

Theme 4: Engagement, Belonging and Identity

Engagement, Disability, and 'Hard to Reach' Students

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In a 1904 short story called "The Country of the Blind," H.G. Wells tells the tale of an ordinary man named Nunez who is unexpectedly dropped into an isolated community comprised entirely of people who are blind. Nunez marvels at how these people have constructed a world that allows them to live full and vibrant lives. Yet, as the only sighted person in the valley, Nunez assumes that he soon will become king: he has the power of sight that everyone else lacks. Over time, he comes to understand that the country of the blind is not designed for those who can see and the people of the community increasingly wonder at his peculiar behaviours and beliefs. Eventually, a doctor determines that Nunez's disordered mind results from his diseased eyes. To ensure that Nunez can thrive as a member of the community, the doctor recommends removing his eyes. Nunez flees.

Ray McDermott and Herve Varenne use the story of Nunez to illustrate their claim that "*one cannot be disabled alone*" (1995:337); instead, "*every culture, as an historically evolved pattern of institutions, teaches people what to aspire to and hope for, and marks off those who are to be noticed, handled, mistreated, and remediated as falling short*" (p. 336). Being blind is a disability, as Nunez learns, only within cultures and institutions that privilege sight.

The same story might be told about 'hard to reach' students. Our cultural expectations and institutional practices mark off certain students and communities as 'the usual suspects' – those who are likely to be the most engaged or the hardest to reach. We and they then act within that construct, behaving in ways that reinforce the norms. In the United States, for example, deficit-based assumptions about Black male undergraduates lead institutions to a particular "*orientation* (focus on stereotypical characteristics associated with the culture of disadvantage and poverty), *discourse* (lack of preparation, motivation, study skills, blaming students and/or their backgrounds), and *strategies* (compensatory educational programs, remedial courses, special programs, all focused on fixing the student)" (Harper, 2009:148, original emphasis).

Unfortunately, as Trowler (2010) concluded, student engagement "*often has a normative agenda*" (p.5) that can lead to a "*reductionist approach*" to diverse groups, including "*students with disabilities*" (p.9). Other research confirms that students labelled as disabled also are widely considered to be 'hard-to-reach'. A 2012 study by Elizabeth Marquis and colleagues in Canada, for instance, found evidence of 'attitudinal barriers' among some academic staff and students that equate students considered to be disabled with those who are hard, perhaps even impossible, to reach; in the words of one interviewee, engaging these students "*may not be worth the effort or the cost*" (p.5). Such beliefs are hardly unique to Canada, as Marquis and colleagues underscore in their literature review, citing similar studies from Ireland, the UK and the US.

Negative expectations of students with disabilities are not surprising. The very term used to describe these students includes the negative: they are dis-abled. When contrasted with other students, they are identified as lacking some salient ability or capacity. Despite this deficit orientation, scholars have found reason for hope, as some staff and students express "*attitudes that might be seen as facilitators of accessibility*" (Marquis *et al*, 2012), and the Universal Design movement enacts an asset-based approach, often yielding positive outcomes for all students, including those who are considered to be disabled (Picard and Chick, 2016).

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Indeed, if we approach disability from a different cultural reference point, we may discover something other than deficits. For instance, if deafness is not defined as the absence of hearing but rather as an expression of natural human variation, then we may notice certain cognitive and cultural assets that typically are overlooked in hearing-centered cultures. A 'deaf-gain' perspective recognises the profound challenges deaf students often encounter in higher education, but it also highlights that students who communicate primarily or exclusively through sign language bring to campus distinct visual, cognitive and community-oriented capacities that are assets not only for those specific students but also for an entire university community (Felten and Bauman, 2013).

Adopting a new perspective on familiar frameworks like 'hard to reach' is rarely easy. To do so, we need to identify and question tacit beliefs and long-standing institutional structures. Yet many of us who work in student engagement have demonstrated our ability to imagine and enact just that kind of culture of transformation. As Alison Cook-Sather has shown, student-staff partnerships make "*it normative for differences to exist and for people in relationships to benefit from them*" (2015:1). We already are questioning common assumptions about hierarchies and power in higher education. Our challenge with 'hard to reach' students might be primarily about transferring our counter-cultural ideas and habits from one topic (students as partners, producers, and change agents) to another (all students are capable of being engaged).

Model programmes and initiatives across higher education demonstrate what is possible with this orientation. For instance, Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, hosts a four-week summer intensive 'JumpStart' programme to help new students who lack a fundamental capacity, fluency in American Sign Language, the primary means of instruction at this institution that is designed for students who are deaf. Gallaudet is committed to not allowing hearing students to be on the margins of their academic community, even though they do not fit the norm on campus.

Our challenge is to use such an assets-based orientation to create inclusive practices and environments for all of our students, even the ones, like Nunez, who feel distinctly out of place in an unfamiliar community.

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