INTRODUCTION

Receiving a college education is considered one of the most sought after goals of young students of the present day. In our increasingly diverse society, access to the college experience has been ascribed with tremendous value, especially among young people who belong to underrepresented communities. Professionals in higher education and student affairs and services are aware of this notion and do daily work to provide ways to increase access to this educational experience. Many universities tend to achieve the diversification of student bodies full of aspiring undergraduate and graduate students by promoting the euphoric ideal of “diversity” and “inclusion.” It seems to be a desirable goal to give those who have been historically marginalized and underprivileged the opportunity to pursue higher education, therefore affirming the idea that diversity is in fact a good thing for our institutions and for society. Yet in our world of dominant Eurocentrism and “whiteness,” it seems all too difficult for our leaders and educators to achieve this feat. Part of the problem is the idea is that if our society is already so diversified then diversity need not be a priority. Another problem, which I believe to be just as violent as the attitude of apathy, is the ignorance on what diversity truly is. To most it is representation of numbers; to many it only focuses on one particular identity; to an even greater amount, it does not take into
account the lived experiences of those whose lives and historical contexts have been systematically marginalized. Hence, it is convincing that many students who do not fall into the status quo image of the American identity—white, heterosexual, male, and physically and cognitively unchallenged—feel quite unsafe and unmotivated in their pursuit for opportunities that should be granted to all beyond the educational sphere.

Institutions of higher learning, while providing windows of opportunity to pursue knowledge for opportunity within and beyond the academy, continue to perpetuate a hierarchy that situates dominant forms of identifying at the center of institutional culture that does little to empower and enable traditionally underserved identity groups on college campuses to enhance their academic and extracurricular experiences. Dialogue on diversity currently persists to keep those in power from not taking active responsibility for the societal and institutional factors that perpetuate marginalization in our schools. I contend that diversity work in higher education has not addressed the needs of the students who exist on the margins, those who do not abide by the code of the status quo American identity. Most students—as well as some faculty, staff and administrators—do not feel that they have a significant voice their concerns or articulate their need for resources to enhance the quality of their academic experience in college. Even after progressive efforts and milestones such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and the enactment of affirmative action, students are still both visibly and invisibly disregarded in terms of their needs. Student success requires student support, which seems to be lacking a great deal from fellow students, staff, administrators, and faculty who perceive the climate of higher education to be affirming who also fall within the status quo identity in our society. In order to promote true diversity, institutions of higher education need to rethink this ideal by escaping the discourse of representation by numbers and engaging the macrosociological forces that negatively affect student access, success and
progress, belittle the uniqueness of lived experience, and perpetuate the ignorance of unsung salient identities such as sexual orientation and ability.

**WHAT DIVERSITY MEANS**

Before I dive into my argument on the current hopefulness and limitations of current diversity discourse, it is necessary to conceptualize what this idea implies. I want to present a more encompassing definition of diversity, which would include various dimensions of identity not limited to age, race, gender, nationality, ability, religion, and sexual orientation (Roberts and Smith 2002, Chan 2005). Diversity often has limited definitions on race and/or ethnicity and, although sometimes racial issues help to inform climate and diversity needs of other college students, informing diversity or intercultural relations using one dimension of identity would problematize the level of visibility of other marginalized groups, with most discussions far too often stuck within the limited scope of the black-white paradigm (Padilla and Montiel 1998). Diversity seems to be lately attempting to heighten the visibility of marginalized groups, but poses the troubling act of essentializing those on the margins reducing them to a set of values or behaviors that continually define them as deviating from the norm. We want to think about the ways in which diversity—or the blissful, clouds nine version of itself—produces more problems for underprivileged and underserved identity groups.

