity of academic staff, which is a key element of teaching approaches and the social support, must be highlighted. In general, college campuses lack diversity among academic staff, which means that students from minority groups are not likely to interact with staff and instructors who look like them and understand their cultural backgrounds. In addition to the lack of diversity, colleges have implicit and explicit curriculum that centers whiteness. Accordingly, when discussing issues of sustainability, "to create regenerative, interconnected, just, and thriving systems and communities," students from minority groups are less likely to see themselves in the material and in discussions, making them feel even further marginalized. For example, discussions of the benefits of electric cars and solar panels on houses may be foreign to marginalized students' from lower income communities. Readings on conservation of forested and ocean environments may be discussing places that marginalized students have never seen and therefore may not be part of the world that they know. All of this can result in students feeling that sustainability may be for other people who can afford it. Unfortunately, we are disenfranchising the very students who need these sustainable and environmentally beneficial actions the most.

Strategies

The presence of deep and persistent barriers to fully infusing sustainability requires a commitment to implementing strategies that address both the student and the institution-related barriers. Some of these strategies are highlighted below.

Strategies Related to Students and Learning

One strategy is to create avenues for these students to gain access to all the advantages held by students of higher income. As mentioned, a campus food bank that students can utilize without having a stigma associated with it is helpful, particularly late in semesters. An exchange where students who no longer need graphing calculators and can donate them to a math or engineering department for under-resourced students to access may provide a hand for some students. It may benefit an arts program to hold campus wide or community sales of some of the work of students with the proceeds being returned to the students for art supplies or financial aid. And as simple as this sounds, flexibility with the timing of assignments in all courses and flexibility of program requirements allow disadvantaged students to fulfill work and family obligations and still receive that elusive degree.

A second approach is to incorporate sustainability issues across many disciplines (e.g., social work/ psychology/math/education). Over the past two decades there has been a push for the inclusion of more topics of sustainability across the curriculum. In fact, there have been calls for this more times than we can really cite in one article. Robert Turner at the University of Washington and some of our colleagues (Kelsey Bitting at Elon University and Chelsea Romulo at the University of Northern Colorado) have been accumulating references to these calls and are producing ideas of how to generate action on them (Turner et al., 2021). One of the hopes is that students from a wide variety of backgrounds would be exposed to these concepts of sustainability and how improving the environment would benefit them. This would increase the likelihood that students would be able to carry this knowledge and apply it regardless of the communities they joined after graduation.

Another approach is to infuse the content into introductory level general education courses such as environmental justice or other courses to highlight the pervasive impact of the environment to marginalized communities. This idea is of huge importance to minority and marginalized communities and is explored in an accompanying essay "Sustainability Without Race? Disrupting Whiteness at the Intro Level". For students that come to the college system hoping to gain knowledge to improve the communities they came from, allowing them to see that some of the chronic problems within these communities are directly tied to environmental health can increase the likelihood that we will attract the best advocates to help solve those problems.

Strategies Related to Decentering Whiteness

The impact of the college environment on sustainability goals begs that approaches focus on decentering whiteness on college campuses and in the curriculum. Decentering whiteness is sometimes used interchangeably with the term "decolonization", a challenge that is explored more in the accompanying essay on "Decolonizing Sustainability in Higher Education". Some scholars (Tuck & Yang, 2012), however, caution against this, suggesting that the term is more than a metaphor for inclusion in the school curriculum. Notwithstanding, when used in the context of decentering whiteness and inclusion, it "involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It's a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in so doing, adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways" (Keele University, 2018). Accordingly, decentering the University curriculum would mean creating a curriculum that shifts from the largely Eurocentric positioning of the curriculum, which often reinforces various forms of oppression and dominance.

Decentering whiteness in the curriculum to aid the sustainability agenda can be achieved in several ways. First, through raising everyone's critical consciousness of the persistent exclusion and oppression experienced by minoritized groups. Part of this critical consciousness is for people to see the role that they can play in helping to address social injustices. Second, shifting the culture of exclusion could be achieved through diversifying classroom materials and content. Students from minoritized populations should be able to see themselves in the content that is taught across the curriculum. This also includes using materials that are authored by people from minority groups and from different regions of the world. A third way to decenter whiteness on campuses is to diversify academic and non-academic staff. A diverse instructional staff would not only help students to feel more at home but would help to ensure that class content reflects other cultures and intellectual traditions. Fourth, styles of teaching and evaluation of student knowledge should be varied to allow students from different backgrounds and abilities to truly unleash their truest potential. The diversity that students bring to the college campuses must be seen as an opportunity to generate creative approaches to education and not as a burden to the system. Lastly, students from diverse backgrounds must be given the space and resources to share their experiences in the classroom. Such information must be valued and regarded as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Conclusion

As universities strive to infuse sustainability into the curriculum and develop co-curricular opportunities, they must at the same time consider the various backgrounds of their students and the quality of the learning environment in which this content is taught. Given that these can widen gaps, instead of equalizing outcomes, universities must adopt strategies to address these gaps as they strive to create "regenerative, interconnected, just, and thriving systems and communities" (Burns, 2016, p. 250).

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