

“Playing Nicely in the Sandbox:”

Demystifying Beliefs and Assumptions about Racial Equity in Career Services

A Dissertation

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Abstract

American colleges and universities seek to provide education and opportunity to their students, and to support a more informed and equitable society. Career education offices in higher education spaces face increasing pressure to lead life and career preparation efforts for a diverse student body. At the same time, as a result of European colonization and its modern structural remnants, significant racial wealth inequality persists around the world and in the United States. Professional associations, such as the National Career Development Association and the National Association of Colleges and Employers, have called on career education offices to address equity in their practice, and to strengthen career engagement and outcomes for marginalized, underrepresented, BIPOC, first-generation, and limited-income students. Though some research has been conducted on social justice efforts in career services offices around the world, limited scholarly attention has been paid to racial equity.

Using a qualitative case study framework, this study sought to demystify beliefs and assumptions about race, racism, and career which shape the practice of equity in career education units. Three aspects of this topic were explored: definitions of equity and racial equity; beliefs, narratives, and assumptions about race, racism, and career; and institutional factors which support equity work in career education units. Two theoretical frameworks were drawn upon in analyzing the data: Color-Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI) and Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Findings suggested that aspects of CBRI may be embedded in the beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in career education, and that non-human actors - such as data platforms and career frameworks - inform understandings of the role of race, racism, and equity in career education. Implications and recommendations for research, policy, and practice are discussed.

Keywords: career education, future of work, life design, racial equity, antiracism, career services

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Practitioner efforts in furthering social justice have tended to be criticized for operating at the interactive level, leaving us with little hope in terms of the transformation of the social structures that create inequality. Such efforts, which at best impact at the micro- and meso-levels, are nevertheless vitally important and should be celebrated. They represent genuine efforts to do the best one can on Monday morning, under the prevailing historical and economic circumstances, which are far larger than us... To deride career guidance practitioners for doing what, at the one-to-one interactive level, can be done is as ungracious and as perverse as putting down ambulance workers who attend to the wounded, criticizing them for not stopping the war. – Ronald Sultana (2014, p. 8).

This dissertation sought to explore and demystify beliefs and assumptions about racial equity held by career practitioners in higher education spaces. During the process of writing this dissertation, I was invited into the work of a well-respected career center, which had undertaken the process of shifting toward a focus on equity a few years before. Administrators, staff, and students shared their stories with me, expressing a shared commitment in advancing equity for the field in general, and adding to the sparse literature on the topic of racial equity in American career centers. I did not have to convince participants of the importance of the work, and each of them took a risk in sharing their thoughts on the racial climate at their university. Many of our beliefs about race and racial equity are not consciously explored, and it was my goal to describe the ways in which these beliefs and assumptions formed and shaped the work of career education. Higher education is shifting, and it is my hope that attention to racial equity is not lost in career center spaces. This research is intended to strengthen our understanding of equity so we can better support students and graduates of American colleges and universities.

The Importance of Context

Before we proceed to explore the ways in which career professionals shift to address equity in 2023, I feel that it is important to situate this inquiry in context. Though this study upholds the idea of multiple truths, and that certain aspects of our social world are constructed and malleable, it is nonetheless situated in certain realities of the American context. I take as truth the premise that racism exists in 2023 America, and that ideas about racial hierarchy are embedded in American institutional structures and in individual minds. I assume that these ideas shape our behavior, thinking, and judgment on issues of equity, care, race, work, and social change.

In developing the concept for this study at my doctoral institution, I encountered scholarly critique that questioned the existence of racism in contemporary American institutions, and that wondered if by raising the topic of race in order to address racial inequity, we might be introducing bias into a system which may in fact be neutral – resulting in the disadvantaging of White students. This concern has appeared in a number of educational and academic spaces (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Neely & Montañez, 2022). The 2023 supreme court decision regarding race in higher education admissions carried a similar sentiment. This decision banned the use of race as an admissions factor at Harvard University and University of North Carolina (Nadworny, 2023), presumably implying that to directly shift educational outcomes on the basis of race amounts to a form of discrimination. This argument – if true – would render my inquiry irrelevant at best. In order to address that critique at the onset, I will provide some context.

The existence of systemic racism in the United States today is contested. This is exemplified in the minds and policies of our two most recent leaders, the 45th and 46th presidents of the country. When asked if he believes systemic racism exists in the U.S. today, Donald Trump, the 45th President, said “I don’t believe that” (“President Donald,” 2020). Joseph Biden, the 46th president, in office at the time of this writing, released the following statement on March 21, 2021:

...we acknowledge that systemic racism and White supremacy are ugly poisons that have long plagued the United States. We must change the laws that enable discrimination in our country, and we must change our hearts...we must all strive to eliminate inequities in our policies...We will not shy away from engaging in the hard work to take on the damaging legacy of slavery and our treatment of Native Americans, or from doing the daily work of addressing systemic racism and violence against Black, Native, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and other communities of color” (“Statement by President,” 2021, para. 1-3).

How are we to make sense of these two contrasting visions of the racial landscape of the United States? Yi et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of studies related to racial ideology and antiblackness in the U.S. The authors illustrated a pattern of minimizing racial inequality (p. 1):

In the United States, there are waves of recognition of racial inequities inevitably followed by long stretches of apathy in which the majority of Americans minimize the existence of racism, particularly directed against Black individuals. Recently, there was an increase in identifying racism as a problem in the United States after the lynching of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia (February 23, 2020) and the murders of Breonna Taylor (March 13, 2020) and George Floyd (May 25, 2020) by police officers. However, months after the killings, levels of denial began to rebound. According to data from the Pew Research Center (Thomas & Horowitz, 2020), in June 2020, 60% of White Americans expressed support for Black Lives Matter, which we interpret as an acknowledgment of the dehumanization of Black people via institutional racism. But, by September 2020, that number slipped to 45%, whereas Black Americans’ support for Black Lives Matter remained stable during the same 3-month period (87% vs. 86%).

This example illustrates the presence of ambivalence and minimization on the subject of race, which underscores the challenge - and the importance - of addressing this topic in educational settings.

One interesting finding in Yi et al.'s (2022) analysis was that the minimization and denial of systemic racism, known as power-evasion (Frankenberg, 1993), was associated with reduced empathy for BIPOC individuals, especially Black individuals. This may partially explain the shifting empathic landscape on anti-Black violence. It carries implications, also, for the work of this study.

Ibrahim Kendi, scholar on antiracism, has suggested that the biggest threat to antiracism is denial (2019). In President Biden's statement, he called the issues of race "painful" ("Statement by President," 2021, para. 3) and asked Americans not to shy away from the hard and daily work of addressing systemic racism. These ideas underpin the central aim of my study, to demystify the beliefs and assumptions about racial equity that shape the practice of career development in higher education.

Of specific relevance to the conversation on racial equity in career services is significant ambivalence on racial equity efforts and funding among American corporations. The Washington Post released an article in 2021, addressing the conflicted stance on racial justice of large corporations following the murder of George Floyd (Jan et al., 2021). The article cited the public \$50 billion pledge that a significant number of leading, large American corporations made to dismantle systemic racism in the U.S. after Floyd's murder. Apple, Facebook, Pfizer, Proctor & Gamble, JPMorgan Chase, and many others committed at least \$49.5 billion to address racial inequality, yet the vast majority of those dollars were used to address economic inequality, education, and health, not explicitly racial justice. Moreover, those companies stood to benefit

from a significant portion of those investments. Their financial commitment represented less than one percent of their net earnings, and one year later, only about \$ 1.7 billion dollars was confirmed to have been disbursed. Several companies refused to disclose how much they had spent. By 2023, it became clear that many of the corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives created or expanded in 2020 had been dismantled (Alfonseca & Zahn, 2023).

DEI professionals were heavily impacted by corporate leaders' concerns about the economy, with one survey of more than 600 companies estimating that DEI professionals were being laid off faster than non-DEI professionals in the years following 2020 (Ayas et al., 2023). In the words of Phillip Atiba Goff, a professor at Yale University, "Corporations are not set up to wield their power for the greater good as much as we give them credit for, a lot of times... They are constrained by things they feel they need to do to manage their brand in a world where Black liberation does not have consensus" (Jan et al., 2021, para. 10). Given that career services centers represent a link between higher education and the world of work, a lack of consensus on racial equity among companies holds significant implications for equity work in these units. This landscape serves as a backdrop to the work of this study, and these themes will be explored throughout the chapters that follow.

Overview of the Problem

As a result of European colonization (Bryce, 1902), staggering racial wealth inequality persists around the world (United Nations, 2020). In many places, gaps by race and ethnicity continue to grow (United Nations, 2020). These trends necessitate a careful understanding of the factors which created and perpetuate inequities in opportunity, wealth, and access. According to a 2020 United Nations Report:

Disparities in secondary school attendance by ethnic group, wealth quintile and educational level of the household head have increased since the 1990s in developing countries with data. Gaps in learning outcomes are large and persistent as well. Such inequalities have historical roots, but often continue even after the conditions that generated them change. Ethnic minorities, for instance, often remain disadvantaged even in countries where special efforts are made to promote their inclusion. Members of groups that suffered from discrimination in the past start off with fewer assets and lower levels of social and human capital than other groups. While prejudice and discrimination are decried around the globe, they remain pervasive obstacles to equal opportunity... Without appropriate policies and institutions in place, inequalities concentrate political influence among those who are already better off, which tends to preserve or even widen opportunity gaps (pp. 4-5).

The report advocates for the creation of strategic policies to disrupt this concentration of power, wealth, and influence in order to facilitate a more equitable distribution of resources.

Career development scholars and practitioners around the world have advocated for more attention to addressing the needs of diverse populations and engaging in social justice (Fickling et al., 2018; Givens, 2022; Hansen, 1997; Hooley et al., 2018; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Reid, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; Sultana, 2014; Tang, 2003). Career professionals in career service units in higher education represent a practice-based offshoot of the broader field of career development, and carry much of the responsibility for addressing career preparation for college and university students (Buford et al., 2022; Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Carter et al., 2003; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). These units - and the professionals within - face

increasing pressure to lead career preparation for today's diverse students (Reid, 2023), and to prepare them for an uncertain professional future.

New guidance provided by career development professional associations and an enhanced ability to collect data about student needs and experiences via new technologies have shifted expectations for career services (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Reid, 2023; Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019). Yet many career services offices have not often been adequately resourced to address student needs (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Tang, 2003). A 2021 report concluded that, "Colleges, often nervous about being viewed as vocationalizing their education, have under-resourced career services and placed it on the periphery of the institution" (Chan & Cruzvergara, p. 6). This under-resourcing carries implications for the ability of career services professionals to address issues of racial equity and to prepare BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] students for their careers (Carter et al., 2003; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Reid, 2023). Leaders at the National Career Development Association have called for college and university career centers to prioritize supporting BIPOC students' career preparation (Givens, 2022; Mathews, 2023). Career services professionals in higher education carry significant responsibility for addressing this issue (Carter et al., 2003; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, 2019; Reid, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020).

The purpose of this study is to explore these professionals' understandings and practices of racial equity in career education. This chapter will describe the wider context of equity in career development, define relevant terms, articulate the research problem, describe gaps in the literature, and ultimately introduce the original research that has been conducted. The main research question driving this exploration is: *What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?*

Upheaval in the World of Work and A Charge for Higher Education

The world of work has changed. Technological shifts, globalization, and capitalism have contributed to economic precarity and challenges to security for many workers, especially for limited-income workers, BIPOC workers, and workers in the global south (Blustein et al., 2019-a; Edwards, 2021; Hooley et al., 2018; International Labour Organization, 2017; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021). This has been exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, raising concerns about the shrinking middle-class, declining sectors of work, and economic mobility in the United States and elsewhere (Aarts et al., 2021; Brunetto et al., 2021; Edwards, 2021).

It is not surprising, therefore, that leaders across a variety of industries in the United States have called upon higher education to contribute to the social and economic future of the country through stronger efforts to prepare graduates for the workforce (Craig, 2021; Siroka & Cox, 2020; The Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity, n.d.). According to the Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity, a collaborative of business and education leaders formed after the Covid-19 pandemic, “the higher education sector has an opportunity to accelerate existing efforts and recommit to supporting students entering the workforce, partnering with our communities, and delivering accessible, applicable, and high-quality education” (n.d., para. 3). This charge comes at a time of growing national alarm about the cost of higher education, student debt, and return on investment in an undergraduate degree (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Siroka & Cox, 2020; Thelin, 2019). Higher education, for many Americans, represents the first step along the path toward a financially sustainable and meaningful career. Colleges and universities have been called upon to better prepare students for the changing world of work, especially students from limited-income, first-generation, and marginalized

backgrounds who may face more challenges to success and wellbeing after graduation (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; Fickling et al., 2018; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

The Role of Career Services in Preparing BIPOC Students

Career services offices are increasingly being asked to address issues of equity, in order to promote graduates' social mobility and return on investment in an undergraduate degree (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; Tang, 2003). Equity - here defined as *addressing the individual and diverse needs of all students, providing tailored services to students who face unique barriers, and dismantling policies and practices that perpetuate disadvantage, exclusion and harm* (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; McNair et al., 2020; Minow, 2021) - has emerged as a critical issue in the scholarly literature on career development and counseling over the last twenty years (Hooley et al., 2018; Sultana, 2014; Tang, 2003). This shift in the conversation has not taken hold in the same way in career services offices in higher education, which still have significant room for growth in addressing the needs of marginalized students (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Reid, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020) and attending to equity in policy and practice.

While some structural progress has been made in career centers to address issues of equity (Buford et al., 2022; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020), racial equity in colleges and university career services has received limited coverage in scholarly and popular press (Bates, 2022; Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Givens, 2022; Reid, 2023). There is significant evidence to suggest that BIPOC students face unique barriers in navigating career education opportunities and work-integrated learning opportunities in higher education (Bates, 2022; Carter et al., 2003; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Reid, 2023;

Stebbleton & Jehangir, 2020). At the same time, these students often demonstrate higher need for these forms of career capital - professional connections, career readiness skills, professional experiences - in order to persist through college and ultimately convert an undergraduate degree into social mobility, financial stability, and career success (Bates, 2022; Carter et al., 2003; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Telles & Mitchell, 2018). Moreover, research has suggested that many BIPOC students may be underserved by campus career services, finding them difficult to access and not always relevant (Carter et al., 2003; Reid, 2023).

For those BIPOC students who obtain an undergraduate degree, their challenges persist beyond graduation (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). BIPOC employees continue to report higher rates of discrimination at work than White workers, and Black and Latine workers report the highest rates of discrimination (Lloyd, 2021). According to a 2020 Gallup poll, 1 in 4 Black and Latine American workers report facing discrimination at work in the last year (Lloyd, 2021). *Harvard Business Review* released a piece describing the ways in which diversity efforts continue to fail Black employees (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). The racial wealth gap continues to widen in the United States and White CEO's and tech professionals continue to be overrepresented in their professions. In 2016, unemployment rates for persons between the ages of 25 and 64 with a bachelor's degree or higher in the United States indicated that White graduates had an average unemployment rate of 2%, compared to 3% for Asian and Hispanic/Latine graduates, and 4% for Black and American Indian/Alaska Native graduates (de Brey et al., 2019). Median earnings for graduates differed by race. In 2016, the median income for White graduates with at least a bachelor's degree was \$54,700. Asian graduates' median income was \$69,100, Black graduates' median income was \$49,400, and Hispanic/Latine graduates' median income was \$49,300 (de Brey et al., 2019).

More recently, a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) report also indicated higher unemployment for Black/African American, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Hispanic/Latine communities. The report found that unemployed Asian American and Black individuals stayed out of work longer than Hispanic and White individuals. BIPOC workers similarly lagged behind White workers in median salary, especially Black and Hispanic/Latine workers. Black and Hispanic/Latine workers were significantly less represented in management roles. Thus, obtaining an undergraduate degree may not be enough to ensure the professional success of BIPOC students.

Career services offices' programs and services represent a critical form of support for BIPOC students in transitioning into the workforce and navigating an evolving and unequal world of work (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, 2019; Reid, 2023). It is therefore important for career services efforts to infuse equity into their work and attend to student career outcomes, with an eye toward supporting BIPOC students (Carter et al., 2003; Reid, 2023). If encouraged simply to pursue equity of service delivery for marginalized students in general, BIPOC students may be neglected. Their efforts must address not only issues of inequity for BIPOC students, but also support international students, first-generation students, limited-income students, women, LGBTQ+ students and others who face professional and personal barriers after graduation (Buford et al., 2022; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; Tang, 2003). As we have seen, BIPOC students often face unique challenges upon graduation due to the historical linkages between racism and capitalism (Edwards, 2021).