I also feel the need to clarify what constitutes a marginalized group. I would define this particular entity to be a set of individuals who possess an identity or identities that contradict the status quo position of the white, heterosexual, wealthy, “able-bodied” male. In other words, I wish to incorporate those who identify as women, African American, Latino/a, Asian, Native American or indigenous, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or differently abled. I feel the need to utilize
this language because it relates to my goal of tackling diversity and deconstructing its Eurocentric implications within higher education institutions. I attempt to address and reveal some of the current obstacles and issues that pertain to the lived experiences of each demographic population so as to highlight some of the legitimate concerns that posit a need for increased support for students, staff and faculty within higher educational structures. It is also important to inform how these identities fair against the notion of “whiteness” by investigating cultures of power and privilege and the reproductions of hierarchies and institutionalized “isms” that permeate the boundaries of safety and sound cultural understandings within each individual minority group. I also attempt to investigate and understand the passive proactive attitudes towards diversity as stemming from attitudes that reflect a sense of veiled progressiveness without challenging the dominant culture of whiteness within educational hierarchies, and how these hierarchies essentially stay intact. Through employment of a number of social and critical theories including intersectionality and interest convergence, I present a complex argument as I attempt to address both benefits and drawbacks of the intuitive good nature of diversity as well as the implications on student experience and campus climate.

EXPLORING IDENTITY

Investigation of identity development and cultural lived experiences is, for the sake of this discussion, necessary to understanding social justice and privileged systems within higher education. As post-secondary institutions continue to receive a concentrated influx of women, people of color, people with disabilities, multiracial individuals, and LGBTQ-identified persons, it is important to recognize the needs and backgrounds of all individuals to serve a wide constituency pool on all levels within the higher education hierarchy, from students to top-level administrators.
It is also important to understand the cultural context within society at given points in time and that these contexts can and do shift immensely, giving practitioners and professionals in higher education and student affairs the ability to plan ahead for trends that need to be addressed with regard to access to and enhancement of the college experience. The goal of discussing the unique experiences of various identity groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education is to reveal connections through the similarities of oppression and objectification that are witnessed within these groups as well as the overwhelming variety of lived experiences that do exist across cultural boundaries. This discussion is intended to provide professionals working in higher education and student affairs with a wealth of information to understand the way their organizations can understand the constituents they serve as well as the way their institutional culture reproduces power and privilege hierarchies.

**On Women and Gender**

For the past decade women have represented nearly half or more of the college student population and little evidence suggests that this has changed (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Women’s experiences are quite varied when incorporating other dimensions of identity from socioeconomic class to race to sexual orientation (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Through the resurgence of research on women in education, one issue that seems to still remain is the notion of the “chilly climate,” or the idea that female college students still experience both overt and sub rosa behaviors that provide a discouraging climate and pessimistic attitudes about success and belonging within higher education institutions, ranging from dominant structures in classroom spaces to sexual harassment within faculty-student relations (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Torres, et al. (2003) argue that through women’s identity development, the more they become
aware and connected to their identity, the more they are willing to see the inequities that exist between men and women. (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003) There is also recognition for the need to place women in more male-dominated fields of math and sciences and to prevent assumptions about the experiences and abilities of women that are being made (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998).

Though it seems out of place to discuss this particular identity group here, it seems fitting to focus on transgender individuals within the paradigm of gender. Specifically, people who identify as transgender have articulated significant needs within campus climate. Though this particular identity group is grouped with lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, the concept of “transgender” relates to gender identity or one’s sense of what gender they feel they embody and is an umbrella term that represents transsexuals, transvestites, gender-queer individuals, drag kings and queens, and intersex individuals (Vaccaro 2006, Sausa 2002). The uniqueness of the transgender identity is that it plays a significant role in the breaking down of gender essentialism, or the need to align oneself with their biological sex. Transgender individuals offer new insights to a very small and invisible community on how to live and provide windows of opportunity to include policies in schools removing discrimination on the basis of gender identity, the implementation of single-use bathrooms, and usage of gender-neutral or non-normative language (Sausa 2002).

On African Americans

African Americans have historically been a central focus to diversity discussions in higher education and is the most widely researched demographic within higher education, especially as it pertains to affirmative action (Padilla and Montiel 1998, Broido 2004, Mauk and Jones 2006). It is without question that African American students, faculty and staff in universities perceive
significant levels of racism through their institutions. There is a prevailing attitude among Black students that the campus climate is challenging and hostile (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003, Mauk and Jones 2006). African American students view diversity in terms of commitment to inclusion; the major desire among this particular population is to be taken seriously as students (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Sentiments on the campus level suggest that White and Asian students feel that African American students, along with Native American and Latino/a students, are undeserving of an education (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998).

