

Levin, John S. (2007). *Nontraditional Students and Community Colleges: The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Pages: 288. Price: 42.95 USD (hardcover).

Reviewed by Tracy L. Davis, Professor, Educational and Interdisciplinary Studies Department, Western Illinois University

The mission of contemporary community colleges extends well beyond the historical focus on degree-granting programs that lead students to either transfer into a four-year institution or obtain terminal occupational employment. Focuses now include “developmental education, adult basic education, English as a second language, education and training for welfare recipients and others facing serious barriers to employment, customized training for specific companies, preparation of students for industry certification exams, non-credit instruction in a bewildering plethora of areas (including purely avocational interests), small business development, and even economic forecasting” (Bailey & Morest, 2004, p.2). According to many scholars, this relatively recent transformation in community colleges today threatens the most fundamental purpose of education: to improve individuals and society through teaching critical thinking and decision making in a participatory democracy. In *Nontraditional Students and Community Colleges: The Conflict of Justice and Neoliberalism* Levin reveals critical ideological tensions that undermine the fundamental purposes of education through a carefully crafted and thoughtfully executed empirical study. Moreover, this research provides evidence that nontraditional students are being further marginalized in the recent move toward neoliberal policies and practices that center economic interests in a manner that subverts justice. The study also offers significant insight into both individual and institutional strategies that counteract the current trends with the potential to successfully promote social justice.

In the introduction, Levin provides the background for his central argument that neoliberal policies conflict with a definition of justice that is “aligned with fairness and the equalizing of advantages so that prior conditions for individuals are recognized and accounted for in rights, privileges, and treatment that compensate for individual’s disadvantage” (p. 4). Focusing on the historical reality that there are those born into less favorable social positions is an important contrast to utilitarian conceptions of justice. As such, the standard of justice for community colleges is whether or not the institution adjusts social and economic inequalities for those who are most disadvantaged (e.g., nontraditional students). Neoliberalism is also defined in the introduction as focusing on state reduction of social programs and support for economic markets. This is evident, for example, in the changing missions cited in the first paragraph. Applied to community colleges, neoliberalism subordinates educational and social goals to economic goals resulting in decisions that ignore prior conditions (e.g., barriers that some face and others do not) and the wide variety of unique developmental needs of students.

The methods of the study are also described in the introduction. Levin included 13 community colleges in nine states where he interviewed administrators, faculty, staff, students, and state policy executives. Data included 180 interview transcripts, institutional documents, catalogues, class schedules and informal observations. In Chapter 1, three frameworks for understanding non-traditional students are offered: trait, behavioral and action. The conventional trait approach essentializes nontraditional student characteristics as deficit. Traditional students are seen as the norm and the various non-traditional traits (e.g., disability) make students “at risk.” In sharp contrast, the action approach focuses not on the individual student, but on the actions of others. From this perspective, policies, institutions, practices, and various external stakeholders are interrogated because they are assumed to influence student ability to be successful. The action framework exposes the complex and often hidden impact of contextual factors. Levin offers a clear of example of how context may inhibit non-traditional student achievement. One college official commented, “why would you direct your efforts to an at-risk student, when we’ve got waves of students coming who are academically prepared? We invest in them, we can move them on; we can do a good job; we can produce come degrees under these conditions. If we focus our efforts on that at-risk student, then we do so at risk ourselves” (p. 38-39).

Theoretical frameworks applied to make meaning of the data, including justice, neoliberalism, globalization and organizational power, are described in Chapter 2. The mission of community colleges is thoughtfully situated within each of these concepts. For example, Levin describes the conflict between neoliberalism and justice in community colleges as one between social democratic principles and a consumer-based approach to education where the public good is subordinated to individual economic interests. He argues that neoliberalism, therefore, is antithetical to social justice and the fundamental principles of the community college.

While some positivists might take issue with the overtly political analytic methods used, this is not only a strength of the research but a necessary strategy for describing the complex phenomena associated with the experience of nontraditional students in community colleges. Community colleges operate in a political milieu and that environment needs to be deeply illustrated. In addition, capturing the authentic voices of faculty, staff, policy makers, and students themselves portrays critical dimensions of contemporary community colleges that many positivist methodologies miss.