Administrators in higher education may be incentivized to focus equity efforts on groups such as first-generation students, limited-income students or international students, without needing to explicitly attend to race (McNair et al., 2020). McNair et al. (2020) and others have

written about “skirting around race” (p. 25) and “substituting race talk with poverty talk” (p. 31) as barriers to the practice of racial justice in higher education. This may appear in career services centers, where administrators and staff are asked to address inequity not just during the college experience but to also take into account students’ long term professional success. Thus, BIPOC students’ career needs may not be directly attended to by these under-resourced offices as they evolve to respond to competing demands.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which understandings of racial equity are developed and practiced by career professionals in higher education. Though there is substantial literature on equity in the discipline of career development and counseling, there are gaps in the literature on racial equity in career services offices. This inquiry is rooted in the research on career services offices in higher education, and the ways in which professionals in these units are conceptualizing and addressing issues of racial equity in their work. In the next section, I will define terms relevant to this inquiry, describe gaps in the literature on racial equity and career services, and discuss the purpose and nature of this study.

Definition of Terms

Before reviewing the literature on racial equity in career services, it is first necessary to define terms. Given the rapidly evolving nature of work and our growing sophistication on issues of equity, there has been significant scholarly discussion of how we define and contextualize the terms we use. Many scholarly understandings of work have developed in different disciplines and with different political priorities (Blustein et al., 2019-a). This is also true of common and scholarly understandings of racial equity and its broader category, social justice (L. A. Bell, 2007; Fraser, 2000; Kendi, 2019; McNair et al., 2020; Young, 2000). I will clarify below the definitions which provide the foundation of this study.

Career and Work

There are many definitions of *career* and *work*, and many scholars are exploring issues of equity within the realm of work, our language surrounding work, and work roles. In the 3rd edition of *Career Development and Counseling*, Lent and Brown's (2020) comprehensive guide to career development, the authors offered a traditional definition of work, that is, "the domain of life in which people provide services or create goods, typically (though not always) on a paid basis" (p. 9). In their description of work, Lent and Brown (2020) acknowledged the writing of Blustein et al. (2019-b) and others who seek to highlight the psychological aspects of work, but ultimately favored the "older terms...as still serviceable, if occasionally less than ideal" (Lent & Brown, 2020, p. 9). Lent and Brown therefore defined career as "a sequence, or collection, of jobs one has held over the course of one's work life" (2020, p. 9).

This definition drew on the work of Super (1990), who emphasized the fact that work often evolves throughout the lifespan, and involves multiple roles, paid and otherwise, and Hansen (1997), who highlighted the work of women and the need to attend to personal health and the wellbeing of our changing communities in our working lives. For this review, I will use a definition of career - mirroring Lent and Brown's (2020) definition above - that is, *a collection of life roles, including paid work, that shift and evolve across the lifespan*. This acknowledges the work of Hansen (1997) and Blustein et al. (2019-a) on inclusivity in definitions of work, while attending to the presence of roles across the lifespan – highlighted by Super (1990).

Career Development and Education

Lent and Brown (2020) differentiated between *career development* and *career education*. In their view, the former refers to a process that occurs from childhood into adulthood and on into retirement. They described career development as a process including entering into work,

the formation of understanding of the world of work, adjustment to work and ultimately making ongoing career choices. In order to acknowledge the significant body of theory and scholarly literature on the topic, I define career development in this study as *scholarship and practice related to the conceptualization, pursuit and preparation of work and career*.

Lent and Brown (2020) defined career education as formal school-based programs, typically at middle and high school levels, that are “aimed at introducing students to the world of work, assessment of career-relevant personal attributes, and exploration of career options” (p. 16). For this review, I use a similar definition of career education, though rooted in the higher education context and including both exploration and preparation, as Lent and Brown (2020) describe. I define *career education* here as *all career-related activities in higher education that explicitly prepare students for their professional life after graduation, including both career services and work-based learning*. Though career education does occur in K-12 settings as well, that will not be the focus of this study.

As I refer to the historical roots of the field of career development, I will periodically use the term vocational guidance. This term was more often used in the early days of the profession in the United States (Lent & Brown, 2020). This term referred to counseling or guidance provided in order to facilitate the pursuit of a particular line of work or career. It may also refer to what was known by some as a social movement in the early 20th century. The vocational guidance movement aimed to guide individuals to find jobs that would provide them with the means to survive and would match their strengths and skills (Lent & Brown, 2020; O’Brien, 2001).

Equity, Inclusion, Equality, and Social Justice

Equity, Inclusion and Equality have received significant attention in the scholarly literature and in the media. I draw on Minow's (2021) distinction between equity and equality, where equality is defined as *providing all students with the same opportunity to access services*. This represents the concept of equal treatment under the law, and emphasizes the importance of consistency in service delivery, regardless of student background. In contrast, equity refers to *addressing the individual and diverse needs of all students, providing tailored services to students who face unique barriers, and dismantling policies and practices that perpetuate disadvantage, exclusion and harm*. Some have also suggested that equity can also include *the unequal treatment of students, to address different abilities or historical inequity* (Strike & Soltis, 1992; Young, 2000). As Chan and Cruzvergara (2021) and Minow (2021) have each articulated, prioritizing equity in career services means that offices take responsibility for addressing student outcomes. Similarly, McNair et al. (2020) - citing McPherson (2015) - define equity in higher education as a "means of corrective justice" (p. 19) for historical exclusion of students of color from opportunities for learning at colleges and universities. This is, in many ways, more difficult, requiring assessment, training and resources. This study will explore those themes further.

Inclusion is typically understood as having roots in disability advocacy (Brown, 2016). Brown has described inclusion in education as incorporating marginalized students into the majority population in an educational environment. This necessitates a certain amount of attention to accessibility. For the purposes of this study, I define inclusion as *the practice of creating space for historically excluded students and addressing barriers to their full participation in programs and services*. This bears some resemblance to the preceding definition

of equality, but emphasizes addressing barriers to access, rather than consistency of service delivery. These nuanced distinctions will be elaborated on as the problem of racial equity in career services is contextualized and explored empirically.

Social justice is a much-discussed concept in a variety of disciplines. Traditional definitions addressed the need for nations to recognize historical oppression and to address the potential restoration of resources to those who have been historically deprived of these resources (Fraser, 2000; Rawls, 1971; Young, 2000). Fraser (2000) raised the complexity of recognizing identity and the modern, capitalistic shift in popular discourse toward displacing conversations around redistribution of resources. She cautioned social justice advocates to be wary of arguments that suggest that naming oppressive structures is enough to create socially just outcomes, and that do not speak to the importance of redistribution. This tension is reflected in the work of higher education career development scholars who bring different definitions of socially just career education to their work.

Within the educational context, several scholars have put forth definitions of social justice (L. A. Bell, 2007; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010). L. A. Bell (2007) described social justice education as a process and a goal. Socially just educational practice should result in equitable distribution of resources and the equal participation of all groups. According to L. A. Bell, a socially just society is one in which individuals have the right to self-determination and are “physically and psychologically safe and secure” (2007, p. 3). This has implications for career development practice in that work can be a vehicle for self-determination and a means to ensure one’s safety and security (Lent & Brown, 2020). Chapman and Hobbel (2010) emphasized the importance of reflection and self-awareness, especially for the social justice educator. This is a capacity that lies at the heart of career education and work-based learning, though these

programs and courses often do not include reflection on power, privilege, and systems of oppression (Lent & Brown, 2020; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021).

Racial Equity and Antiracism

McNair et al. (2020) defined racial equity in higher education as operating under three premises (p. 20-21):

1. Equity is a means of corrective justice (McPherson, 2015) for the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to the descendants of enslaved people and other minorities populations will-fully excluded from higher education.
2. Equity is an antiracist project to confront overt and covert racism embedded in institutional structures, policies, and practices (Pollock, 2009).
3. Equity lets practitioners see Whiteness as a norm that operates, unperceived, through structures, policies, and practices that racialize the culture and outcomes of higher education institutions.

The authors described racial equity here as a form of antiracism, designed to confront and shift racism in structural forms, overt and covert as a means of corrective justice. This ties also to definitions of social justice described earlier in this chapter, which seek to address historical inequity through corrective or restorative action (Fraser, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McPherson, 2015; Young, 2000).

Kendi (2019) offered a binary understanding of racial equity that contrasts a *racist* with an *antiracist*. He defines *racist* as “one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea” (p. 13). He defines *antiracist* as “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (p. 13). Though critics have challenged the presence of the term within its own definition and the binary nature of

Kendi's conceptualization of racism and antiracism (Dahlen, 2021), Kendi's binary proposes that policies and individuals within a racism system must actively work against racist forces or through inaction, perpetuate them.

Based on McNair et al. (2020) and Kendi's (2019) definitions, I will here define racial equity in higher education as *the critical examination of systemic policies, procedures, and assumptions in order to identify and counteract negative, differential, racialized impacts on BIPOC students, faculty, staff, alumni and college and university stakeholders*. Antiracism, then, may be thought of as *actively dismantling or counteracting racist policies, procedures, assumptions, and impacts*.

The Challenge of Racial Equity in Career Services

Racial equity efforts in career services offices at colleges and universities have received limited attention (Bates, 2022; Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; Givens, 2022; Reid, 2023), in spite of rising attention to equity in higher education in general (McNair et al., 2020). BIPOC college and university students and graduates face significant barriers in their pursuit of upward social and economic mobility and in their pursuit of career goals, due to discrimination, limited professional opportunities, generational inequity, wage gaps, lack of belonging, and other challenges (Blustein et al., 2019-a; de Brey et al., 2019; Givens, 2022; Kantamneni, 2020; Lent & Brown, 2020; Lloyd, 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). BIPOC graduates also carry a disproportionate share of student debt, especially Black graduates (Perry et al., 2021; Reid, 2023). These combined impacts threaten the long-term success and well-being of BIPOC graduates, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, such as BIPOC international, first-generation, limited-income students and others.

In order to equitably support BIPOC students' career development, it is necessary to assess the status of racial equity in career services and to map out a path toward greater racial equity in these units. This poses some challenges, due to the limited resources, training, and staffing in these units (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, 2019; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018). These limitations have historically acted as a barrier to systemic attention to equity in college and university career services, both in the U.S. and abroad (Arthur et al., 2009; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2008).

The Importance of Racial Equity in Career Services

For several decades, career services offices have been tasked with preparing undergraduates for the workforce, with diminishing funding and support (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, 2019; Tang, 2003). In recent years and with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, more attention has been paid at the federal level, in higher education and by private organizations to the importance of career services professionals in addressing issues of equity and social mobility in the U.S. (Bates, 2022; Buford, 2022; Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). BIPOC workers face significant and distinct challenges gaining and maintaining employment, building wealth, and thriving in the workplace, even after obtaining a college degree (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; Lloyd, 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Career services professionals in higher education are positioned to strengthen support for BIPOC students and prepare them for their professional lives after completing their degrees.

As Chan and Cruzvergara noted in their report (2021), addressing racial equity through career services in higher education requires attention to graduate outcomes, not simply service delivery. This issue is also acknowledged by evolving standards provided by professional

associations such as those written by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). The most recent set of CAS standards as of this writing stipulate that career services offices “consider the needs of all designated clients and constituents when developing resources, designing programs and delivering services” (Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019, p. 115). This statement spoke to an equality approach, emphasizing inclusion for all students. The following page of the CAS manual highlighted the need to specifically “address interests and needs of diverse, multicultural, post-traditional students...with attention to students...who are underrepresented based on their experiences and identities” (Wells & Henry-Darwish, p. 116).

This serves as an acknowledgement of the importance of serving the needs of underserved students, though there are no specific or measurable goals for how to do so. Moreover, we have limited information regarding implementation of these standards across career centers. What studies do exist on the use of CAS standards indicate that these standards are applied inconsistently due to lack of time and staff resources (Ratcliffe, 2004; Walker-Donnelly et al., 2021). CAS standards that ask career services offices to “address interests and needs of diverse, multicultural, post-traditional students...with attention to students...who are underrepresented based on their experiences and identities” (Wells & Henry-Darwish, p. 116) leave significant room for interpretation. McNair et al. (2020) raised the importance of specificity in language in order to ensure racial equity efforts are effective in higher education. Ambiguous language, and language that does not explicitly mention race, may undermine efforts to impact racialized outcomes due to the active presence of racist policies, practices and assumptions in these settings (Dei, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Zamalin, 2019).

Another challenge underlying the problem of racial equity in college and university career services is confusion about the definitions of equity, equality, and access (Givens, 2022;

McNair et al., 2020; Minow, 2021). Minow (2021) raised an important distinction between equity and equality, describing equality as providing students with equal access to services and equity as addressing the specific needs of all students by tailoring services. The latter has been upheld by McNair et al. (2020), among others, as a more effective way to address racial inequity of student outcomes, rather than simply addressing issues of access and opportunity. That is, in order to close racial equity gaps in higher education career development, institutions need to address racial inequity in outcomes and better tailor services with BIPOC students in mind. Yet, this relies on a shared commitment among career services administrators, faculty, and staff to advancing equity and social justice for BIPOC students. Developing clarity on definitions of these concepts and how they translate into practice is a critical first step in this process (Dei, 2005; McNair et al., 2020; Minow, 2021).

A 2021 report authored by the Career Leadership Collective identified a troubling gap between institutions' stated intention to address equity and their actual practice. Among the institutions who had taken steps to address equity in career services, few institutions had measured the impact of these efforts. The report emphasized the importance of measuring the outcomes of equity efforts in order to affect change, rather than stopping progress after a program had been offered. The relative absence of racial equity and antiracism conversations in college and university career services is all the more striking in light of the significant presence of these conversations in other areas of higher education. Significant scholarly and popular press attention has been paid to affirmative action, college access for all, and other strategies for diversifying higher education, resulting in the steady diversification of many colleges and universities (Carter & Lippard, 2020; Thelin, 2019). Yet efforts present in admissions, the entry

point to higher education, have not always translated into career services (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Higashi & Stebleton, 2020; Tang, 2003).

This is significant, in light of changes to the world of work, rising and racialized student debt, and persistent inequities in postgraduate pay and employment for BIPOC professionals (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; Givens, 2022; Higashi & Stebleton, 2020; Lloyd, 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Attention to this issue promises to more effectively address the positive impacts of higher education on BIPOC graduates' lives, and to promote greater social mobility for BIPOC graduates, supporting racial equity for the U.S. as a whole. It will also support higher education institutions in fulfilling their missions to contribute to the welfare of their communities.

Gaps in the Literature

Significant literature exists on racial equity and social justice approaches and paradigms in higher education. Addressing issues of access and inclusion has been a topic of focus for many years, though it has gained more attention over the last few decades (McNair et al., 2020; McPherson, 2015; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). There are also several articles addressing the nuances of social justice, equity, and inclusion in education (Adams et al., 2007; L. A. Bell, 2007; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010; Fraser, 2000; Minow, 2021). McNair et al. (2020) shared best practices for engaging in the work of racial equity and barriers to following through with those efforts in higher education.

The career development and career counseling literature is extensive, including significant contributions on culture, narrative theories, systems theories and diversity, equity and inclusion. There are older contributions, such as the work of Hansen (1997) who raised the issue of diversity in the field of career development and the need for more attention to inclusion in the

practice of career counseling. More recently, Blustein et al. (2019-a, 2019-b) have brought attention to the psychology of working and to the pursuit of engaging students and clients of different identities in equitable and culturally-tailored career development. Hooley et al. (2018) have written about reclaiming justice and emancipation through career guidance. McWhirter and McWha-Hermann (2021) have explored the presence of social justice in career development and offered a framework for assessing programs. This represents only some of the work being done in that space by scholars in the last few decades.

Significant gaps exist in the scholarly literature on professional staff and faculty understandings of racial equity in career services offices at colleges and universities. Carter et al. (2003) explored racial implications for student engagement with career centers. This study also briefly assessed staff perceptions of students by race. Yet, I was not able to find any significant work in the intervening years. Fickling (2016), Fickling et al. (2018), McMahon et al. (2008), and Arthur et al. (2009) have each conducted empirical research on professional understandings of social justice and equity in career settings. Fickling et al. (2018) specifically addressed the perspectives of career center directors in U.S. higher education, gathering data on barriers and sense of responsibility for advocacy and addressing inequities. Fickling (2016) conducted a similar study on career professionals who work with clients and students, many of which practiced career development in higher education settings. McMahon et al. (2008) and Arthur et al. (2009) conducted their studies in Australia and Canada, respectively.