About 9% of first-year first-generation college students are African American, which demonstrates the disadvantages of access to the college experience as well as information about it (Mauk and Jones 2006). In addition, institutions are attempting to deviate from the concept of merit by admitting students with desire to attend college but who do not demonstrate the ideal level of credentials necessary for successful admission through special assistance and transition prams. Identity seems to be a solid factor for most African American students’ potential for increased academic success and retention when integral to assistance programs for students transitioning into or already enrolled in college (Lee 2006, Mauk and Jones 2006). It is also important to them through the various activities and academic pursuits they carry out in college, through their interests in classes, programs and other institutional responses to their commitment to African American students (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). One interesting and troubling statistic that seems to be both affirming and discouraging is the idea that more African American women (64%) are attending college than men (36%) with predictions that over the next decade women will be matriculating at double the rate of their male counterparts. These statistic show great hope for African American women but provide great concern for the lack of African American men taking on the pursuit of higher education.
On Latino/as

There is debate over whether or not it is appropriate to refer to this particular demographic with the label of “Latino/a” or “Hispanic” because this particular reference varies among the more than twenty countries for many within this demographic; some people prefer to be referenced by their nation of origin instead of being classified under these somewhat generic labels. It is important to recognize, in alignment with this, that lived experiences among Latino/a people are unsurprisingly varied based on cultural background and values, and even some intercultural conflict tends to emerge from these distinctions (Gamboa and Vasquez 2006). Latino/as represent the largest minority group in the United States, with the population at approximately 41.8 million in 2005, with a majority of people unsurprisingly originating from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba (Gamboa and Vasquez 2006). In spite of the contemporary interpretations of diversity, it seems there has been sentiments suggesting that Latino/a individuals are regarded as insignificant compared specifically to African Americans in the United States (Padilla and Montiel 1998).

Trends indicate that prior to college, despite the increasing population of Latino/a youth in the United States, many of these students lag behind their White, Asian, and sometimes African American counterparts in test scores, college completion and dropout rates, obstacles that are faced currently for students who wish to enter college (Gamboa and Vasquez 2006).

Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper (2003) provide a definition of biculturalism as “the synthesis of two cultures, out of which a third ‘reality’ emerges that incorporates both cultures” (58). This exists for many Latino/a students because there is a constant battle between cultural allegiances and, ultimately, pressure to juggle between expectations from home and family as well as the rigid expectations from college (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003,
Gamboa and Vasquez 2006). It is important to look at the historical and geographic context of Latino/a cultures within the United States as well. Land boundaries and immigration played a significant role in the lives of Latino/a people, creating a set of oppressive assumptions and expectations upon them such as the loss of land rights and the need to speak English in white classrooms (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003). Immigration becomes increasingly significant for undocumented students—students who do not have the valid documentation for citizenship or expired visas for legitimate stay within the United States. Issues surrounding this particular subpopulation of Latino/a include eligibility for admission as well as access to housing, employment and health care (Gamboa and Vasquez 2006). Other barriers within the higher educational system, which seemingly perpetuate the social status of Latino/as in the United States in general, include poor high school support, racism and racial segregation, low personal expectations and goals, inequities in prior schooling, and unsurprisingly lack of financial resources and assistance.

**On Asian Americans**

It is important to note the given that Asian American identity constitutes an all encompassing representation of a multitude of ethnic groups of Asian and Pacific Islander origin with varying languages, religions and values (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003). Asian Americans have been considered an underserved identity group on college campuses in spite of it being the fastest growing demographic in the college arena due in part to the passing of legislation allowing for more opportunities for Asians to enter Canada and the United States (Bonner, et al. 2006). Several issues related to this lack of service to this demographic come from the assumption that Asian Americans are academically superior to their other racial counterparts. The common
misconception of the “model minority” is a primary example of one of these issues. Bonner, et al. (2006) all describes the origins of the myth, citing that Japanese Americans in the 1950s and 1960s redeemed themselves as a model racial and ethnic group through work ethic and family values. This reference, in turned, stated the implication of African Americans as the “problem minority,” due to backlash from the masses on the Civil Rights Movements during those two decades (392). These authors provide evidence to contradict the myth of the “model” minority through exposing early on the bimodality of success within the Asian American population, stating that while a high percentage of Asian American students have achieved degrees in college, there is also a high percentage of Asian Americans (in proportion to non-Hispanic whites) who have under four years of college education, particularly within certain ethnic groups of South Asian origin.