The results of the study are profoundly described and carefully contextualized in the following chapters. In Chapter 3, Levin describes the complex, multiple identities of nontraditional students that make it difficult to describe them in any categorical manner. Race, socioeconomic status, being an immigrant, gender, age, occupational status, and having a disability all intersect to give students various levels of need, motivation, cultural capital and social capital. Disconnections between nontraditional students and educational institutions

are described as rooted in choices that respond to economic pressure, limiting potential for those most in need. One Chancellor described the frustration with the new economic forces that impoverish those most disadvantaged saying, “we know how—I mean there is research on how to help these people overcome their skill deficiencies—but it is expensive. It takes small classes; it takes six hour long classes; it takes daily classes; all kinds of attention. So we just can do it” (p. 87). Chapter 4 describes the ways that nontraditional students experience college. Using students’ words to illustrate crucial points, this chapter portrays the struggles, disadvantages, and the benefits students require to succeed.

After establishing the theoretical context for the study, its methods and describing results for students, Levin describes distinguishing factors that help clarify what promotes and inhibits justice. In Chapter 5, for example, three community colleges are compared revealing the following institutional characteristics related to student success: flexibility and variety in programs, staff assistance and guidance, opportunities for collaborative study, training in basic technology, provision of success skills and career planning, mainstreaming those most marginalized, and setting expectations for degree attainment. In Chapter 6, strategies and actions that provide important advantages for the disadvantaged are further outlined. Levin found that learning communities, specific programs for first generations students, and a case management or drop out prevention approach were each successful, with the important caveat that particular strategies should be provided for particular populations. In addition, one of the most significant findings was that “autonomous agents” were critical at mediating the negative impact of neoliberal policies and procedures. Autonomous agents are described as social critics who alter formal structures to accommodate, present opportunities, position themselves as gateway keepers who have influence—and use it. This, I believe, is one of the most critical points of the entire text. As opposed to formal institutional action and lifeless bureaucratic policy, courageous individual action becomes the process through which justice is realized.

In Chapter 7, Levin illustrates how programs like lifelong learning and continuing education have been commodified by neoliberalism to serve the needs of business and industry. He argues, “We have arrived at a society of lifelong learning, not because we have evolved to accept that learning *per se* is a defining or developmental characteristic of being human or because we have much to learn to be human and realize our capacities, but because the new economy, the knowledge economy, the globalized competitive economy requires us to serve its masters” (p. 178). This somewhat controversial statement is well supported by the evidence.

As Levin summarizes his findings in Chapter 8, he holds the evidence up to the light of justice and finds a few glimmers of hope. He briefly describes some remarkable programs that advantage the disadvantaged (e.g., the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics program for First Generation and minority students at Bakersfield College). In addition, Levin pays tribute to

individual faculty and staff who serve as autonomous agents, sometimes bending or ignoring policy in order to promote justice for students. Fundamentally, however, this research suggests that such actions are too rare and flow against the stronger current of neoliberal and neoconservative agendas. Summarizing the findings and placing them in the theoretical context with which he began, Levin warns, “disadvantaged students must not be subjected to an educational system or program in which their individual agency and self-purpose are neglected in favor of economic benefit for local industry. National or local economic competitiveness cannot justify the commodification of students, in which their rights to equality of opportunity are sacrificed for a larger, rationalized good” (p. 197).

Levin makes a meaningful contribution to the literature regarding non-traditional students and community colleges in particular and illuminates how neoliberalism is threatening education in general. This book deserves an audience in higher education, student affairs, and other curricula where professionals are learning about the needs of nontraditional students, history and philosophy of community colleges, or how contemporary political issues influence the fundamental purposes of education.♣

#### REFERENCES

- Bailey, T. R. & Morest, V. S. (2004). *The organizational efficiency of multiple missions for community colleges*. New York: Yeachers College, Columbia University.