This work serves as a starting point, yet more inquiry is needed both to assess the practice of equity in career services offices and to explore the perspectives of career advisors in these units, especially BIPOC staff. The vast majority of respondents in Fickling et al.'s (2018) study, Fickling's (2016) study, McMahon et al.'s (2008) study, and Arthur et al.'s (2009) study

identified as White. Moreover, none of these studies specifically assess racial equity or antiracism, focusing instead on the broader category of social justice. This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by exploring racial equity understandings and practices in career services offices.

Purpose of the Study

A stronger understanding of career center professionals' definitions of equity and racial equity and their perspectives on how equity work is practiced in their offices will provide a foundation for future work to assess the infusion of racial equity into the practice of career development in colleges and universities. The career development components of higher education represents an opportunity to support BIPOC students in realizing the benefits of higher education, and can partially address issues of racial equity and economic mobility in the United States.

One of the most complex issues within this area of inquiry seems to be definitions and understandings of equity and racial equity themselves. Some practitioners and scholars seem to use the terms equity, accessibility, inclusion, and equality interchangeably. Moreover, the perception that equity and social justice efforts are optional (Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018) may further delay or inhibit tangible action toward racial equity. This study will attempt to demystify career center staff perceptions of racial equity in their career development practice. It will explore how career professionals in higher education career services units understand equity and racial equity, and how they perceive their own office's efforts to address racial equity in their work.

Research Questions

In order to explore this topic, my inquiry will be rooted in one central research question:

What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?

Secondary research questions include:

- How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?
- What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
- What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

These questions are rooted in the gaps in the literature addressing how racial equity is understood and practiced in career services offices in higher education. There exist studies and theoretical models on social justice in career development and social justice education (L. A. Bell, 2007; Blustein et al., 2019-a; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010; Fraser, 2000; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Minow, 2021) and a smaller collection of studies on social justice practice in career services (Arthur et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2003; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2008; Reid, 2023), yet a stronger understanding of progress toward racial equity in career services is needed. More research is needed on the actions being taken toward racial equity in career services and on the beliefs and assumptions which guide this action.

Hunter and Swan (2007) discussed the importance of beliefs, practices, and structural dynamics in shaping the practices of equity work in educational spaces. They wrote about the:

...relative under-theorisation of the messiness of equalities and diversity work within the literature...it is rarely cut and dried...equalities and diversity workers feel a great deal of ambivalence in relation to the types of policies, training and actions that they have to undertake (p. 403).

These research questions are designed to explore the conceptualizations, definitions, stories, and assumptions about racial equity that shape the practice of career education in career services spaces.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to explore higher education career professionals' understandings and practices of racial equity, we must first establish a foundational understanding of racial equity, antiracism, and the ecosystem of career services in higher education. This literature review will describe the evolution of the concept of antiracism and efforts toward racial equity, trace the development of career services units in colleges and universities, and discuss racial equity efforts in career services. Intersections between these bodies of literature that specifically address racial equity efforts in career services are limited, and so this review will also incorporate literature from the field of career development and counseling more broadly. Career development and counseling scholarship includes coverage of social justice and equity in career development practice in settings outside of higher education, and will help to provide more context for the study.

Conceptualizations of Race

Racial distinctions have been drawn throughout history and around the world (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Collins, 2008; Kendi, 2016, 2019; Zamalin, 2019). While some have argued that racial classification began as a scientific attempt to organize the human species (Benedict, 2019), its journey over the last several hundred years has been closely linked to politics, power, and the justification of subjugation on the basis of skin color (Zamalin, 2019). Many scholars have argued that race is less a biological reality, than a set of socially-constructed categories of power and identity (Benedict, 2019; DuBois, 1903; Kendi, 2016; Vajda et al., 2022; Zamalin, 2019). Though without a solid scientific basis, racial categories have significant impacts on individuals and on communities. Around the world, and in the United States, one impactful ideology based in racial categories is racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; DuBois, 1903; Kendi, 2016). Benedict (2019)

defined racism as a “modern superstition...the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by Nature to hereditary inferiority and another group is destined to hereditary superiority” (p. 62).

Antiracism

Antiracism, then, can be understood as the process of disrupting and dismantling structures and ideologies of racism (Dei, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Zamalin, 2019). According to Dei (2005), “The task of antiracism is to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression” (p. 3).

Antiracism in practice means attending to the ways in which racism manifests within societal structures. This goes several steps further than what Dei (2005) has called liberal multiculturalism, which posits that individual bias and discrimination explain societal inequities, rather than systemic oppression as a result of centuries of nation-building.

Kendi (2019) argued for a binary understanding of antiracism - that true neutrality on racism does not exist, but rather that individuals and systems are either complicit with racism or actively working to dismantle it. Kendi described the importance of direct action as a necessary component of antiracism. This is consistent with Dei’s (2005) understanding of antiracism, though Dei (2005) does acknowledge the complexity of complicity in his work, that even antiracist research and practice can result in reinforcement of colonial notions of knowledge, for instance.

Underlying scholarly conversations about race, racism, and antiracism is the extensive body of evidence documenting the myriad negative impacts of racism on non-White Americans and the ways in which race, to quote Bonilla-Silva (2021), “racial considerations shade almost everything in America” (p. 2). Research has found that racial inequality exists in nearly every aspect of American life, from housing to education; crime to health care; wealth to neonatal

development (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Collins, 2008; Kendi, 2016). Collins (2008) and others have written about intersectionality and the impact of racism on women specifically, describing the oppressive effects of racism and sexism as a “supposedly seamless web of economy, polity, and ideology [which] function as a highly effective system of social control” (p. 5). The impacts of racism are pervasive and persistent, despite years of action taken to dismantle racist systems. Bonilla-Silva (2021) and Kendi (2019) might suggest that this failure comes as a result of 1) the permanence of racism within American structures and 2) performative efforts at racial equity that do not work actively enough to oppose racism’s manifestations.

Zamalin (2019) articulated the project of historical and contemporary antiracists:

Many of their counterarguments and direct actions assaulted racism’s public face, its most visible enforcer: the unmistakable American racist— the slaveholder, lyncher, Ku Klux Klansman, social Darwinist, eugenicist, southern Democrat, and neo- Nazi. But antiracists have also, and perhaps even more importantly, unmasked racism’s secret weapon: the ordinary white American who has sometimes tepidly, conditionally, equivocally, or even shamefully agreed with the unmistakable racist (p. 5).

Zamalin described both the efforts to challenge overt and covert racism, as well as passivity in the face of overt racism.

Critical Race Theory

Related to the concept of antiracism is critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a movement which emerged in the 1970s out of a legal subfield known as Critical Legal Studies and asserts, first and foremost, that racism is a normal feature of American history and contemporary society. Critical race theorists contend that critically engaging with racism requires a sharp attention to structures and policies of American institutions, as well as a focused attention to the lived

experiences and stories of racialized groups. CRT also maintains that racism advances the interests of White Americans, regardless of their social and economic class, and that many movements perceived to be racial advances, such as affirmative action and the civil rights movement, succeeded in part because they also benefited White society, especially elites (Delgado et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Both CRT and antiracism argue that racism is ubiquitous in America and deeply embedded in American structures and policies. Both also discuss the purpose racism serves in elevating White Americans, and the fact that race has evolved as a socially-constructed power category, rather than a solid biological reality. Each discusses the complex ways that racism manifests in American institutions, including education (Delgado et al., 2012; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Racial Capitalism

One important aspect of the construction of race as a socially-constructed category is its intertwining relationship with wealth, production, and capitalism (Edwards, 2021; Robinson, 1983). Racial capitalism acknowledges the linkages between race and the rise and maintenance of capitalism (Edwards, 2021; Robinson, 1983). One reason for the critical importance of attending to the career preparation needs of BIPOC students is the historical linkage between racism and capitalism. In a piece titled, *Racial capitalism and COVID-19*, Zophia Edwards described what she and others have called racial capitalism, or “the mutually constitutive entanglements of racialized and colonial exploitation within the process of capital accumulation” (2021; p. 22). This term, originally described by Robinson (1983), captures the long and global history of wealth accumulation in majority White countries, such as the United States and countries in Europe, and by White communities within those countries, as a direct result of the

capitalism-fueled colonization, relocation, enslavement, and exploitation of BIPOC-majority countries and BIPOC communities (Edwards, 2021).

James Bryce, former British advisor to Washington, captured the links between racism and capitalism as he described European colonization in his 1902 work, *The Relations of the Advanced and the Backward Races of Mankind*:

India, Northern Asia, almost the whole of Africa, Madagascar, the Indian and Polynesian archipelagoes, and the Phillippine (sic) Islands now own civilized masters of European stock, as do all the aboriginal races of America. Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan, Siam and in a sense even China, are now overshadowed by European Powers...The completion of this World-process is a specially great and fateful event...In passing under the influences of civilized Powers, [the backward races] have indeed given to the world a new kind of unity. They have become in a new sense economic factors in its progress, and they must affect more powerfully than before the economic conditions of labour and production among the advanced races. It is hardly too much to say that for economic purposes all mankind is fast become one people, in which the hitherto backward nations are taking a place analogous to that which the unskilled workers have held in each one of the civilized nations (pp. 8-9).

This quote captures the intent and impacts of a race-driven economic restructuring of the world through European conquest. The strong modern links between race and wealth continue to persist worldwide (United Nations, 2020), necessitating the consideration of race and racism as we grapple with wealth and career inequities today.

Edwards (2021) described the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic as an event which highlighted the links between racism and capitalism, given the disproportionate impact of the

pandemic on BIPOC people. She has also written about the greater representation of BIPOC people in lower-wage and service-related occupations, and the way that capitalism draws power and compensation toward the cores of economies, roles and industries which are disproportionately occupied by White workers. The presence of coded language around race in conversations about the pandemic in the United States and the resurgence of racialized nationalism in response to economic shifts signal the intertwining of race and capitalism. Edwards (2021) points to the lack of solidarity among working-class workers across race, and the links between racism and class status among White workers as further evidence that capitalism and racism are intertwined:

Now that wages of white workers have plummeted (though not nearly as much as for workers of color), many are clinging to their psychological wages of whiteness, as they did in the era of Reconstruction...middle-class white support for Donald Trump in the United States and for Brexit in the United Kingdom appears to be driven more by anxieties around preserving their relative position in the global race-class hierarchy than by actual material economic disadvantage. Likewise, in the COVID-19 pandemic, we are witnessing an intensification of white nationalism and white supremacist extremism (p. 30).

Racial capitalism illuminates the ways that racism and capitalism operate together, shaping the way industries and individuals conceptualize wealth and racial categories.

Key to this framework is the idea that racial categories were socially constructed in large part to fuel the rise of capitalism in the West (Miapyen & Bozkurt, 2022). Robinson (1983) arguably saw racial categorization as essential to the success of capitalism, raising the question of how realizing racial equity might impact capitalism. If racial narratives about White

superiority are challenged, how might our collective view of racial inequities in wealth and employment shift? Given the nature of career development in U.S. higher education (and elsewhere), and its role in preparing individual students to navigate a capitalist economy, racial capitalism offers an important lens through which to view perspectives on racial equity in career services practice. As a space where capitalism is arguably more present than in other college and university offices, career services - through the lens of racial capitalism - might be more challenged to adopt antiracism practices, or even to examine racism within its practices. Racial equity may be challenging to examine as students are prepared to compete within a capitalist market.

Jones and Okun's (2001) list of characteristics of White supremacy culture includes:

1. Perfectionism
2. Sense of urgency
3. Quantity over quality
4. Progress is bigger, more
5. Individualism

These characteristics of White supremacy might also be thought of as components of capitalism. Jones and Okun (2001) suggested that these characteristics are present in many workplaces. As such, the characteristics are also likely to appear in career development conversations. Awareness of the connection between White supremacy and capitalism - especially regarding these characteristics - might represent an important capacity for those who wish to practice career services.

One limitation of the racial capitalism model is its construction of a White and non-White binary, which, when applied without critique, might minimize differential impacts on different

communities of color (Miapyen & Bozkurt, 2022). In the space of career services, students of different racial identities have been found to experience services differently (Carter et al., 2003). Moreover, post-undergraduate salary and employment outcomes vary by ethnic subgroup (de Brey et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Nuance may be required to explore shared and differential impacts of racial capitalism on students. Though it is often useful to explore White and non-White as power categories, these should not be conflated with ethnic and national identities.

Key Concepts for Racial Equity in Higher Education

McNair et al. (2020) presented a few important concepts related to the pursuit of racial equity in higher education. The authors suggested that a strong grasp of these concepts is necessary for the successful pursuit of racial equity in this space. Ahmed (2012), Bonilla-Silva (2021), Collins (2008), Kendi (2019) and many others have contributed other important understandings of racism and antiracism. I will next address a few of these central aspects of how racism operates, with the intention of providing a foundational understanding of the work of antiracism in higher education for this study.

Obscuring Race and Whiteness

Kendi (2019) suggested that the largest barrier to antiracism is denial. An unwillingness to see racism and its impacts continues to operate as a strategy to block antiracism. This is consistent with DiAngelo's (2018) assertion that a common White response to the topic of racism is denial of its impacts. DiAngelo has also proposed that one way White denial of racism manifests is in the obscuring of structural racism, followed by denial of individual responsibility for racism. Several authors have raised this issue, that obscuring structural racism in particular, minimizes the scale and significance of racism (Benedict, 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Kendi,

2019; Neville et al., 2013). Yi et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis that found that denial of the impacts of race and racism were associated with endorsement of anti-Black prejudice, reduced social justice behaviors, and diminished empathy for BIPOC individuals, especially Black individuals. They suggested a tendency for White individuals to minimize the impacts of racism at the individual and systemic levels, exemplified in the shifting opinions of White Americans on the existence of racism in the United States.

At the center of racism in the U.S. and in higher education is an ideology of White racial superiority, specifically of White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Kendi, 2019; McDermott & Ferguson, 2022). In the modern U.S. racial difference has catalyzed around the idea of Whiteness, that is, a category of power that functions “as an identity as well as a structural process” (McDermott & Ferguson, 2022, p. 258). Whiteness, as a racial identity, might be thought of as an aspirational designation that was built to convey social and economic power, privilege, access to opportunities, moral purity and, at some points in American history, religious solidarity (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; McDermott & Ferguson, 2022; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021). Thus, laden with meaning, and yet regarded as a default racial category, Whiteness has been able to persist within American structures since its inception. McDermott and Ferguson (2022) have written about the increase of interdisciplinary attention to Whiteness as a racial category in the 21st century. These efforts at interrogating the concept of Whiteness have helped to bring it to the forefront of conversations about race, challenging its invisibility.

Given the relative recency of mainstream conversations about Whiteness in the U.S., several scholars have written about the emotional, hostile, and avoidant reactions these conversations can produce (DiAngelo, 2018; Kendi, 2019; McDermott & Ferguson, 2022; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Srivastava, 2006). Discussions around race in general can prompt

resistance and hostility, a fact which serves to protect racist structures from critique and challenge (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; DiAngelo, 2018). In this way, many people may be unable or unwilling to perceive the racialized nature of the American environment, and of higher education more specifically. Racial narratives about White superiority, Euro-centered understandings of research, learning and work, beliefs about intelligence, capacity, and work ethic are often at play, invisible to some (McNair et al., 2020; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Neely & Montañez, 2022). These hold implications for educational and occupational environments. The real advantages White students carry within a racialized system may be considered natural and inevitable. Antiracism might then be seen to introduce inequality into a system misunderstood as neutral.

This obfuscation of the centering of Whiteness serves to protect structural and individual racism, making the project of antiracism more difficult. Neely and Montañez (2022) have suggested that Whiteness and antiblackness are obscured within higher education by the colonial nature of participation and learning in colleges and universities. Assumptions of the inferiority of BIPOC learners, staff, and administrators are often invisible to White educators, who hold disproportionate roles of decision-making and control within the sector. An exploration of the ways in which racism and antiracism operate in career services offices must therefore contend with the phenomenon of White dominance, invisibility, and resistance - both individual and structural (McNair et al., 2020; Mitchell & Chavous, 2021; Neely & Montañez, 2022).

"Niceness" and Educational Equity

In the introduction to the 2019 volume, *The price of nice: How good intentions maintain educational inequity*, Angelina Castagno describes how a culture of “niceness” can serve as a barrier to addressing educational equity:

“Most educators are nice people with the best intentions regarding the schooling they provide to students every day...to be nice is to be pleasing and agreeable, pleasant and kind....Niceness compels us to reframe potentially disruptive or uncomfortable things in ways that are more soothing, pleasant, and comfortable. This avoidance and reframing are usually done with the best intentions (p. x).

Castagno harkened back to Ladson-Billings (1998) and her contention that “niceness” and racial equity do not work well together. Castagno wrote about the importance of connecting racial equity resistance to a culture of niceness, and how the lack of support for critique and discomfort can enable racial inequity. “Niceness is...a facade for the perpetuation of the status quo of patterned and pervasive educational inequity” (p. xiii).