Campus alienation is another issue that comes up throughout the exploration of Asian American identity in higher education. Several factors that affect this perception of negative climate for Asian American students include inter-group class-based prejudice within the Asian American community, lack of Asian American leadership in faculty and administrative cabinets, and levels of overt racism and privilege amidst a pressure to maintain the “model” stereotype (Bonner, et al. 2006). The possible danger of not challenging the overall model image of the Asian American student is the possible disavowal of ethnic identities. Salience of ethnic identities is heavily dependent upon one’s personal attitudes about ethnic identity, concordance of behaviors between oneself and their ethnic group and their educational upbringing. Therefore, if it is expected that an Asian American be successful academically but that person does poorly in school, there becomes a loss of salience for that person (Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003).

On Native Americans
Native American and indigenous people have been historically ignored and invisible in conversations about diversity and academic access and success (Lee 2006, Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003). Though the population of American Indian and indigenous people exists quite disproportionate to other marginalized ethnic communities in the United States, they still move through the thread of society and most certainly through institutions of higher education. Because of the specificity of Native American cultures, it is important to understand how their identities and cultural practices affect how work in diversity should be done with respect to these individual groups. Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper (2003) discuss the importance of tribal sovereignty, which comes from the notion that Native tribes had “inherent sovereignty before there was a United States government and never delegated those rights to anyone else” (49). This guiding principle is of key importance to Native Americans because of systematic government oppression through the policing of these unique cultures. Also, Native people possess values such as community, tribal identification, and familial kinships that intrinsically conflict with the “majority values of individualism, competitiveness, and amassing property” (Torres, et al. 2003, 49). In essence, institutional values that seem to align with a white majority make it difficult for Native American students to navigate healthily through their college experiences.

Prospects for college among Native Americans within the United States are relatively low compared to other marginalized non-native groups (Murdock and Satterfield 2006, Torres, Howard-Hamilton and Cooper 2003). Native Americans, like African Americans, also report high levels of alienation and lower sense of allegiance on college campuses when they encounter incidents of resentment, institutional discrimination, and racial stereotyping. Campus climate also portrays a profound sense of false consciousness regarding the Native American race, especially with discussions of diversity. Specifically, there are institutions in which their athletic teams
misappropriate Native American symbols and imagery and make a mockery of cultural customs and performances of Native tribal rituals (Castagno and Lee 2007). The example of the “Chief” at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is one site where this tension has existed. The problem of addressing the needs of Native American students and constituents is the lack of visibility that exists of this particular demographic. Assessment of the level of campus climate demonstrates that Native American students feel alienated by dominant culture due to the lack of support both prior to and during college and by not seeing enough examples of Native American culture or ideas integrated into the folds of the institution such as classroom instruction and campus resources (Murdock and Satterfield 2006). Without question, allegiance to identity is a strong core value that must be recognized by higher education administrators and faculty.

**On Ability**

Lynn Meade (2006) defines students with disabilities to include “those with learning disabilities, permanent health conditions, mental health conditions, as well as those with visual, auditory, and mobility disabilities” (136). Federal statistics indicate that one in seven Americans experience a disability that inhibits daily activity, with that fraction increasing to less than half the United States population when chronic illness, learning disabilities and various mental illnesses are included in the diagnosis (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Further statistics also state that approximately 10% of all college students (in the year 2004) have a disability of some kind (Carney, et al. 2007). These figures suggest a major presence of conditions that most of the nation tends to underprivilege and ignore. One of the major issues for students with disabilities, particularly those dealing with cognitive and mental challenges, is the climate of acceptability that exists within institutions of higher learning. Carney, et al. (2007) describes conditions that
students have faced where embarrassment about their condition or diagnosis lead to hesitance to self-identify to professors in classroom settings (38). This example highlights some key factors that lead to the lack of empowerment of students with disabilities, in that there exists ignorance among campus bodies (faculty, staff, and students) about how to be affirming and accommodating to students with disabilities as well as the negative stigma attached to students’ self-perceptions on disabilities on college campuses (Carney, et al. 2007, Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998, Konur 2006).

