

Chapter 8

Don't Forget About Us: Holistically Supporting Underrepresented Students During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Through narratives, this chapter explores the perspectives of three higher education professionals who served diverse student bodies during a pandemic. Detailing their experiences, the authors address efforts made to support underrepresented students during a pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 were vast and even more impactful for underrepresented students. The challenges of taking classes during a pandemic, combined with the known social challenges of 2020, made for an unforgettable period of time. This chapter addresses lessons learned, best practices, and suggestions for supporting students during a pandemic. The authors define underrepresented students as first-generation, LGBT+, low-income, and ethnic/racial minority students.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities often acted as if they were immune to the impact of events in the world; however, higher education was not immune to the COVID-19 crisis, which taught us that health pandemics can spread quickly and change the ways our lives function. As a result of COVID-19, colleges and universities across the country were forced to take precautionary steps to ensure students' safety. The actions taken involved the campuses closing and students finishing the spring 2020 semester online. The decision to close was based on recommendations from state and federal governments. Although closing campuses

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and moving from in person to virtual campus engagement was the best decision for the health, safety, and well-being of all members of the higher education community, it did have a tremendous impact all of our students.

Some higher education institutions were prepared, and others were not, because many institutions did not learn from previous crises and prepare for an unexpected change in operation (Jenkins, 2008), but all colleges and universities had a duty to provide services to students with the recognition that campuses moving to virtual engagement would impact some students more than others. This chapter provides narratives of three higher education professionals (a librarian, a faculty member, and a student service professional) providing services to underrepresented students, defined here as first-generation, LGBT+, low-income, and racial minority students, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The effect of COVID-19 on college students cannot be examined without acknowledging the challenges underrepresented students face. The impact of attending classes and attempting to learn during a pandemic, coupled with the known social challenges of being a member of an underrepresented population, must be considered as higher education institutions rethink the ways they support students. Colleges and universities have a responsibility to develop plans that keep the campus community safe and secure and serve the needs of all students. As it relates to serving students during COVID-19, the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2020) noted, “School officials should keep in mind federal civil rights requirements and respond appropriately to allegations of discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, or disability” (p. 1). Post-secondary institutions must serve all students and ensure there is equal access to education. Therefore, colleges and universities cannot use COVID-19 as an excuse not to take discriminatory behavior seriously. Post-secondary institutions are obliged to prevent discrimination on part of the institutions against any student under federal civil rights laws even during a pandemic.

This chapter will discuss through self-told narrative from three professionals at three university about their overall experience of serving students and explicitly addressing the efforts made to support the unique challenges underrepresented students face as they continue their education. The use of narratives allows participants to engage in an investigation of lived experience and an exploration of why things happened the way they did, allowing for meaning to be uncovered from those lived experiences (Riessman, 1993). The examination of the participants’ experiences is provided here, including lessons they learned, best practices they developed and used, and recommendations they have for a student center support system during a pandemic.

NARRATIVE ONE: PROFESSOR (FACULTY MEMBER)

Contextual Background

Northern Kentucky University, historically known as the “concrete jungle”—a reference to the campus’ overwhelming concrete infrastructure—enrolls 16,000 plus undergraduate and graduate students (Northern Kentucky University (NKY) Enrollment Management, 2021). Situated in the suburbs of Cincinnati, Ohio, this metropolitan university is populated with students from urban as well as rural communities. NKU student populations are more reflective of surrounding rural communities than of Cincinnati, with over 81% of student population being White (and rural), while Black and LatinX populations peak at single digit representations of slightly over 7% and 3% respectively. Over 34% of undergraduate students

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