Like Kendi (2019) and others, Castagno suggested that “silence, passivity, denial, and avoidance” (2019, p. xiii) are tied to the maintenance of racial inequity. In the context of career education, this is a key distinction. Castagno (2019) argued that understanding and grappling with how niceness functions to suppress dissent in equity conversations is critical to making progress on equity goals. A culture of niceness may then represent another barrier to progress on equity in career services.

Minow (2021) has written about the perception that equity efforts run counter to an equality agenda, and therefore may be seen to harm historically advantaged groups. This perception is similar to niceness politics, described by Castagno (2019). Language of equality under the law is embedded within most systems in the American context, education systems especially (Minow, 2021). Equality and equity, then, may be at odds in conversations about shifting the culture and policies of an educational unit. Treating people differently on the basis of identity - even to address historical and contemporary inequities - may be dismissed as

discriminatory or not “nice” (Castagno, 2019; Minow, 2021). Contending with racial inequity, then, means coming up against the accusation of differential treatment, which might be at odds with a “nice” culture of education.

Later in this study, I will discuss the ideology of meritocracy in career development - and the philosophical origins of the field. The need to challenge “nice” and to provide different resources to different identity groups - based on historical disenfranchisement - may be an unavoidable step in the process of antiracism (Castagno, 2019; Kendi, 2019; Minow, 2021; Strike & Soltis, 1992; Taylor, 1994). This tension will be explored further in the literature on career development’s origins in social justice, and in the results and discussion chapters of this inquiry.

Measuring Racial Inequality

One way to illuminate racial inequalities is in the gathering and sharing of data. McNair et al. (2020) described the collection and disaggregation of data in higher education as a common barrier to antiracist efforts. “Data can reveal which student groups experience inequitable outcomes and describe the nature of those inequities. However, if practitioners fail to employ an equity-minded lens and are unwilling to see things critically, equity gaps may remain” (p. 68). This is consistent with Dei’s (2005) suggestion that the process of data collection matters, as well as the interpretation, when conducting antiracist work.

Building institutional capacity to collect and analyze data with an equity-lens is a strategy that both Dei (2005) and McNair et al. (2020) advocate for. In particular, McNair et al. (2020) drew attention to the disaggregation of data by specific racial groups as an important step in unearthing racial inequity. Racism impacts groups differently, and disaggregating can help to clarify impact in specific domains. For instance, research that assesses outcomes for White and

non-White students can sometimes be useful, yet it is in the disaggregation of such data - examining impacts on each BIPOC population - that a more precise picture can emerge (McNair et al., 2020).

McNair et al. (2020) suggested that while many institutions now gather student outcome data by race, fewer disaggregate that data by subgroup. Disaggregation has become more common in the last two decades (Roegman et al., 2018), yet it is not yet a universal strategy for assessing differential racial impacts (McNair et al., 2020). This can produce a situation where data capturing racial disparities exists, but is not analyzed, allowing equity gaps to remain unaddressed. Roegman et al. (2018) and Kodama and Dugan (2013) conducted studies examining the practice of disaggregating student data by race in education. Kodama and Dugan (2013) found that disaggregating data on student leaders revealed unique predictors by racial group for leadership outcomes, in a few cases overturning earlier empirical findings that had not disaggregated by race. Roegman et al. (2018) assessed data disaggregation practices by K-12 school principals from three midwestern school districts and found that state requirements for disaggregation were perceived to be vague, resulting in inconsistent disaggregation and potentially misleading results about student achievement. Moreover, the authors found that principals more often chose to disaggregate data by performance, rather than by identity or demographic. This served to obscure racial, gender, and other inequities.

The practice of assessing student outcomes by income, first-generation status, and other structural characteristics, rather than race - while sometimes important and necessary - cannot itself advance antiracism (McNair et al., 2020). “Substituting poverty talk for race talk” (p. 31) is one barrier to racial equity in higher education identified by McNair et al. (2020). They pointed to the work of Dowd and Bensimon (2013) who reported having repeatedly been asked to

prioritize income over race in their interactions with higher education leaders. This is obviously a tricky issue, as both issues need attention. Yet, several of these authors have identified a tendency to focus on income instead of race when permitted.

Ambiguity in Goals and Language

McNair et al. (2020) named clarity in goals and language as two key priorities for undertaking antiracist work in higher education: “it is important for institutions to engage in dialogues to define equity, equality, diversity, and inclusion before launching any equity projects” (p. 88). McNair et al. (2020) offered several questions for engaging in these clarity conversations, for instance (p. 88):

- How do we as an institution define equity?
- How is this viewpoint/definition reflected in our institutional values as stated in our mission statement or diversity, equity, and inclusion statements and evidenced in our practices?
- What language in our current mission and diversity, equity, and inclusion statements needs further clarification and to be widely shared?

Questions like these are intended to unearth differences or ambiguities in language around racism and racial equity and to clarify antiracist goals as an institution. They also raise the tension between the language of equity and the language of equality. “Equity talk and equity walk educators interrogate the concept of equity and its relationship to equality, including how the paradox of equality requires a critical examination of the historical, social, cultural, and political perspectives that make the concept of equality a misnomer for many in our society, especially minoritized students” (McNair et al., 2020, p. 3).

Zamalin (2019) has also cautioned against applying the term antiracism to initiatives with vaguely equity-oriented goals: “Treating antiracism simply as an abstract philosophical orientation that names an honest refusal to be racist...cheapens its historical meaning and specific political ideas” (p. 7). Zamalin argues that accepting the true radical nature of antiracism would be to fundamentally shift American politics. True antiracism, according to Zamalin, engages politics directly and tackles “racism in all its forms” (2019, p. 7).

Interest Convergence

One concept relevant to the clarity of goals and language in racial equity efforts is the concept of interest-convergence, one of the tenets of CRT (D. Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Interest-convergence within the context of CRT, represents an event during which policies or structures are nominally changed for the reduction of racial inequality, but changed in a way that benefits White people at the same time. The implication of interest-convergence is that if a structural or policy change will not benefit White people, there will not be significant White support behind the change. D. Bell (1980) described the events of the desegregation of American schools in the 1960s as an example of interest-convergence. D. Bell argued that White students and politicians benefited from desegregation, and that this accounts for why the initiative to desegregate schools received support.

Applying this concept to education, some efforts intended to address equity may receive support because they promise to produce benefits for White students or administrators. McNair et al. (2020) wrote about the tendency to substitute poverty talk for race talk, which might be understood through the lens of interest-convergence. If the decision is made to offer educational support to working-class students, for example, rather than BIPOC students, it may receive more support because it will result in significant support for White students. This phenomenon may

help to explain why colleges and universities often have more explicit support for marginalized populations such as first-generation students, working-class and limited-income students, international students, women, LGBTQ students, and others which include White students. McNair et al. (2020) would encourage support for these student populations, and an additional, specific focus on addressing inequities for BIPOC student populations. This specific, explicit focus on racial equity in the goals and language of a change initiative are critical for closing racial gaps. Of course, intersectionality is an important part of this picture (Crenshaw, 1991). Students have multiple identities, and yet the impacts of racism are specific to many BIPOC students and may compound with impacts of other marginalized identities those students have. McNair et al. (2020) suggested that specificity in goals and shared definitions of equality, equity, and other key terms are crucial to the success of racial equity initiatives in higher education. Having reviewed key concepts in antiracism and racial equity, I will describe the evolution of racial equity efforts in higher education.

Racial Equity in Higher Education

Conceptions of equity in higher education exist around the world and date back centuries (Howard et al., 2020). In the United States, one early and prominent equity conversation revolved around equal access to postsecondary education for women and BIPOC students (Thelin, 2019; Urofsky, 2020). One strategy to increase access was known as affirmative action, that is, “the use of policies, programs, rules and administrative actions that treat members of disadvantaged groups differently to assist in overcoming the obstacles and discrimination they face in contemporary society” (Howard et al., 2020, p. 5). Early on, a distinction was made in policy between forms of affirmative action that are intended to provide equal access to opportunity and those that are intended to create equality in outcomes of programs and services.

During this dissertation study, the United States Supreme Court issued a decision regarding affirmative action in higher education. In June 2023, the Supreme Court rejected race-conscious admissions in higher education at two universities. This represented a shift in the racial climate in higher education, creating some wariness around addressing racial discrimination and racialized outcomes in the sector (Nadworny, 2023). A few of the participants in this study referred to the Supreme Court's decision in their interviews, since it occurred during data collection. This tension between equity and equality will be raised again further on in this study.

Renewed attention to racial equity since the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic in that same year have raised the specter of continued racial injustice in spite of some efforts at increasing diversity and inclusion (McNair et al., 2020). Issues of equity continue to require urgent attention in higher education and McNair et al. (2020), Ahmed (2012) and others have written about the performative nature of many equity and inclusion efforts in colleges and universities.

Sellar and Gale (2011) suggested that the evolution of higher education from a site of rarified privilege to a vehicle for economic mobility for all necessitates a new approach to equity. They suggested that higher education leaders move away from exclusive focus on access and admissions, and move toward addressing issues of full participation by BIPOC and limited-income students and addressing educational outcomes and social mobility for those students. Thomas (2021) has suggested that racial discrimination is:

...generally enacted in colour-blind ideologies, policies and practices that see 'race' being trumped by class, gender or sexuality, with a lack of appreciation for the intersecting axes of discrimination. Educational organisations seem to be faced with the

conundrum of placating ‘the consumers’, maintaining the status quo, or defusing the decolonising incursion with more palatable alternatives (p. 7).

An important foundation of contemporary equity policies at colleges and universities is an understanding of the pervasiveness of legal, social, and economic discrimination against women, people with disabilities, the LGBTQ+ community, and BIPOC individuals in both the history of the U.S. as a whole, and in higher education. Arguably the clearest and most consistent legal and structural discriminatory policies in higher education have impacted BIPOC students for several centuries. Given the length and severity of this discrimination and exclusion from the opportunities of higher education, several institutions eventually adopted a variety of programs and policies - some of which fell under the affirmative action umbrella - to address the impacts of this historical inequality (Carter & Lippard, 2020).

Efforts toward racial desegregation in the 1960s marked a more decisive legislative turn toward equity. President Kennedy declared support for minorities to have equal employment opportunity. His executive order in 1961 used the language of affirmative action, and specified that racial minorities should be treated equally under the law. The administration encouraged organizations who received federal funding to change discriminatory policies and recruit minority candidates. The Civil Rights act of 1964 established some provisions to prevent discrimination in federally funded institutions and private organizations. Sex-based discrimination was later added as well. Affirmative action in higher education has been largely visible in the world of admissions, where women and BIPOC students have been more proactively recruited at some institutions (Carter & Lippard, 2020). Carter and Lippard (2020) noted that many of these policies are informal and involve the somewhat weighted consideration of identity in admissions, rather than quotas or policies that require specific goals for BIPOC

student recruitment. Resistance to affirmative action programs and policies has been strong and consistent, especially in the realm of higher education and - when those programs involve preferential treatment for BIPOC students. As mentioned earlier, the Supreme Court's rejection of race-based affirmative action in 2023 underscored this changing policy landscape (Nadworny, 2023).

Carter and Lippard (2020) suggested that the reason opponents of affirmative action have been especially active in higher education is because it is associated with economic opportunity and mobility. This resistance is often in the form of an individualist (rather than structural) view of race, which ignores historical policy and injustice and focuses on individual harm to White students today. Moreover, due to the Supreme Court's use of the diversity rationale - that greater learning for all is enhanced by the presence of diversity - to justify affirmative action policies (prior to their 2023 decision), historical injustice is not always present in the conversation about affirmative action. Supreme Court Justice Powell, in 1954, explicitly stated that affirmative action was not to be used to address the impacts of historical discrimination, consistent with the Court's 2023 decision (Nadworny, 2023), and waning support for affirmative action as an equity strategy (Carter & Lippard, 2020).

Another visible form of inequity in higher education has been the preponderance of racialized hate incidents on college campuses or associated with university administrators, including at the University of California, Los Angeles, Northwestern University, University of California, San Diego, Santa Clara University and others (Museus et al., 2015). Museus et al. described the persistence of unequal wealth in the U.S. by race, and the fact that BIPOC people are more likely to be born into poverty and accrue less generational wealth than their White peers (2015). These wealth disparities are linked to health disparities and issues of access to quality

health care that have been present historically and persist today in spite of recent efforts toward emphasizing equity (Museus et al., 2015).

Greater attention has been paid in recent years to the increasing diversity of student backgrounds in colleges and universities, with significant scholarly work exploring the experiences of BIPOC students, women, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, first-generation and working-class students, international students, among others (de Brey et al., 2019; McNair et al., 2020; Soria, 2018). Soria (2018) edited a collection which includes research on campus climate for students of these identities and more, describing student perception of the college experience. This work covered the impacts of identity on persistence, mental health, academic performance, and other important aspects of the student experience.

In spite of efforts to create greater equity in higher education, racial differences in educational outcomes persist. The *Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Group 2018* report indicated that White, first-time, full-time students' 4-year graduation rates from postsecondary institutions stood at 45%, compared to 50% for Asian students, 31% for Pacific Islander students, 32% for Hispanic/Latine students, 23% for American Indian/Alaska Native and 21% for Black students (de Brey et al., 2019). 6-year graduation rates by race indicate that 64% of White students complete their undergraduate degree in this timeframe, 74% of Asian students, 51% of Pacific Islander students, 54% for Hispanic/Latine students, 39% of American Indian/Alaska Native students and 40% for Black students. These statistics demonstrate significant gaps in educational attainment by race, especially for students who do not identify as White or Asian (de Brey et al., 2019). Though the language of diversity, equity, inclusion, and multiculturalism has a significant presence in higher education institutions today, there is limited evidence of a sustained commitment to antiracism and policy shifts on racial

equity in higher education (Ahmed, 2012; McNair et al., 2020). This picture of racial equity in higher education represents the landscape in which career services units operate. Next, this review will explore the evolution of career services in higher education, and ultimately assess efforts in career services offices to address racial equity through programs, services, and assessment.

The Landscape of Career Services

History and Context

The story of career services in higher education is intertwined with the broader story of career development as a profession (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Samide et al., 2011; Tang, 2003). Several prominent career counseling theorists have described the evolution of career development practice, which launched in the form of community vocational placement agencies and ultimately grew to include college and university career services, along with a myriad of other programs and practices (Herr et al., 1993; Kretovics et al., 1999; Pope, 2000). According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, career services centers now host a variety of programs and services to support students' career development, including: "career counseling, advising or coaching; career resources; programming, such as job-search workshops and networking events; career and job fairs; assistance with co-op, internship, and externship programs; on-campus recruiting; graduate, professional school, and transfer or other education advising; and job posting and resume referral services" (Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019; p. 113).

The Evolution of Career Development

In the very early days of U.S. higher education, career assistance largely took the form of informal mentor and mentee relationships between faculty and students. This made sense for

close knit, homogenous, learning communities of young, White men privileged enough for their families to forgo the earning potential of a few years of their sons' labor (Aubrey, 1977; Samide et al., 2011). The industrial revolution resulted in the formal birth of what was then called vocational guidance (Pope, 2000). This was the beginning of a significant change in the economic landscape of the United States. Permanent job loss in the agricultural sector grew, and workers were forced to embrace urbanization and roles in heavy industry. Placement centers emerged outside of higher education, such as the Vocation Bureau at Civic Service House in Boston, established by Frank Parsons in 1908 (Herr et al., 1993; Pope, 2000).

In the 1920s and 1930s, school-based career support expanded. Industrialization had come to stay, and the market demanded a literate workforce. Elementary and high schools expanded to meet this need, and to respond to the rising birth rate following the first World War. Meanwhile, a host of new organizations and policies appeared to support workers, including, at the federal level, the New Deal legislation following the Great Depression and the Works Progress Administration in 1935. Unemployment became a deep and pervasive problem, drawing more national attention (Pope, 2000).

In the 1940s and 1950s, formal career development programs in higher education emerged and proliferated, as a result of increased focus on advanced education. Returning veterans from World War II infused new urgency into vocational guidance programs at colleges and universities, and the G.I. Bill made higher education accessible for a new generation of veterans. The rising demand for career guidance led to the strengthening of vocational guidance professional associations and more training infrastructure for the profession (Pope, 2000).

The 1960s and 1970s mark a shift toward what Pope (2000) called “a time of idealism and hope” (p. 200). Pope described a generation struck by a waning faith in American society,

and a simultaneous belief in both their own and the country's potential. In higher education, enrollments rose, with substantial gains for women and BIPOC populations. This marked a significant turning point for the industry. Colleges and universities no longer represented merely a training-ground for White, male, elites, but rather provided a foundational educational experience designed (at least theoretically) for a diverse student body (Pope, 2000; Thelin, 2019).