Numerous barriers exist for students with disabilities in terms of access and retention as well as perceived attitudes about one’s disabled status. Compared to two-thirds of students without disabilities, only one half of enrolled students with disabilities are fortunate enough to attain a degree, and even then they are more likely to take twice as long to get them (Meade 2006). Students expressed concerns with regard to faculty members’ receptions of their disabled statuses, citing frustration with their lack of awareness and persistent apathy (Carney, et al. 2007, Meade 2006). Issues of disability rights and social justice do not seem to be prominent on most college campuses, particularly with civil rights efforts not being as prominent or active as other efforts for other marginalized communities (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998). Climate concerns surrounding students with disabilities could very easily skew perceptions about the visibility of this demographic, since primarily most students choose not to be visible or disclose their status due to the factor of shame (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998, Carney, et al. 2007). However, Meade (2006) suggests through her work that it is important not to think of disabled students as disadvantaged through rhetoric of marginalization or oppression, since their lived experiences are mostly contextual. This does not mean that their experiences should be of any lesser value than other marginalized groups since it is easier to privilege ability over lack of it in society.
On Sexual Orientation

Climate issues for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students have become more prominent over the past decade. For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students, sexual orientation is a very broad territory to cover in terms of understanding one’s identity. What can be commonly seen though in terms of students who identify as LGB (and/or T for transgender, though covered above) are issues related to heteronormativity, high levels of heterosexism, and students’ overall sense of fear about themselves and their sexual orientation. Even though popular culture has done its part by exposing society to lesbian and gay individuals or ideas, the topic of sexual orientation is one that still remains impossible to tackle without negatively affecting perceptions of LGB people outside of the mainstream (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998, Broido 2004). Unlike being a racial or ethnic minority, unless one’s sexual orientation is disclosed, that individual fits within an invisible minority making it easy for one to overlook the needs of LGB people (Lopez and Chism 1993). Visibility becomes even more challenging when sexual orientation becomes tangled with other salient identities such as religion and race, where there may be conservative views about the issue and internalized prejudices manifest (Hurtado, Carter and Kardia 1998).

Campus climate without question does have significant effects on LGBT individuals. With regard to the classroom, the sentiments were that professors did not create affirming and safe environments for LGBT students to voice their concerns or feel comfortable participating in discussions, especially in courses where materials emphasized heteronormativity (Lopez and Chism 1993). For students who have not “come out” or openly identified yet their sexual orientation, this major milestone makes a difference on students’ ability to maneuver through the social and academic channels of college life for the better and for the worse. For example, while it
is acknowledged that there are many LGBT people that live openly within society, responses to a person’s self-identification as a non-heterosexual can be a major gamble, risking negative reactions from family at home; despite this, the first step to acknowledging one’s own sexual orientation does affect a student’s psychological state of being in general, which can have either detrimental effects or personal benefits for the student (Vaccaro 2006). The coming out process for many students is a period of high anxiety which can affect the way they perform academically; grades usually were lower for most people and in some cases students dropped out of school altogether (Lopez and Chism 1993). The trouble with assessing climate concerns is that we are unable to determine the signs or signals that represent one’s struggling through the coming out process or conflicts between sexual orientation and other contradictory ideologies, so it is important that a climate that does not devalue one’s sexual orientation be clearly affirming in that respect.

