Summaries of 2015 ACPA Mental Health Related Presentations

Understanding and Researching Disability in Higher Education: Emerging Perspectives

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Eleven percent of college students have a disability. Yet, published scholarship about disability in student affairs remains rare and discussions regarding methodological complexities including ableism, definitions, voice, agenda, access, and inclusion are scarce. These constructs have a direct impact on how practitioners understand and use research related to students with disabilities in their daily work. In this program we advanced participants' professional competencies by facilitating a conversation about topics to consider when interpreting, applying, or conducting higher education disability research.

This interactive session provided participants with the opportunity to:
- explore the challenges inherent in researching disability in the context of higher education,
- consider the implications of varying models of disability (i.e., medical, social constructionist) and variation in individual identification for research,
- interrogate assumptions held by society and review boards about the nature of disability that influence research on disability in higher education,
- explore the influence of researcher positionality on research on disability in higher education
- highlight strategies that have enabled successful research on disability in higher education

Rationale and Theoretical Framework

While the number of students with disabilities in higher education is rising (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), we have inadequate information about the experiences of students with disabilities. People with disabilities confront "virulent biases and negative associations [that] discourage [them] from identifying as disabled" (Garland-Thompson, 2005, p. 1567). Additionally, despite the increasing prevalence of people with disabilities in higher education, between 2000 and 2010, just three articles about students with disabilities were published in the top four higher education journals, and all of those in a single journal (*The Journal of College Student Development*) (Peña, 2014).

Voice, agenda, agency, and inclusion are critical components of disability research. Noted disability studies scholar Michael Oliver wrote that "there was increasing anger, hostility and suspicion amongst organizations of disabled people that much that passed for 'disability research' was nothing more than a 'rip-off'" (1997, p. 15), because that research benefitted researchers more than people with disabilities. Historically, research on people with disabilities was written by "health care practitioners, policy makers, and caregivers" (Kroll, Barbour, & Harris, 2007, p. 690), rarely including the voice of people with disabilities (Gere, 2005). Still, Smith-Chandler and Swart (2014) argued "inclusive research practices that seek to emancipate rather than oppress can do much to challenge the ongoing subjugation of individuals with disabilities" (p. 421).

Competing paradigms of disability have led to starkly incongruent research approaches, with dominant models viewing disability as solely a physical or solely a social phenomenon (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014). The physical lens perpetuates the idea that disability is an individual experience (Smart & Smart, 2006). The social constructionist lens expands the understanding of disability by considering impairment as a part of normal human variation (Denhart, 2008).

As Loja, Costa, Huges, and Menezes (2013) noted, "empirical research on ableism and disabled embodiment is relatively scarce in disability studies" (p. 190); disability studies writing tends to be theoretical. When anti-ableist research is conducted, "methodological issues have been more or less ignored" (Grönvik, 2009, p. 13), and differing approaches have limited the ability to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of people with disabilities. This has negative consequences for how "disability is theorized, conceptualized, and presented" (Smith-Chandler & Swart, 2014, p. 420). There are multiple challenges in doing good research on disability, including lack of consensus on what constitutes a disability, with stark differences between those who self-identify as having a disability, those receiving benefits or accommodations because of impairments, and those with functional impairments (Grönvik, 2009).

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