Yet, colleges and universities produced more graduates than the job market could comfortably support (Kretovics et al., 1999). As a result, responsibility for making the most of a college degree transferred from the career counselor to the student. Graduates were now encouraged to “take ownership of their own career development and job search” (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, p. 7). This coincided with a generational shift beginning to take hold in the 1970s, the emergence of what Kretovics et al. called “the more goal oriented ‘Me’ generation of the 1970s and 1980s” (1999, p. 79). On average, graduates had more access to options and data, and the support of a professional to help them find meaningful work (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Pope, 2000).

Self-discovery emerged as a key component of career decision-making, along with a belief in the importance of the counseling process (Pope, 2000). Still, Kretovics et al. (1999) have suggested that even as belief in finding a meaningful career grew for many students and professionals, placement still played a role in career services. Around this time, career development as a profession began to look inward and reconceptualize (Pope, 2000). A number of books were released, written by key figures in the career development space; Donald Super, Margaret Andrews, Edwin Herr and others stepped in to examine and write about the evolution of the profession itself. Career development professional associations evolved their goals and

career development theory expanded to consider the lifespan of the individual (Pope, 2000; Super, 1990).

During the 1990s and 2000s, career services offices in higher education took on more responsibility for addressing a host of unique career problems and populations with vastly different needs, identities, and resources. Cultural competency, technical fluency, executive leadership, economic access, and workforce development were just some of the issues career professionals tackled during this period of time (Pope, 2000). Concurrent with this expanded focus was diminishing fiscal and structural support for career centers in higher education (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019). These centers, compelled to take on an intrapreneurial mindset, looked to on-campus, community (Samide et al., 2011) and corporate partnerships to fuel their efforts, rebranding and retooling to reflect their partners' interests. This emphasis on networking, connections and employers has prompted Dey and Cruzvergara (2019) to declare the post 2008 recession era a new stage of career development, what the authors called "Connected Communities" (p. 8).

This evolution represents the structural and political trajectory of both career development as a field, and of career services offices within higher education institutions. Next, I will review the presence of social justice in this evolution, highlighting scholarly perspectives and tensions in career development practice with equity and social justice in mind. The contributions of scholars who have studied and written about social justice and equity within career development will be discussed.

Career Development Origins in Social Change

Many scholars and practitioners of career development and counseling have urged career practitioners to refocus their work on social justice, drawing attention to the fact that the

American origins of the field came out of an intent to create more social and economic opportunities for limited-income and migrant workers. Frank Parsons, who some consider the founder of vocational psychology, has been described as an advocate for women, the poor and disadvantaged and an opponent of discrimination and oppression (O'Brien, 2001). Parsons (1909) is credited with establishing the foundations of what is often known as the “matching model” of vocational guidance. This process involves helping a client or student to identify their strengths and interests and then match those to a best-fit occupation. This approach has evolved over many years in scholarship and practice, and still represents a common approach to career education in career services offices at colleges and universities today (Michel, 2022).

In 2001, Karen O'Brien addressed Parson's legacy in the field, and the profession's history in social equality. O'Brien defined social justice synonymously with social change work, as “actions that contribute to the advancement of society and advocate for equal access to resources for marginalized or less fortunate individuals in society” (p. 66). This definition perhaps best resembles an access and inclusion approach, more than a restorative definition of social justice in that it emphasizes promoting equal access to opportunity rather than addressing historical or systemic inequality. The term “less fortunate” also connotes disadvantage on the basis of luck or accident, rather than as a result of deliberately discriminatory policy. O'Brien points to career counseling's history of empathizing with and empowering individuals to pursue their career aspirations, regardless of identity, including research on individual experiences of marginalization and oppression, financial education, “vocational interventions with special populations” (p. 69), and some political advocacy (2001).

Fickling (2016), Fickling et al. (2018), Hooley et al. (2018), McCrory (2022), Sultana (2014) and others have described the limits of the individualized approach to social change.

While empathy, cultural sensitivity, and individual empowerment are considered by some to be social justice capacities, they often fail to adequately address structural, systemic, and historical injustice. Blustein et al.'s (2019-a) evolved psychology of working theory partially addresses this gap. The authors have also written about the importance of decent work around the globe (2019-b). Blustein et al.'s (2019-a) paper described the usefulness of the psychology of working theory in addressing issues of social justice. This theory centers the importance of individual clients' cultural, family, and social backgrounds and identities and their impact on experiences of work (Blustein, 2006). It upholds the importance of decent work as a human right, and describes the economic and social constraints on workers based on marginalization and systemic oppression. Psychology of work theory highlights the importance of survival, social connection and contributions, and self-determination as tenets of decent work. Importantly, and unlike many other psychologically-based theories of career development, psychology of work includes an action-oriented systemic change component. Critical consciousness, critically informed action, proactive and adaptable engagement with systems, social support, and community engagement are recommended as avenues toward systemic change (Blustein et al., 2019-a).

Underlying many of these critiques of career services practice in higher education is confusion about the definitions of equity, equality, and access (McNair et al., 2020; Minow, 2021). Minow (2021) raised an important distinction between equity and equality, describing equality as providing students with equal access to services and equity as addressing the specific needs of all students by tailoring services. The latter has been upheld by McNair et al. (2020), among others, as a more effective way to address inequity of student outcomes, rather than simply addressing issues of access and opportunity. That is, in order to close equity gaps in higher education career development, institutions need to address inequity in outcomes and

better tailor services with diverse and underserved students in mind. Yet, this relies on a shared commitment, and significant training and skill, among higher education administrators and staff toward advancing equity and social justice for students. Developing clarity on definitions of these concepts and how they translate into practice is a critical first step in this process (McNair et al., 2020; Minow, 2021).

Young's (2000) distinction between equality and equity, taken up by L. A. Bell (2007), presented a sticky tension in the area of career development practice. Sultana (2014) has applied the equality/equity distinction to better understand resistance among career practitioners to undertaking the work of equity. Sultana described the field of career development's historical belief in the power of counseling the individual to pursue fulfillment, and he argued that the field needs to "emancipate itself from its sole anchorage in personal psychology, neoliberal economics, and human capital theory" (2014, p. 11). Some writers have contended that challenging power and systems is too unrealistic an undertaking for career development practitioners, and others faithfully subscribe to the promise of meritocracy - that hard work is rewarded and that equality should be the goal of the profession (Sultana, 2014). In Sultana's (2014) words: making "equality the litmus test of social justice" (p. 11). This philosophical tension may partially explain the findings of Fickling et al. (2018), McMahon et al. (2008), and others who have found that career development practitioners – including participants working in higher education settings – are concerned about how their social justice advocacy efforts will be received by peers and leadership.

Cook et al. (2002) described the origins of the profession of career development, advocating for a more critical understanding of the field: "Career counseling, as widely practiced today, evolved at a time when the typical career client was young, male, White, able-bodied,

publicly heterosexual, and ethnically homogenous (White immigrants from Western Europe)” (p. 291). The authors conducted an examination of the fundamental assumptions underlying the traditional model of career counseling: that work is central to an individual’s life, that they have independent decision-making control, and that they can prioritize work over other life roles. Most importantly, perhaps, that traditional career counseling rests on the premise that hard work will result in the realization of professional aspirations, financial security, and success. Cook et al. (2002) described these assumptions as “consistent with an American ethos of individual self-sufficiency and freedom of choice, officially mandated since the birth of the United States as a sovereign nation” (p. 293). Yet the authors assert that “this vision of career development has never reflected the needs of everyone...and is not consistent with the general life priorities and specific role commitments of many women of color and White women” (p. 293). At issue here is the contested belief in a fair and impartial system, which offers equal opportunity.

Taylor’s (1994) politics of misrecognition provides more insight into this issue. Taylor described the philosophical understanding that failing to recognize identities, or “misrecognition,” does harm and represents a form of oppression. Taylor named the inherent area of departure between those who believe firmly in the differentiation of people on the basis of identity – and consequentially the opportunity to address inequality through differential treatment – and those who believe in the politics of equal dignity and equal treatment. That is, Taylor raised the tension, similar to what Sultana (2014) has articulated, between differential treatment and equal treatment. In the realm of higher education career practice, differentiation might take the form of creating programs that specifically address the needs of BIPOC students, for instance, rather than simply reducing barriers to participation for these students in

standardized support. This tension among philosophical approaches to advancing the profession, while somewhat theoretical, still holds tangible implications for career education practice.

Changes to the World of Work

Even prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the changing nature of work was a significant topic of popular and scholarly discussion. For BIPOC students, the uncertain future of work takes on more relevance, given the substantial professional and financial challenges many of them face as graduates (de Brey et al., 2019; Lloyd, 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This section will review changes to the world of work in an effort to illuminate the capacities that career professionals need to impart to current and future students, especially those who identify as BIPOC.

The World Bank released a report in 2019 on the changing nature of work, highlighting the impacts of digitization on individual workers, countries, and organizations. The report drew attention to the rise of flexible and alternative forms of work, such as project-based and contract work, rather than full-time, benefited positions - a phenomenon known as the “gig” economy (Ruyter et al., 2019). Project-based, flexible positions allow organizations to be more agile and to respond to changes in the market as a result of the impacts of technology. Organizations can shift, grow, and fade more quickly, requiring individual workers to adapt and leverage more diverse skills (The World Bank, 2019). In their book, *The Adaptation Advantage*, McGowan and Shipley (2020) described the need for workers to reimagine the trajectory of their careers. In McGowan and Shipley’s new conceptualization of career, they emphasized the importance of adaptability, engagement, and continuous learning of new skills (2020). This aligns with recommendations from The World Bank (2019) and challenges workers to bring new investment and intentionality to the way they approach education and career preparation.

Career services offices have begun the process of adapting to better prepare graduates for the world of work (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Several career services leaders have risen over the last ten years to positions of greater positional authority, and centers have evolved their names, strategies, and missions. They have drawn on technology to scale services, contracting with software vendors to reach more of the student population (Buford, 2022; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Efforts have increased to integrate career development and experiential learning into academic curricula, to better acknowledge its importance and increase accessibility for all students (Nester, 2022). Estimates indicate that somewhere between 30-40% of colleges have for-credit career courses (Lenz & Reardon, 2017; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021). This statistic was considered to be rising (Reardon & Fiore, 2014), and may be higher after the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting turmoil in the job market. Schools with roots in the liberal arts tradition have implemented bootcamps and other strategies to engage students in career development early (Belden-Castonguay, 2022).

Yet as colleges and universities work to adapt career services for a new economy, little is known about efforts to specifically address issues of equity in service delivery. While some attention has been paid to addressing issues of equality in access for limited-income, first generation, immigrant and international students (Stebbleton & Jehangir, 2020) there is limited attention to identifying ways to assess and address differential career *outcomes* among college graduates, that is, issues of *equity*, especially for BIPOC students (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021). In their article *Five Future Directions in University Career Services*, Dey and Cruzvergara (2019) described facilitating social mobility for a more diverse student population as a new foundational reality for career services in higher education:

Many institutions have demonstrated strong progress toward expanding access at the point of admission through thoughtful recruiting and enrollment management. However, for true equity and access to occur, we must invest across all aspects of the educational journey to ensure every student has an exceptional post-graduate outcome. By building infrastructure that supports students most in need, we benefit all students. While career success is the desired outcome, higher education's ultimate return on investment is equity (para. 3).

The language of attention to outcomes is significant, going beyond common rhetoric around providing equal service to all students. Without attending to outcomes, it is difficult to assess the impact of efforts to create greater equity in career services. In a book chapter titled *Defining Equity and Inclusion in the Future of Career Services*, Bates suggested that in order to infuse equity and inclusion into the practice of career education, career centers need to attend to both continuous staff training on issues of equity and to measuring the impact of their work through the lens of equity (2022). It is therefore necessary to better understand the ways in which equity is being discussed, infused and assessed in career services offices.

Racial Equity in Career Services

As mentioned earlier in this review, there is limited coverage in the scholarly literature about equity in college and university career services offices, and less still which specifically addresses the issue of racial equity or antiracism in career services. I will here review what literature exists on equity in career services generally, and then discuss attention to racial equity and antiracism.

There are many career services offices in the U.S., and each has its own mission, institutional structure, populations, and priorities. One challenge in determining how well racial

equity is addressed in career services is the relatively inconsistent use of assessment and metrics (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). This problem is often attributed to lack of resources, staff and professional time available to assess the impact and quality of services offered (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Ratcliffe, 2004). As mentioned in chapter One, the most recent set of CAS standards made explicit that all career services centers must design their programs and services to “address [the] interests and needs of diverse, multicultural, post-traditional students...with attention to students...who are underrepresented based on their experiences and identities” (Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019, p. 116). Another professional association with ties to career services, the National Association of Colleges and Employers, released a report titled *Positioning Career Services as An Institutional Strategic Priority* (NACE Career Services Strategic Positioning Task Force, 2022). This report described the importance of elevating career services within universities to better address students’ substantial career development needs following the Covid-19 pandemic. It offered six rationales for this work, one of which is to “help marginalized students build social capital, increase access to opportunities, and achieve career mobility” (NACE Career Services Strategic Positioning Task Force, 2022, p. 14). This represents another attempt to name equity as a priority. While these standards reflect calls to address equity in the field, little progress has been made and this review found limited evidence of consistent measurement of application of these standards in career services offices (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021).

One study by Carter et al. (2003) found racial differences in engagement with career services at a university in a sample of 1,051 students. Results of this study indicated that many students struggled with career decisions, and that these struggles negatively impacted their

psychological wellbeing. Asian and White students in the study were more likely to have been self-referred to career services or referred by a friend, compared with Black and Hispanic students. Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be referred by other offices, such as college counseling and academic services. The authors suggested that White friend networks played a significant role in White students' referrals. Notably, Black and Hispanic students' referrals by academic services carries motivational implications. According to Carter et al. (2003), "the fact that academic services appeared to refer Hispanics and Blacks [sic] more so than other groups might give these students the impression that career counseling is something they must comply with rather than choose for themselves" (p. 402). The authors recommended that career centers approach outreach more intentionally to address differences in perception about access and choice in career advising (Carter et al., 2003). Carter et al. (2003) also found that some students of color were less likely to cite psychological concerns in their reasons for seeking career advising, compared with White students. Finally, Black students were more likely to terminate services after one session than other groups (Carter et al., 2003). Though now somewhat dated, these findings began to paint an important picture of student engagement in career services.

More recently, Gebremicael et al. (2019) assessed Latine students' engagement with career services in liberal arts at Indiana University - Purdue University of Indianapolis (IUPUI). Citing Carter et al. (2003) and others, Gebremicael et al. (2019) wrote about the need for career centers to better serve BIPOC students, including Latine students - especially because of the discrimination they face in the workforce. Gebremicael et al.'s (2019) study participants were 98% White, in spite of their research question. Nonetheless, the authors recommended engaging

more students of color by conducting outreach to student groups and using social media strategies.

In 2023, Reid conducted a dissertation study on the experiences of Black students with career services offices at a northeastern institution. This hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry sought to clarify how Black university students perceive career development and what factors drive their engagement with the office. Reid found that students chose to engage with the office to seek clarity on how to apply their coursework in the job market. Yet the students also conveyed a desire for support in navigating work as members of a historically marginalized group and did not have confidence in their career services office's ability to support them on this. Reid recommended that career services offices provide more tailored support to students of marginalized ethnic and racial identities on navigating real and perceived barriers in their careers (2023).

One 2021 report, authored by the Career Leadership Collective on behalf of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, provided some data on the state of equity in career services. This represents the clearest picture as of the time of this writing on efforts to address racial equity in the field. The report advocated for expanding responsibility for student career success beyond the career center in order to better address equitable preparation. This speaks to the limited capacity of many career centers to address the issue of equity, as Chan and Cruzvergara (2021) and Dey and Cruzvergara (2019) have suggested. In its introduction, The Career Leadership Collective's (2021) report asserted that:

A critical and often missing piece in the student success equation is career advising...Problematically, most career advising is a stand-alone service passively offered to college students, but not required. As a result, career advising is relegated to an

optional, often ignored variable in the college experience, calling into question what that means for first-generation college students or others less likely to have been shown how to maximize success during the college experience (p. 5).