WHITENESS, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND POWER CULTURE

Although not considered a marginalized group, it would be contradictory to discount white individuals from what makes our nations and institutions diverse despite the ramifications of power and privilege that is often carried with such an identity. At institutions of higher education where the majority of the student population and faculty and staff distribution are white, it is argued that a culture of “whiteness” prevails where the tone is set for what is considered normal or status quo (Castagno and Lee 2007). Angelina Castagno and Stacey Lee (2007) inform the culture of whiteness through their investigation of interest convergence theory, a principle which states that “people believe and support what benefits them so the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice and greater equity only when such advances suit the self-interests of the majority group” (4). In essence, the attitude for diversity seems to mean that it is acceptable for society as
long as it does not incur significant costs on the “normal” way of life for white Americans.

Martinez (Padilla and Montiel 1998) states that many institutions and the powers that oversee them see social justice “as an abstraction but tends to ignore it in the pursuit of other values (e.g., success, excellence, efficiency, etc.), all of which are framed in western terms” (“Foreword,” xvii). Hence, diversity is often easily viewed in terms of visibility of the marginalized masses (i.e. phenotype) rather than promoting structural changes that can enhance and pull them out of the margins, embedding racism within the institution that comes from the unimposing and comfortable definition of diversity (Torres 2006).

Acquisition of resources and privileges within the higher education structure appears on the basis of demonstrated “normal” behavior: that if one person’s or group’s actions fall are deemed as appropriate and decent—or acceptable by the standards of the institution—then that one group or person will be deserving of the benefits and privileges that they request (Padilla and Montiel 1998). Rubén Martinez, in a forward in Debatable Diversity by Raymond Padilla and Miguel Montiel (1998), declares that dominant culture within higher education seeks to assimilate marginalized communities—though he specifically discusses Chicano/a faculty—into norms that perpetuate “conformity, acceptance, and service” (xvii). Affirmative action has sparked some tense discussion on its social benefits and drawbacks as well as the double-edged-sword effects on African Americans and Whites. One major limitation to affirmative action is that while needs and demands for access and opportunity of African Americans in higher education, it creates a difficult position for marginalized communities such as Latino/a individuals to gain access through such a social initiative due to the heightened conflict and legal recourse that precipitated from the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s for Blacks only. Whites effectively do not carry the attitude of seeking to address the social reparative demands of Latino/a and or Chicano/a individuals within
the United States; “white guilt” only seems to stem on the part of African Americans, which creates a dilemma for Latino/as in higher education and society at large (Padilla and Montiel 1998).

Another concept that challenges the current idea of diversity is the notion of repressive tolerance. Stephen Brookfield (Brookfield 2007) pays homage to the critical philosophy of Herbert Marcuse by highlighting the nature of this theory, stating that “an all-embracing tolerance of diverse views in both curriculum and classroom discussions always ends up legitimizing an unfair status quo,” a practice which seems all too far from liberating but rather repressive (558). The danger behind repressive tolerance, in effect, is that it manifests the marginalization of ideas, opinions and individuals. The relevance of this concept can be easily conjoined with and almost justifies the idea of interest convergence; that is, the majority group will not only align with values or ideas that do not incur personal or social costs, but that they are the most logical to them. The need to promote liberating tolerance, then, involves recognition and employment of radically different perspectives that challenge the mainstream, White ideology that dominates throughout repressive tolerance (Brookfield 2007). Brookfield emphasizes the need for educators to “confront—even coerce—students into engaging with troubling ideas that they would otherwise avoid” (558). Professionals and academics in higher education must learn to cast away special interest politics and ideologies that seek to justify marginalization in order to serve an effective base of people.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) discusses the concept of black feminist thought, a theoretical tool that “aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (22). Collins also recounts the importance of understanding Black women’s experiences as unique as well as the paradox that United States culture continually
fosters differential group treatment on various identity dimensions such as race, gender, sexuality, and other salient factors. Utilizing the set of lived experiences familiar to Black women as the cite for her argument, she states that Black women “encounter a distinctive set of social practices that accompany our particular history within a unique matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions” (Collins 2000, 23). Intersectionality, which is central to Collins’s point, gives us a way to understand how systems of oppression interact, interrogate and inform one another and ways in which oppressive realities are produced. It is often not recognized that people carry multiple identities, and that these identities construct and inform a person’s reality, thereby constituting a set of experiences specific to that identity group. Being a queer person of color, for example, can inform how racism is prevalent within the LGBT community or how it contrasts with the conservative and religious ideologies of heterosexual people of color (see Clark 2005; Mauk and Jones 2006).

