Post-structuralism is a movement in philosophy that has been applied widely to the humanities, social sciences, and other fields. It has its roots in the writings of a diverse group of philosophers, most notably Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who were reacting against the 1960s structuralist movement, which suggested that individuals are shaped by structures, whether political, economic, social, linguistic, or other, over which they have no control. These structures, however, could be revealed through structuralist methods of inquiry. Foucault disagreed that such structures explained individuals. In his examinations, he came to the understanding that the discourse emanating from accumulated knowledge became accepted as the prevailing truth. In other words, individuals are shaped by the dominant discourse surrounding them, rather than an underlying fixed structure. Derrida took this idea further with the concept of deconstruction, where the focus is on the interpretation of discourse and not on the discourse itself. In this sense, meaning is not fixed, rather, it changes according to the interpretation.

Adopting a post-structuralist approach to higher education allows researchers to view the barriers (often hidden and unquestioned) that are faced by low-income students. Post-structuralism takes the position that the engagement of low-income students is limited due to the prevailing institutional practices and culture that have been established after decades or even centuries of providing education to the wealthy (Kezar, Walpole, and Perna, 2014). The campus, in essence, is not set up to cater for low-income students, and because the hidden privileges have never been discussed, they have become normalized. In post-structuralism, the responsibility to change these inequities lies with the institution itself, and not society.
Post-structuralism upends the notion that student success is primarily due to an individual's effort and involvement in campus activities. Instead, it looks deeply at the institutional practices that hinder success. From an IEO perspective, post-structuralism addresses the institution's “E” (environment), although it goes much deeper than merely proposing a review of specific programs offered by institutions to engage students, and instead suggests a critical, in-depth examination of the underlying culture and practices, and making fundamental changes to the institution based on this examination.

Kezar, Walpole, and Perna describe a three-step post-structuralist framework to critically assess an institution's prevailing structures:

1) Revelation: exposing the practices that privilege one group and constrain another
2) Deconstruction: examining the impact of specific institutional policies and practices on low-income students (essentially through deconstructing these policies)
3) Reconstruction: providing ideas for new or revised policies and practices (p. 244).

**Strengths**

The strength of adopting a post-structuralist approach in higher education is that, if adopted wholeheartedly, it can force us to examine how we operate at a very fundamental level, and can cause us to rethink our institution's entire culture and structure. By following the three-pronged approach of revelation, deconstruction, and reconstruction, the campus can evolve into an environment that is truly supportive of low-income students.

Kezar (2011) notes that while institutions are generally willing to engage in diversity issues concerning race, gender, and sexual orientation, class privilege is largely undiscussed. At the heart of this, she suggests, is the prevailing belief in the United States that people generally have equal access to opportunity. For this reason, individuals are generally unaware of privilege...
afforded to middle and high-income students on campus. The first step—revelation, entails
describing this privilege, and making visible what was formerly hidden. Through making these
hidden privileges visible, an institution can critically examine the campus practices and policies
that enable this privilege, and reconstruct these policies to make them more equitable for low-
income students.

As an example, students today accept that college is expensive, from the dorm room and
meal plan, to the textbooks that they are required to buy, and the technology they need to have to
be able to engage in their classwork, and with their peers. Another example can be seen in the
college application process. Knowing how to find and complete a FAFSA application, and the
process of applying to college in general, is complicated, and if a student does not have the
support of a school counselor or family members who understand the system, that in itself can be
a barrier to entering college. Rather than providing a slew of different programs to help
individuals navigate the system, the entire process needs to be changed from the ground up to
make it easy for students who would otherwise be marginalized. By revealing unquestioned
assumptions such as these that we have accepted as the norm, institutions can point out the
challenges that low-income students face that are often not considered. In this way, post-
structuralism can address inequities inherent in the system and lead institutions that embrace this
framework to make fundamental changes.

**Weaknesses**

The weakness of this approach is that it requires a paradigm shift that is far more radical
than most institutions would consider. As such, it may be too idealistic for today's higher
education environment. Bloland (1995) notes that liberal thinking is dominant in higher
education today. A liberal approach to higher education does not consider deconstruction of the
current system as a means to widening access to marginalized groups. Rather, the liberal mindset is to expand and modify the current system to be more inclusive of such groups, and this, in essence, preserves and upholds the existing structure. According to Bloland, the prevailing thought is the belief in merit, progress, and science, and by giving individuals opportunities and access to education, a wider pool of students can benefit. This line of thinking is far removed from the systemic change called for in post-structuralist thinking, however, it is a more pragmatic approach and one that is achievable.

**Application ideas**

Through the three-pronged approach proposed by post-structuralism, it is easy to lay bare the numerous policies that institutions have in place, and requirements that they expect of students that are barriers for low-income individuals. For example, many of our activities on campus today involve technology components, with the implicit expectation that our students have the technology to be able to participate. Secondly, we offer extracurricular activities that often take place in the evenings when low-income students might be working part time. We promote study abroad programs, yet only middle or upper income students will have the financial means to participate in these programs or be able to afford the extra expense of staying in college for an additional semester to complete degree requirements. For our world campus programs, students are expected to have a high-speed internet connection in order to be able to participate in class activities. This acts as a barrier to prevent low-income students from enrolling. Even seemingly innocuous campus activities, such as attending cultural or social events, can prove a barrier to low-income students, who may not be well-versed in the social conventions/mores that would be called for at such events (Kezar, 2011). Overall, institutions
have a high expectation of what resources they expect students to bring with them, and these resources are often ones that low-income students will struggle to afford.

One related field that higher education could draw from is adult education, where for decades, academics have been employing a post-structuralist/post-modern perspective, critiquing all of its central concepts, from what constitutes "adult" to the concept of "lifelong learning," and the nature of knowledge (Haggis, 2009). This kind of approach has not been taken in higher education to date, but it has the potential to radically change the current system, which most often benefits middle and upper-middle income students.

References