Though this report was not specifically focused on race (it included consideration for first-generation, limited-income students, and others), it did provide some sense of how centers are attending to equity. It synthesized data from what assessments do exist on the impact of career advising on marginalized students. Among its conclusions were concerns about equity in career service delivery, specifically that:

Few two-year, four-year, public or private colleges are strategic and intentional about collective, analyzing and using career advising data to discern equitable student success. Most of the researched practices which are likely to increase equitable student success outcomes reach a small number of students leaving a need for structural and sustainable solutions that can be implemented at scale so that higher education can increase equitable student success on campuses for more students (p. 7).

About 50% of surveyed institutions reported some or high integration of career advising beyond the career center, while the other 50% reported little or no integration. Moreover, when asked whether formal career centers were integrating strategies related to diversity, equity, and inclusion to support student success, the report found that responses varied widely. According to the report, about 17% of respondents reported that they were not integrating DEI efforts into the work of their formal career office. Another 34% reported that they were just beginning this work. Forty-seven percent reported that they had done some work and were continuing to invest in DEI priorities. Three percent of respondents reported having established robust DEI initiatives (Career Leadership Collective, 2021). While this did indicate that 83% of respondents surveyed

were attending to equity in career services in some way, we have little information about these efforts. Ultimately, the report found that while most campuses believe they are addressing equity and some can provide anecdotal testimonials, “few campuses have taken the time to specifically assess outcomes” (p. 29).

The report did share a few notable comments collected during their focus groups. I include these below, as they provide some qualitative context for the quantitative data (Career Leadership Collective, 2021, p. 29):

1. “Our office has quite a few partnerships or shared career programs that help minoritized groups...we tend to report on good things that happen during the programs, not on the outcomes.”
2. “We have the ability to see how our career programming engagement data by demographics relates to items like persistence or graduation, but we have yet to take a look.”
3. “Our campus leaders are more focused on basic career engagement data about racially minoritized students and first-generation students and have not requested other types of data.”

The report found indications that BIPOC students may be less likely to benefit from opt-in services, suggesting that mandatory services may be one path toward greater equity.

In a podcast episode on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the National Career Development Association, then-NCDA-president Lakeisha Mathews (2023), and guest Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, described the need for college and university career centers to directly address racial disparities in career outcomes, and specifically, to better address the needs of underrepresented and racial minority students. Dr. Zamani-Gallaher suggested that our

institutions and workplaces are not race-neutral and therefore our career services approach must directly address race. She described career services offices that serve students without directly addressing race as race avoidant. She also described the critical importance of having candid conversations about race in career centers, and of affirming the worth of students of color. Finally, she suggested we get more honest with each other about how the backgrounds of career advisors affect their career development work, and be sure to set and measure progress on racial equity goals. Both speakers on the podcast shared stories about having been directed toward career options based on stereotypes about their racial identities (Mathews, 2023). These suggestions and stories serve as a useful summary of the ways in which race impacts the service provided at college and university career centers.

It is likely that some career services professionals in higher education are leveraging strategies from the wider career development and counseling literature, which includes substantial coverage of multicultural considerations and issues of equity. Fickling's (2016) and Fickling et al.'s (2018) empirical work indicated that some career center leaders and advisors do attend to social justice, though primarily during individual student appointments in the form of empowering conversations. More systematic or data-driven initiatives toward antiracism seem to be inconsistently applied, if at all. In the words of Dr. Monica P. Band, a featured guest in a recent National Career Development Association Career Practitioner conversation regarding equity in career development, "We're not even at equity. We've got to get to equality first" (Givens, 2022, 5:22).

Career Services Professionals' Understandings of Social Justice and Racial Equity

A few studies have specifically assessed career services professionals' understandings of racial equity in career development practice. These contributions illuminate the ways that career

professionals define social justice and address issues of equity in their leadership and practice. Fickling et al. (2018) conducted a study exploring the perspectives of university career center directors regarding social justice in their work. Fickling et al. described many participants' definition of social justice as serving all students and sometimes attending to the needs of marginalized students, for instance in the form of targeted outreach. At least one participant noted that continuing education and training on issues of equity are considered optional, after the primary work of the office is done. Moreover, several shared the sentiment that the role of a director is to model fair practice and to emphasize the importance of diversity and social justice, without necessarily taking specific action. These sentiments seem to point to an equality approach to service, rather than an equity approach.

A few empirical studies have been conducted, examining the perspectives of career counselors on the practice of social justice in their work. Fickling (2016) interviewed 19 career counselors from around the U.S. The sample was 68% female, and 84% White (2 Black and 1 multiracial participant). 63% of Fickling's participants were employed in higher education career offices. Fickling found that the counselors principally focused on supporting clients to develop stronger self-advocacy skills as individuals, locating their social justice work at the individual level. Counselors differed in their perception of how much leadership in their organizations support social justice advocacy, but several felt that it was not their responsibility to push for structural change. Some felt that social justice conversations were divisive and perceived that their peers did not want to have conversations due to their own White identities and personal discomfort. Fickling found that age and experience appeared to be relevant variables; younger counselors were more likely to consider advocacy important, beyond the individual level with clients. Notably, lack of time to think about and practice advocacy was cited by most as a

barrier, along with lack of skill and confidence in one's ability to advocate, especially at the political/social level.

McMahon et al. (2008) assessed the attitudes of 26 Australian professional association members of career development practitioner associations, some of which worked in university settings. Of the participants, 23 were female and 23 identified as White. The researchers used a social justice and career development survey - which they developed themselves - in order to gather information about professional needs and best practices in social justice. The survey asked participants to define social justice as it relates to career practice. They were then asked questions about their practice of career development, the resources they desire to do social justice work and barriers to practicing social justice. Results indicated that 10 participants noted the importance of equal access to services for students and clients - reflecting an inclusive philosophy of social justice. These participants also stressed the importance of awareness of an individual's vulnerability or marginalization. In general, participants cited a number of barriers to social justice practice in their work, including injustice itself and client struggles at work due to marginalization. A few shared structural barriers in their employment spaces. Most participants focused on individual intervention, fewer talked about engaging with government, employer, society and other structural elements. Once again, this study found that a significant number of Australian career development practitioners in this sample held some social justice values. Most were focused on practicing these values through individual empowerment.

Arthur et al. (2009) examined 151 Canadian career counselors' definitions of social justice and views on the practice of social justice in their work. Some of their participants worked primarily in higher education settings and most identified as White. This qualitative study found that definitions of social justice differed, and that barriers such as lack of time, lack

of financial support, and even lack of colleague support were identified as problematizing the practice of social justice in participants' work. These studies represent important efforts to assess staff understandings of equity and social justice in career development practice and identify barriers to engaging with equity in these settings.

Limited work exists on career center professionals' perceptions of racial differences in their work. Carter et al. (2003) included career services professionals' perceptions of different students by race as those students sought career advising. In their study, the authors noted that no other work assessing staff perceptions of student experiences with career services in relation to race had been done. Carter et al. (2003) found that Black students – compared with White, Asian, and Hispanic students - were perceived by career counselors to experience the least positive change as a result of career advising. In fact, the perceived change for Black students was found to be slightly negative on average. This perceived negative change raises the question of harm – that is, some counselors in the study indicated that Black students may be worse off as a result of their career counseling. In the study, Carter et al. (2003) also found that Black students were most likely not to return for a second session, perhaps supporting staff perceptions of negative or neutral impact.

Carter et al. (2003) stated that no other work assessing staff perceptions of students' experiences with career services in relation to race had been done. Many years have passed since this assessment. I conducted a search for articles that had cited Carter et al.'s (2003) piece, and there were seven results. None of these articles included additional information about staff perceptions of their work for racial implications, underscoring the need for more empirical work in this area.

This study offers several contributions to the literature. Little empirical work has been done to explore understandings of racial equity among career professionals in higher education. There is one scholarly study on racial equity in career services by Carter et al. (2003). The researchers explored student engagement with a career center through the lens of racial identity. They found that career counselors perceived that their services had a more positive impact on students who did not identify as Black. They also found that Black and Latine students were more likely to be referred to career services by academic support services, and hypothesized that these students might be less likely to seek out these services on their own.

Summary

Many BIPOC graduates face significant barriers to career development and professional success both during and after obtaining a bachelor's degree (Bates, 2022; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; de Brey et al., 2019; Lloyd, 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). At the same time, the world of work is rapidly changing, along with the demands placed on modern workers, creating an ecosystem of economic precarity (Aarts et al., 2021; Blustein et al., 2019-b; Hooley et al., 2018; International Labour Organization, 2017; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021). Career services units in higher education - increasingly asked to do more with less - are tasked with serving the diverse career needs of all students (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014, 2019; Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019). Yet analysis and action on racial equity in these offices is not yet widespread (Givens, 2022). Limited resources, training, and staffing in career services has acted as a barrier to fully engaging in equity conversations (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; Tang, 2003).

In order to adequately support BIPOC students' career development, it is important to assess the status of racial equity in career services programming and services. Significant literature exists on social justice and equity in higher education and in the realm of career counseling more broadly (Blustein, 2006; Blustein et al., 2019-a; Fickling, 2016; McNair et al., 2020; McPherson, 2015; Sultana, 2014). Research on racial equity and antiracism in career services offices in higher education represents a gap. This study aims to expand our understanding of how career services professionals define racial equity, how they interpret the lack of consistent attention to and action on antiracism in the field, and what an antiracist career development practice in higher education might look like by gathering insights from a career center which is formally practicing antiracism.

This study will pursue one central research question:

What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?

Secondary research questions include:

- How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?
- What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
- What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

In answering these questions, I hope to advance the conversation on racial equity in higher education and explore ways for career services to lead the effort to create greater social mobility and success for BIPOC graduates. For many, work represents hope for the future, service and social connection, and more. For most, work is necessary for survival (Blustein et al., 2019-a; International Labour Organization, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2020). Higher education has an

opportunity to support the success and wellbeing of BIPOC graduates through a sharper understanding of and renewed attention to racial equity in career services.

Chapter 3: Methodology

College and university career educators seek to provide equitable career support for all students, regardless of background and identity (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Givens, 2022; Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019). Yet, several authors and career leaders have highlighted the need for increased attention to marginalized students' career development in higher education – noting that these students often have unequal social and economic outcomes in spite of access to many of the same services (Buford et al., 2022; Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; de Brey et al., 2019; Givens, 2022; Mathews, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). As discussed in Chapter One, in order to close equity gaps for BIPOC students in career development, higher education institutions need to find ways to address racial inequity in outcomes and implement antiracism initiatives that identify specific equity goals and strategies (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; McNair et al., 2020).

Though there exist studies and theoretical models on social justice in career development and social justice education (L. A. Bell, 2007; Blustein et al., 2019-a, 2019-b; Chapman & Hobbel, 2010; Fraser, 2000; McWhirter & McWha-Hermann, 2021; Minow, 2021) and a few studies on social justice practice in career services (Arthur et al., 2009; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; McMahan et al., 2008), empirical work examining racial equity in career practice is needed. This study explores beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in a university career center that has centered the practice of equity in their programs, services, and assessment. This center represents an exceptional case in that the unit is well-resourced, data-driven, and sits within an elite institution. I use a number of theoretical lenses to explore the ways in which

issues of equity and race manifest within the work of the center. This chapter will describe the conceptual and theoretical framework of my study and the methods used.

This study addresses the following research question, and subquestions, through qualitative case study analysis:

Primary Question:

- What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?

Subquestions:

1. How do career services professionals define racial equity?
2. What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
3. What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

Positionality

I bring a unique positionality to this research in that I have lived experience with racial discrimination and have worked for more than ten years in career development practice in higher education settings. I believe that my positionality will likely serve as a source of insight and is important to disclose given my personal history with the topic and my proximity to some participants in professional experience and personal identity. I identify as a member of the BIPOC community - specifically a Black woman raised in southern Ohio. I was socialized into my identity by a Black family – descendants of American slaves - with both midwestern and southern roots. As such, I have experiences with racial difference and marginalization, which I hope will offer unique insight into the complexities of race. I do hold beliefs about race and

racism that reflect my own life experience, which will shape my work on this topic. At the time of this writing, I have significant experience working in career services in higher education, in both staff and faculty roles, at three different universities and one non-profit, and across three regions of the United States.

I engaged in reflexivity throughout this study, keeping a reflexive journal in order to continually surface my own observations, values, reactions, and beliefs about the work as I carried it out. This was warranted, not only because of the complex nature of the topic, but also because of my critical paradigm and use of reflexive thematic analysis as an analytical tool (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) described the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research in order to raise awareness about the researcher's identities, values, beliefs, and positionality to the research, all of which shape their design, approach, theoretical assumptions, data collection and analysis, and presentation of the work. Reflexivity rejects the concept of impartiality, and instead, I worked to illuminate my assumptions and values in the research, just as I collected and interpreted the assumptions and beliefs of my participants. I will describe my ontology, epistemology, and paradigmatic stance on the research below.

Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

Paradigm

This study will draw on a critical paradigm, rooted in the understanding that there are multiple truths, that individuals make sense of their surroundings via interpretation, and that history, power, and politics are solid realities that impact institutions, systems, and individuals and which produce both just and unjust outcomes (McCrorry, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sipe & Constable, 1996). Given that this study examines racial equity, issues of social construction, politics, identity, and power are central to the conversation (L. A. Bell, 2007;

Zamalin, 2019). A critical paradigm will focus this inquiry on those elements of practice and facilitate the envisioning of antiracist career development in higher education.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into focus for many career scholars the inherent tension in career development between dismantling and reproducing inequity (Higashi & Stebleton, 2020; McCrory, 2022). At the same time, some scholars and practitioners have expressed concerns about centering identity and social justice in career development (McCrory, 2022; Sultana, 2014). One concern that has been articulated is that a focus on social justice may result in the unequal treatment of students and clients, in order to address historical inequality. Another critique is that career development as a discipline should focus primarily on the individual – their own agency and fulfillment (McCrory, 2022). McCrory (2022) has written about this tension, suggesting that these arguments in part reflect an a-historical and a-political approach to career development.

McCrory (2022) argued that career development is neither a-historical nor a-political: “...socially just career work requires that we move beyond individualized conceptualizations of career and of agency and move towards thinking about the inherently collective and ethico-political dimensions of career decision-making, career development and career scholarship, research and practice” (p. 505). McCrory (2022), Cook et al. (2002), and Sultana (2014) have advocated for a more complex understanding of career development and for the rejection of an oversimplified model of career that ignores anything other than individual agency. This study will carry through McCrory’s (2022) approach to career development that acknowledges the systemic factors and power dynamics that guide understandings of career and work and that shape the practice of career development in higher education.

Ontology and Epistemology

My ontological and epistemological assumptions reflect my critical paradigm. These philosophical elements shape the ways that researchers conceive of knowledge and reality, and these assumptions ultimately shape the research process. Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality, that is, what constitutes something real. Epistemology refers to the relationship between the researcher and what is being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontologically, I assume that realities are socially constructed and shift over time. I do not assume a single truth or reality that can be objectively measured. Similarly, I assume that power shapes the construction of reality and that knowledge is socially constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018). These assumptions are reflected in my qualitative case study methodology, which seeks to illuminate the ways that participants and career services spaces construct ideas about career, work, race, and equity. Given this paradigm, and these assumptions, I will next describe the conceptual and theoretical frameworks guiding the research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is antiracism. Antiracism, as articulated by Kendi (2019), recognizes the embeddedness of racism and ideologies of white racial superiority in American institutions, such as universities and workplaces. It problematizes the concept of a race-neutral stance, confirming that ignoring or denying race perpetuates racial inequality. This framework is underscored by the persistence of race-based inequality in the world and in the U.S. today (de Brey et al., 2019; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; United Nations, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Kendi (2019) defined antiracism as “a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas” (p. 20). Kendi (2019) asserts that “racist

policy” is a better target of antiracist intervention than “racial discrimination,” which can be individual, may be ambiguous, and may or may not be tied to policy. Kendi argued that focusing on racial discrimination can distract from what he considers the key drivers of racism, racist policies and racist policymakers. Within the higher education context, a focus on antiracism might mean evaluating policies for racial implications, and assessing the causes of racial inequality.

Consistent with Kendi’s (2019) understanding of antiracism, McNair et al. (2020) describe obstacles to racial equity in higher education will serve as a foundation for grasping the nature of resistance to racial equity efforts in the higher education context. Of particular use for this inquiry is what the authors describe as obstacles to the practice of racial equity in higher education. These include (McNair et al., 2020, pp. 21-51):

1. Claiming to Not See Race
2. Not Being Able or Willing to Notice Racialized Consequences
3. Skirting Around Race
4. Resisting Calls to Disaggregate Data by Race and Ethnicity
5. Substituting Race Talk with Poverty Talk
6. The Pervasiveness of White Privilege and Institutionalized Racism
7. Evasive Reactions to Racist Incidents
8. The Incapacity to See Institutional Racism in Familiar Routines
9. The Myth of Universalism
10. Seeing Racial Inequities as a Reflection of Academic Deficiency

These obstacles help to illuminate manifestations of antiracism in a higher education context. McNair et al.'s (2020) work is practice-oriented, and will serve as a theoretical framework for understanding forms of resistance to antiracism in higher education.