Collins’s reference to a matrix of domination infers that there is a particular arrangement of forms of oppression that all coexist within structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal dimensions of power (Patricia Hill Collins: Intersecting Oppressions n.d.). The university system does serve as a site where matrices of domination are produced and maintained, and not just within a broader institutional culture but on sub-cultural levels as well. With each dimension of power, it is easy to notice the structural domain through implementations of hierarchies that are complex and difficult to break down; with disciplinary domains, university bodies attempt to regulate the roles and behavior of people. The key domain of power that operates on the hegemonic level allows for the production of knowledge and the rigid circulation of it through all disciplines, allowing objectivity to be defined by those who produce knowledge. Finally, the interpersonal domain of power allows us to utilize personal interactions to see within ourselves how we operate without
recognition of how our actions cause us to marginalize others.

When people acquire power, they utilize these four dimensions of power to enact what they believe to be the appropriate outcome. Presidents and chancellors of universities, in essence, allow themselves to produce a culture of power that allows them to be upheld as good Samaritans by espousing diversity ideals, dictating what will not be tolerated, and having singular control on how that gets defined. In his essay entitled “The Culture of Power,” Paul Kivel (2004) gives the following personal reflection as an example of how he, like many people of privilege, benefits from this kind of culture:

The problem with a culture of power is that it reinforces the prevailing hierarchy. When we are inside a culture of power we expect to have things our way, the way with which we are most comfortable. We may go through life complacent in our monoculturalism, not even aware of the limits of our perspectives, the gaps in our knowledge, the inadequacy of our understanding. We remain unaware of the superior status and opportunities we have simple because we’re white, or male, or able-bodied, or heterosexual. Of course a culture of power also dramatically limits the ability of those on the margins to participate in an event, a situation, or an organization. Those marginalized are only able to participate on unfavorable terms at other’s discretion, which puts them at a big disadvantage. They often must give up or hide much of who they are to participate in the dominant culture. And if there are any problems it becomes very easy to identify the people on the margins as the source of those problems and blame or attack them rather than the problems themselves (27-28).

This narrative shows how possible it is to identify those entities—identities, ideas, and constructs—that paralyze those who deserve a voice and to be seen. By understanding higher education systems as structures that constitute a culture of power, we can effectively deconstruct the methods by which opportunities are privileged for those not on the margins and encourage liberating tolerance among our constituents.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to talk about diversity within a rigid amount of space, since there are many
ways to direct such a discussion on such an ambiguous concept. Despite its good intentions, it seems that it continues to identify ways of keeping those historically on the margins within them, whether intended or not. Discussion of various identity experiences allowed us to see the diversity of lived experiences that need to be considered, acknowledge and respected when dealing with a population full of diverse backgrounds. The limitations of talking about various identity groups is that by taking a singular approach with each identity group, I aid in the process of defining their characteristics, especially for those with whom I have no allegiance of identity or experience (such as disability or being Asian or Native American). I also understand that second-hand accounts of identity-related experiences do not contain a full portrait of the lived experiences of all within a specific identity group. Nor can I assume that lived experiences for groups are the same. As an aspiring student affairs professional in higher education, I want to introduce some new ground to see how we can challenge the way we create and cement boxes that keep those who are underrepresented and underprivileged in their status positions and eliminate the status quo identity that exists within the culture of higher education. Robert Torres (2006) emphasizes the point that “as long as the academy writ large seeks to accommodate diversity on only the terms that it is comfortable with, it will continue the cultural and material marginalization of difference that has marked our institutions and their structures of privilege for so long, essentializing those of us who are different as it goes” (67). The hope for the future is that institutions of higher learning, for me, will allow the unsung voices and the invisible bodies to permeate the hierarchies and reform the academy into one that truly values difference not for the sheer cosmetic nature but for its richness in cultural variety.
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