Dei (2005) has written about antiracism as an approach to research. Dei names a few premises upon which antiracism functions:

Antiracism is about power relations. Antiracism discourse moves away from discussions of tolerating diversity to the pointed notion of difference and power. It sees race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy, and defend spaces. The task of antiracism is to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression. Specifically, and as many have pointed out, antiracism discourse highlights persistent inequities in communities, focusing on relations of domination and subordination (2005, p. 3).

This description captures the centering of power and the importance of examining the structures and policies of spaces in order to trace the impacts and manifestations of racism and to highlight differences and inequities.

One distinction key to antiracism is to distinguish between what Dei (2005) called “liberal multiculturalism” (p. 5) and antiracism itself. Within an antiracist framework, the project of antiracism assumes that empathy, goodwill, and recognition will not be enough to counteract the pervasive impacts of racism and the construction of nations rooted in racial inequity. Liberal multiculturalism, as defined by Dei (2005), suggests that racial and cultural inequity are essentially a natural result of misunderstanding and miscommunication, and that awareness is the central path to remedying these problems. The concept of liberal multiculturalism might be identified by Kendi (2019) as an attempt to minimize the reality of racism.

Two tensions lie at the heart of this distinction. One tension revolves around intention. Under liberal multiculturalism, racism might be seen as an accidental product of cultural integration. Racism would not necessarily be considered deliberate, but rather an inadvertent failing of recognition of BIPOC communities. By recognizing and empathizing with the experiences of BIPOC people, liberal multiculturalism offers to create a harmonious environment where all cultures are equal (Dei, 2005). This vision speaks to the second tension, whether or not true equity requires treating different racial groups differently. If inequity is anomalous, as liberal multiculturalism would maintain, then solutions need not be systemic or pervasive. If instead, deliberate exclusion is a fundamental project of colonialism and nation-building, the remedy must be actively embedded in every part of society (Dei, 2005). This study will draw on antiracism in order to illuminate these tensions as they appear in the work of career services offices.

Limitations of Antiracism

Reduced to Abstraction

One limitation of antiracism, articulated by Zamalin (2019), Kendi (2019), Bonilla-Silva (2021), and others is its potential to be reduced to an “abstract philosophical orientation” (Zamalin, 2019, p. 7). Zamalin (2019) and Kendi (2019) both cite the tendency of many people and corporations in the U.S. to espouse antiracist values that are not in line with the rigorous and specific political engagement required of true antiracism. Zamalin (2019) cites former U.S. president Donald Trump’s claim that he is the least racist person in the world, and other claims by U.S. officials that seem to consider racism a conscious hatred of BIPOC people. Because antiracism does not yet have a shared and testable theoretical model for identifying racism and antiracism in many contexts, it is vulnerable to reduction in this way.

McNair et al. (2020) also described the danger of reducing equity to abstraction and not employing specific and shared language and goals in antiracist work. A lack of specificity threatens to reduce racism to individual beliefs, rather than a structural and historical force. Antiracist writers and scholars have drawn attention to the historical siloing of racism to a few individuals who expressed hatred of BIPOC people, and the minimization of its impact across American society and globally (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Dei, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Zamalin, 2019).

Liberal Equality and Self-Sabotage

Given that antiracism operates on the premise that race and racism are ubiquitous facets of American society, many critics of antiracism challenge the focus on difference and identity inherent in antiracist ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Dei, 2005; Kendi, 2019; Smith, 2019; Zamalin, 2019). Approaches to navigating difference that focus only on empathy, equality, and goodwill - sometimes called liberal multiculturalism (Dei, 2005) or color-blind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2021) - emphasize commonalities between racial and ethnic groups and aspire to either celebrate difference or minimize it. Bonilla-Silva (2021) describes the four frames of color-blind racism, which imply that racial inequities are a natural part of human social life, rather than a deliberate component of nation-building and colonization. These frames explain racial inequities in terms of human nature, the cultural deficiencies of BIPOC communities, and a kind of economic natural selection.

These frames appear in many forums, and have been advanced by thinkers such as Smith (2019), who suggested that antiracism's emphasis on difference, victimization, and identity politics represented a modern social ill. Smith described this as society turning on itself and sabotaging its own progress (2019). Antiracism to Smith, results in a waste of time and energy rather than true collaboration across identity groups. Community insularity is described as a

threat to societal advancement. In essence, Smith critiques antiracism for an overemphasis on identity and inequity rather than a focus on unity and collaboration.

Smith (2019) specifically addressed the issue of immunity to blame on the basis of identity, a critique consistent with Bonilla-Silva's (2021) description of cultural racism - one of the four frames of color-blind racism. Cultural racism suggests that there is something inherent in BIPOC cultures that can explain inequities in society. Smith argued that antiracism discourages blaming BIPOC individuals or groups for contemporary inequities, a way of thinking similar to cultural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Presumably, to Smith (2019), some inequities can be explained either by the cultures or individual choices of BIPOC people.

Rejecting the Binary

Perhaps central to Smith's (2019) critiques of antiracism is the idea of Kendi's (2019) binary - a policy or individual can either be racist or antiracist, but not neutral. Smith expressed frustration that antiracism in his view regards BIPOC communities and individuals as "sacred" (2019, p. 18). He described the philosophies of antiracism as religion-like in that they consider themselves "infallible and universal" (2019, p. 18). "The sacred victim [of racism] cannot be questioned, challenged, or engaged with civil debate; to do so is tantamount to sacrilege" (2019, p. 19). Smith bemoans the tendency for antiracism to require White people to engage in virtue signaling and self-flagellation, because of their privilege. This, according to Smith, results in a loss of critical thinking and healthy debate about race (2019).

Smith (2019) would likely argue that there exists a third category in Kendi's (2019) model of antiracism, that of the well-meaning skeptic who is neither racist nor fully in support of antiracism. This category may also allow room for an individual who chooses inaction in the face of racism because they believe that race is not the principal culprit for inequity. The fourth frame

of color-blind racism, minimizing racism, might be in line with this way of thinking (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Minimizing racism highlights all of the social forces other than race which impact communities and individuals. This minimization, to thinkers like Smith (2019), might justify a kind of abstinence on antiracism, due to a focus on other aspects of equity.

For this purposes of this study, two relevant premises of antiracism as a conceptual framework include (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Kendi, 2019; Smith, 2019):

- Due to global and national history, and the long-term impacts of overtly racist structures and policies, racism is deeply embedded in contemporary American institutions, structures, and policies
- In order to undertake antiracism, it is necessary to take action to identify and change racist thinking, structures, and policies

These assumptions guide the collection of data, analysis, and interpretation of this research.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two frameworks will provide a theoretical foundation for this study - color-blind racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022) and actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Hunter & Swan, 2007; Landri, 2020; Latour, 1987). The complex and multidisciplinary nature of examining racial equity efforts in career services departments warrants more than one theoretical lens. Scholarly understandings of racism and antiracism continue to evolve, and career services as a field is experiencing an evolution. Below, I will describe two frameworks that illuminate this intersection, with the understanding that these concepts are dynamic and have evolved through the process of the research itself.

Color-Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI)

Color-blind racial ideology has been described as an “ultramodern” (Neville et al., 2013) p. 455) and evolving form of racial discrimination which seeks to deny or minimize the impacts of racism by emphasizing sameness, prioritizing a color-blind stance on race, and denying the existence of institutional racism and racial power differentials within systems (Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022). Some proponents of this ideology believe that it is our modern focus on race which perpetuates disparities, and that the path to equality should involve eliminating discussion and action on race-based differences and inequities.

Two Dimensions

Frankenberg (1993) described two dimensions of CBRI – color-evasion and power-evasion. Neville et al. (2013) elaborated on Frankenberg’s model, presenting characteristics of the CBRI dimensions. Their conceptualization of the model is included in *Figure 1* below.

Figure 1. Dimensions of CBRI

From *Color-Blind Racial Ideology: Theory, Training, and Measurement Implications in Psychology* (p. 457), by Neville, H. A., Awad, G. H., Brooks, J. E., Flores, M. P., and Bluemel, J., 2013 (<https://doi-org/10.1037/a0033282>). Copyright 2013 by Neville, H. A., Awad, G. H., Brooks, J. E., Flores, M. P., & Bluemel, J. Reprinted with permission.

Characteristic	Color-Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI) dimensions	
	Color-evasion	Power-evasion
Definition	Denial of potential racial differences by emphasizing sameness	Denial of racism by emphasizing the belief that everyone has the same opportunities
Type(s)	Denial of "race"	Denial/minimization of (a) blatant racial issues, (b) institutional racism, and (c) White privilege
Example	"I don't see the color of the person"; "I don't notice race"; "We are all the same"	"Racism is <i>not</i> a major issue in American society"; "Everyone has an equal chance to succeed in society"; "Racism against Whites is a major problem in society"
Underlying assumptions	(Ineffective) strategy to reduce racial prejudice; masks discomfort in interracial interactions	Legitimizing ideology to justify the racial status quo; ultramodern expression of racism in society
Alternative perspective	Multiculturalism	Color-consciousness
Elements of CBRI in Whites	Discomfort in the presence of people of color and/or when discussing racial issues; increased engagement in racial microaggressions	Increased racial intolerance/prejudice, modern racism, racial anger and fear, belief in a just world, and social dominance; lower cultural empathy and multicultural competencies
Elements of CBRI in people of color	Discomfort discussing racial issues; fewer interracial friendships	Increased internalized oppression; lower multicultural competencies and provision of racial socialization

Color-evasion and power-evasion can be viewed as related but distinct manifestations of CBRI, one of which focuses on denial of racial differences and the other of which focuses on denial of racism. Importantly, as it relates to career, power-evasion upholds the concept of equal opportunity and legitimizes the status quo, i.e. racial inequality in education and career (Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022).

Neville et al. (2013) described the impacts of this ideology in White and BIPOC peoples. For White communities, CBRI can serve to legitimize racial inequality and produce discomfort with discussion and action on racial issues. It may contribute to engagement in microaggressions, racial intolerance, anger, and fear. It may create the perception of a just world, and reduce skill and empathy for engaging with racism – individual and systemic. For BIPOC communities, CBRI can produce a similar discomfort discussing and engaging with racial issues, and reduce engagement in interracial friendships. It can also result in more internalized oppression, where BIPOC people internalize racism ideas and self-concepts. It can reduce BIPOC people's

multicultural competence and reduce their ability to socialize other BIPOC people around racial identity.

Early Origins

Interestingly, in James Bryce's writing on racial differences around the world, Bryce (1902) proposed what may be seen as an early form of a CBRI as a strategy for reducing hostility among races due to European conquest. Bryce said:

The races of mankind have been and are being reduced in number by Extinction, by Absorption, and by Admixture. The races that remain, fewer in number, but nearly every one of them larger, are being brought into a closer contact with one another, and the lower races are being raised in the arts of life, in knowledge, and in intelligence...closer contact and the increase of population bring with them a more severe economic struggle for life between races, and may bring hostile conflicts, in which the Backward races may prove less conspicuously weaker than heretofore. What can be done to mitigate antagonism and to reduce the risks of collision? A larger philosophy may do much. A deeper and more earnest faith, which should strive to carry out in practice that sense of human brotherhood which Christianity inculcates, might do still more (Adenda).

Bryce described the opportunity to develop a larger philosophy of common brotherhood in the hopes that the violence may be minimized, and races may work together for common advancement.

CBRI represents a related concept – an ideology that denies, avoids, and minimizes racial differences and inequities in order to promote harmony and/or preserve the status quo. In this way, though CBRI is often described as a modern manifestation of racism, it does have some historical roots (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022).

The Four Frames of CBRI

Bonilla-Silva (2021) suggested that CBRI contains four frames, which he described as “set paths for interpreting information” (p. 54). These frames provide the “how” of CBRI by offering ways to engage with racism and cultural difference as it appears in the world. Bonilla-Silva’s four frames (2021) are *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism*. *Abstract liberalism* suggests that individual choice should be protected over efforts to create social change through policy. This includes opposition to policies or programs that might support some identity groups more than others, or any policies that factor in race, such as affirmative action. It also emphasizes individual freedom and opportunity, and the ability of all individuals to theoretically access any program or service. It ignores the significant inequality in representation on the basis of race in wealthy and powerful spaces. *Naturalization* is a frame which suggests that racial phenomena, including inequities, occur naturally. This frame obscures the significant, organized, and strategic effort and policy that created racial hierarchies and the disparities that exist today. *Cultural racism* refers to the use of culture-based arguments to explain the unequal standing of BIPOC communities in the modern world. Cultural racism has replaced biological arguments of BIPOC inferiority that were pervasive into the 20th century (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). While white supremacist organizations continue to use biological and cultural arguments today, cultural arguments are more common in public spaces. These arguments include accusations of low-work-ethic, ignorance, moral-deficiency, weakness, deviousness and other similar narratives about BIPOC communities. These arguments are used to justify modern racial inequity and to obscure the role of racism in creating and maintaining these inequities. *Minimization of racism* as a frame proposes that discrimination no longer plays an important role in shaping BIPOC individuals’ lives and careers. This frame deprioritizes race-

based violence and discrimination, and contributes to narratives about BIPOC sensitivity and intentional wielding of racism in order to gain social favor. It only acknowledges blatant forms of racism, and neglects other more subtle and institutional forms (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). These four frames help to explicate the ways that CBRI may be employed to justify racial inequality and deprioritize perception of and action on racial issues.

Bonilla-Silva (2021) and others have called CBRI and similar ideologies the new racism, and Bonilla-Silva describes CBRI as “slippery” and “a curious ideology” (p. 53, 2021). This is due to the indirect nature of how it justifies racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva (p. 54, 2021) says:

The central component of any dominant racial ideology is its frames or *set paths for interpreting information*. These set paths operate as cul-de-sacs because after people filter issues through them, they explain racial phenomena following a predictable route.

Although by definition dominant frames must *misrepresent* the world (hide the fact of dominance), this does not mean that they are totally without foundation. (For instance, it is true that people of color in the United States are much better off today than at any other time in history. However, it is also true—facts hidden by color-blind racism—that because people of color still experience *systematic* discrimination and remain appreciably behind whites in many important areas of life, their chances of catching up with whites are very slim.)

Important to this case study is the fact that CBRI acts as a filter through which information is interpreted. Thus, it may serve as a framework for interpreting responses to racial information shared by administrators, staff, and students in career services offices.

Limitations

One limitation of CBRI is its reliance on a racial binary – White and non-White. As of the time of this writing, CBRI scholars provide limited detail on the unique ways race impacts people of different ethnic and national identities, and the way it intersects with other identities, such as class or LGBTQPIA+ identities. Notably, Yi et al. (2022) addressed the specific impacts of antiblackness, and other writers will likely elaborate on CBRI and its intersectional implications in future work.

In order to address complexities and intersectionalities in this case study, I will use CBRI in conjunction with actor-network theory, which examines complexities in actors and systems. As addressed in my literature review, BIPOC individuals with different intersectional identities and ethnicities have somewhat different post-undergraduate outcomes – unemployment and salary metrics, for instance (de Brey et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Class, nationality, and gender intersections are present in my case, and so I will address these as I look at elements of vertical comparison of perspectives among participants (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

CBRI represents an important lens for understanding beliefs and assumptions about racism in part because it details the ways this ideology shapes what individuals and institutions are willing to notice and respond to (Dawson, 2001). In the case of a career center, beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the perception, willingness, and ability to engage with race in the organization. Leaders and staff who can “see” racial issues and inequities may be more willing to respond to these issues. Leaders and staff who cannot see racial issues and inequities, may be more unwilling or unable to effectively respond to them. Given the empirical links between CBRI and reduced empathy for BIPOC people, career educators who consciously or

unknowingly hold these ideologies may have reduced skill and willingness to support BIPOC students (Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022).

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

Another theoretical framework which has utility in critical qualitative research is actor-network theory (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Landri, 2020). ANT was originally developed by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987) for use in examining the social implications of new technologies. I will draw on ANT as articulated by Landri (2020) and by Hunter and Swan (2007), who have applied the theory in educational and social change contexts. ANT emphasizes the importance of networks, both physical and digital, for the transmission of power, information, and meaning. It also considers both human and non-human actors important in shaping and driving the creation and evolution of networks (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Landri, 2020).

In this historical moment, many career services staff members engage in social and professional networks within their organizations, national and international networks in professional associations such as the National Career Development Association, and in digital networks, such as online career communities, podcasts, articles, and social media domains related to the field of career development (LinkedIn, Twitter etc.). They also engage with technology and data in their practice, which actor-network considers non-human actors (Landri, 2020). Landri (2020) described the importance of data and digital platforms in educational spaces:

Platforms create spaces of interconnection between teachers, headteachers, students, parents, administrators and bureaucratic agencies...Platforms are also crucial for school evaluation and educational planning...Platforms are not merely a neutral tool, as they

orient the way schools define themselves and suggest the most valid research evidence-based knowledge to inform their capacity to improve organizational action....these digital formations affect school orientation and reinforce an ‘epistemology of seeing’ that tends to pay more attention to the most visible and measurable aspects of education, leaving the rest on the periphery of a school’s attention (pp. 52-53).

All of these actors, systems, and networks serve as sources of information about notions of equity, equality, access, and social justice in educational units. For example, the National Career Development Association has recently launched a podcast exploring theory, practice, and definitions in the field. A recent episode explored issues of equity in career development practice (Givens, 2022). In accordance with ANT, these digital and physical networks are emerging, dissolving, and evolving every day. I will use ANT to explore the role of non-human actors, technology, communication, and networks in the study.

Limitations of ANT

One limitation of actor-network theory is that, on its own, it may fail to adequately acknowledge power differentials and oppression within communities (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Landri, 2020). Hunter and Swan (2007) named this limitation, suggesting that “...ANT tends to avoid macro notions such as institutions, state, class, ‘race,’ or gender (p. 406). It is therefore necessary in my study to apply the lens of ANT together with my conceptual framework and CBRI, which directly address power and identity. I plan to take a critical stance in this study and will be addressing issues of inequality and power imbalance directly. ANT will be used to explore the origins of participants’ understandings of career development, equality, equity, access, and social justice and to gain more clarity on how they imagine equity work being practiced in career services. Yet, I will supplement this theory with my conceptual framework

and color-blind racial ideology in order to adequately address the historical and macro-factors that will influence participants' beliefs and assumptions about racial equity.

Critics have also called attention to the tendency of ANT to treat human and non-human actors as similar entities within organizations. Walsham (1997) described this criticism, suggesting that ANT may not adequately acknowledge human agency and responsibility. My critical paradigm and use of antiracism as a conceptual framework for this study will address this gap in ANT and provide a framework for understanding agency and power dynamics in equity spaces.

Finally, Walsham (1997) articulated a contribution of ANT that explores the fixedness of non-human technologies in networks. This immutability is something that several writers on ANT have debated (Walsham, 1997). For example, if we are to regard databases in a career center as immutable actors, this carries implications for equity work. In order to address this limitation, and because data are important non-human actors in this case, I will describe the ways in which the data in the unit dynamically shape and are shaped by human interpreters. CBRI may supplement ANT on this topic, in that an unwillingness to engage with race and racism may reduce the movability of data in this case. I will explore this further in my analysis. Next, I will describe my research methodology and the design of the study in more depth.

Research Methodology and Study Design

Methodology

In order to explore beliefs and practices regarding racial equity in career centers, I will be using a **qualitative case study** approach, focusing on a single university office (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The term case study has been used to describe a variety of methodological approaches (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to provide specificity on the

structure and rationale behind this study, I will briefly describe the evolution of case study as a method.

Though case studies can involve both quantitative and qualitative inquiry, case study methodology is often considered to exist within the broader category of qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the defining characteristics of qualitative research (pp. 14-18):

- Focus on meaning and understanding
- Researcher as primary instrument
- An inductive process
- Rich description

In general, qualitative research is designed to understand situations in a particular context and while it may shed light on situations beyond its particular foci, is not necessarily designed to be generalizable. It is conducted for the purpose of understanding the nature of things in depth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Evolving Understandings of Case Study

There are some differences in the underlying philosophy and practice of case study. Several scholars have advocated for different approaches (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). I will briefly describe a few of these philosophies and then describe the approach I have selected for this study – Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) – and the rationale for using that approach.

Yin (2018) described case study as a method in some depth, and other scholars have referred to this work, which was originally published as a first edition work in 2003. Hancock et al. (2021), drawing on Yin (2018), defined a case study as “conducting an empirical

investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2018, as cited in Hancock et al., p. 15). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) suggested a number of areas for evolution for case study research.

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) took issue with the traditional understanding of case studies as *bounded* – within a clearly defined context – and as focused only on contemporary phenomena. They suggested a new approach to case study that broadens the method to examine cases comparatively in order to make bolder statements about a phenomenon. They recommended that case study researchers think carefully about the roles of culture, context, and comparison, drawing on a critical lens to illuminate issues of power (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) wrote that their “[comparative case study] heuristic warns against static and essentializing notions of culture, recommends attention to cultural repertoires and contestation, and emphasizes the need to consider power relations within a single institution or community and across communities, states, and nations. [Their approach] also suggests that researchers pay particular attention to language, discourse, texts, and institutions as important social and policy actors” (p. 11). Accordingly, the analysis of this study acknowledged the complexity and subjectivity of culture, and took into account the macro-culture of the site of research, as well as subcultures within the institution. It attended to the histories involved in the case, and how beliefs and practices evolved over time.

My approach to this case is consistent with Bartlett and Vavrus’ (2017) critical paradigm and careful consideration of culture, power, and socio-political context. Due to the paucity of qualitative studies on racial equity in career services units, I chose to study a single career center in depth, giving significant attention to the evolution and practice of racial equity and the underlying understandings of race, equity, and work that guide this practice. My focus on a

single career services unit is intentional. Yet, it is important to note here that Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) lead with the understanding that case “sites” are not necessarily bounded by location. That is, though I explore one career center site, through my use of vertical comparison, I explore the nature of relationships throughout and beyond the unit. In this case, understandings of race, equity, and work are shaped by participants’ experiences in multiple “sites” of practice, digital and physical, and by their membership in different personal and professional communities. Many participants referred to their learning about equity in various spaces external to the career center site, such as professional networks, texts, personal relationships, and other spaces. This multiplicity of influences expands the study beyond a simplified, bounded site, and instead allows for rich vertical comparison. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) suggest that comparative case studies “cannot be ‘bounded’ from the start of the study...A comparative case study looks across scales and consider [sic] how scales intersect, through a process of inquiry that follows the phenomenon” (p. 47). Thus, my inquiry will follow the phenomenon and explore how understandings of racial equity develop in multiple spaces and through relationships with non-human actors and digital networks. I drew on one of the core elements of Bartlett and Vavrus’ model of case study: vertical comparison (2017). Vertical comparison refers to the process of comparing practices and perspectives within a case (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), in this case comparing practices and understandings of racial equity across human and non-human actors with different identities and positions in the unit. This approach guided my data collection and analysis in three ways:

First, I examined perspectives among administrators and staff, students and staff, participants with different identities, and staff who were accountable to different stakeholders. Second, I examined the role of human and non-human actors in shaping relationships, which is

raised by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) as a key component of actor-network theory. Actor-network theory “seeks to explain the interactions of human and the non-human actors by tracing the non-permanent assemblages they form” (p. 76). This approach allowed me to attend to the dynamic interactions between staff, students, and administrators within and outside the unit, and to non-human actors within the system. As the data emerged and I began analysis, the influence of non-human actors became salient. Third, I considered the role of discourse and language in the shaping of meaning and action around racial equity. This aspect of the research design illuminated contextualized meaning, especially as it related to my research question about definitions of equity and racial equity. The evolution of beliefs and assumptions about racial equity, equity in general, and career, in this career center is unique to that context, and I believe that careful discourse and thematic analysis with attention to comparison warranted significant time and focus.

Why Qualitative Case Study?

As discussed in Chapter One, perceptions of racial equity in career services have received limited attention in the scholarly literature (Carter et al., 2003; Fickling et al., 2018). At the same time, these phenomena are complex. Cultures of equity and inequity evolve within specific contexts and as a result of structural and cultural needs and priorities (Minow, 2021). In Chapter Two, I explored the history of racism, Whiteness, and antiracism in the American context. Racism in America can itself be seen as a case within the larger context of the global evolution of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Kendi, 2016; Zamalin, 2019). Racial categories, such as the concept of Whiteness, have been constructed over time in response to political and economic needs (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Zamalin, 2019). In a similar way, understandings and politics of race and racism evolve within educational contexts, and in the micro-contexts of career services units

(Carter et al., 2003; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019). The historical and political contexts of these units are important to the understanding of how beliefs and practices regarding racial equity evolve and shift (Minow, 2021). Therefore, an understanding of the context of a career center, and its relevant history, are critical in the study of racial equity within that center. A case study approach that includes an exploration of context, power, and culture (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) will help to illuminate the complexities of the evolution of understandings and practices of racial equity within a specific career center. Because the career center I studied included multiple hierarchical employee levels, and staff and students with diverse identities, this was ideal for applying vertical comparison across positionalities within the work. This was made even more significant by the relatively few studies with diverse participants in U.S. career centers. Thus, Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) approach to case study offered a useful model for gathering and analyzing the data in this study.

Study Design

This study explores beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in career services. These perceptions were explored within the context of a single career center using a qualitative case study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The study included observation, staff interviews, document analysis, and a process of researcher reflexivity. Each was used to illuminate how issues of racial equity play out in the context of a specific career center.

Context

The research was conducted within the context of a single career center office at a large, private university. This university will be identified as Large Private University (LPU). LPU has more than 30,000 students. The most recent undergraduate first-year class had substantial racial diversity, with more than 15% Black, Latine, Asian, and White students, respectively. The

school enrolls about 15% international students. LPU has a centralized career center which serves the entire student population. This site represented an exceptional case in that it was a well-resourced career center at a university with a low admission's rate, with substantial student and staff diversity, and explicit efforts toward advancing equity in their practice.

Site Identification

In order to determine a site for this inquiry, a list of criteria was created. The following selection criteria were used. The career center site:

- Is housed within a 4-year, accredited college or university
- Must have a mission that is focused on providing career guidance and resources to all students at the university
- Must have at least six full-time staff members; must have at least two full-time staff members who identify as BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color]
- Must have programming or staff initiatives related to equity; this can include a DEI committee, a staff DEI representative, or other programming that represents a commitment to advancing equity
- Must self-select to participate in the study

These criteria were developed to support the identification of a purposeful sample site within which to conduct the study. Purposeful sampling describes the selection of a site or sample for research based on the fact that it represents a source of significant information about the research topic (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For this study, I wanted to identify an exceptional career center with substantial funding and enough staff to engage with issues of equity in their work. The center would also need enough staff of diverse identities to contribute to the interview process, and would ideally have one or more staff members who were directly responsible for

addressing equity. These individuals would bring substantial perspective and knowledge about equity in order to answer interview questions. To gather data which might be useful to practitioners and future scholars, I developed criteria which would identify a center with a stated commitment to equity and one that carried responsibility for serving an entire college or university. Thus, the data would represent the perspectives of staff and leaders who were simultaneously attending to equity and to the needs of all students. I hoped to gather their perspectives on the potentially competing priorities of serving all students equally and serving BIPOC students equitably. These criteria ensured that the data contained robust information about the practice of racial equity in career services offices.

The search for a career center site was challenging. I began by identifying career professionals who had appeared in webinars and on podcasts discussing equity in career centers. I also identified a few writers who had written on the subject. I reached out to any professionals in these groups who worked at a college or university career center, if their center met the criteria as indicated on their website. I asked if they might be willing to host my PhD research related to equity in career services, that it would be anonymous, and that I would be happy to share more information via phone or video call. I received one response to these six messages. The response expressed willingness to hear more over a video call. We conducted a call in December of 2022, during which the director of the center shared the story of their antiracism work as a result of racial tension following the death of George Floyd. I told her more about the process for a dissertation study, and she said she would think about it, but was inclined to agree to host my research. I told her I would follow up in January, but when I did so, there was no response. I followed up twice more over the span of another month, and she never responded. I later heard

from another colleague familiar with that center that at least one of their few Black staff members had resigned, and that this might explain their lack of response.

At this point, I reached out by email to colleagues around the country, asking if anyone knew of a career center doing equity work, which had at least a few BIPOC members of staff. One colleague provided me with a list of four directors. I emailed all four. One of these directors, who had written about the diversity work of his center, wrote back letting me know that their staff would be unable to commit even a full day to working with me, due to their busy schedules and asked for the details of my IRB approval. At the same time, another colleague reached out to a director she knew at a midwestern career center. This person never responded. I reached out to a director at a career center I had visited a few years prior, and where someone I knew had gotten her PhD. I followed up three times with this director, and she never responded. I interpreted this lack of responsiveness as disinterest or concern about addressing issues of race.

After attending a presentation on equity in higher education, I reached out to a guest speaker who oversaw a career center doing some equity work. I reached out to the guest speaker, who connected me to a staff member at the center. This staff member, a woman of color, told me that their center had been having tension around race, and had lost a significant percentage of their small team. One of the reasons for the resignations was because the departing staff did not like the antiracism work unit leaders wanted to do. She told me that my research was needed, and that she would be willing to talk to me herself, but that their staff was so small and was going through so much change that their center would likely not be a good site for the study.

Next, my advisor suggested connecting with a professional he knew at a career center. I emailed this person, and he and I set up a video call to discuss the possibility of his center hosting my research. I spoke with him for one hour, during which he asked close to a dozen

questions about my qualifications and background. He asked for my research question, and when I shared it, he said that beliefs and assumptions about race have nothing to do with professional behavior on equity. After a brief discussion, he told me that he would have to end the call because he had another meeting. I asked if he thought it might be possible for me to conduct my study at his center, the ostensible reason for the call. He smiled and said, “I’m sorry, I have to go,” and ended the call. I have not heard from him.

Finally, I reached out to a colleague I knew who did DEIA [Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access] work in higher education. She connected me to another colleague who worked in the center at LPU. He tentatively agreed on behalf of the center, and sought approval from his supervisor and the leader of the center. I presented my work twice to their leaders, and LPU agreed to participate in the study in March 2023. They expressed appreciation for my willingness to contribute to the literature on equity in the field, and provided me with support and access to their work. I deeply appreciate LPU’s willingness to host this work, given the responses – and lack thereof – of other centers. This is clearly a sensitive topic that has caused tension and turnover in career offices around the country. It is a strong statement to support this work in spite of the national climate on race.

Participants

Career center staff, administrators, and students at LPU were eligible to participate in the interview process if they met the following criteria:

- For Staff and Administrators: Were working full-time (75-100% FTE) at the selected career center at the time of data collection; or were working at the university and interacted with staff at the career center

- For Students: Had interacted with the selected career center at least once at the time of data collection (for an event, program, or advisor meeting)
- Self-selected to participate in the study
- Were age 18 or older at the time of the study

Though there is no required number of participants in a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), it is important to be intentional when determining the number of participants. I interviewed eleven participants in total, and conducted follow-up interviews with two participants. I also followed-up with six participants by email for member-checking purposes.

LPU is a large, private institution and does not necessarily represent all institution types. This site was chosen as a purposive sample, that is, a sample which would yield significant information about the phenomena to be studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). LPU's career center was chosen, in part, because of its stated commitment to equity and inclusion, the diversity of the students they serve, and the size and diversity of their staff team. Some beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in this center were likely unique to this context. This study was intended to explore beliefs and practices of staff and students at a career center that has done some work to address equity in student outcomes. As such, the goal of this work was to provide a foundation for future study at other institutions and with other methods.

Data Collection

In order to ensure trustworthiness, qualitative case study methodology should involve in-depth study of a research site, including more than one form of data collection (Hancock et al., 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There are many sources of data within any given case study site (Hancock et al., 2021). For this study, I conducted site observations, interviews of career center staff and students, and analysis of the center's website and other materials. Given that this study

uses a critical paradigm, I also kept a reflexive research journal, to add another form of data regarding my observations and positionality. Probst and Berenson (2014) wrote that reflexivity is “generally understood as awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher” (p. 814). Given my proximity to the topic, as a member of a racial minority group within the context of the United States, it was important for me to observe my own reactions to the research process in the form of a reflexion journal. Ultimately, this reflexion journal contained 18 written pages about my data collection, analysis, and reporting process for the study – recorded chronologically by date. I also used it to track my data analysis steps – so that they could be included in this report and shared with my research advisor. As I conducted observations, I simultaneously noted my own reactions to events, interviews, and recordings in my reflexion journal. I included quotes that stood out as relevant to the research questions in this record, as well as images of the site. The reflexion journal served as another source of data for the study.

Another important consideration is what Lincoln and Guba described as transferability, or demonstrating that findings may have relevance in other contexts (1985). Though the intention of qualitative research – and this study – is not generalizability, some of the findings may have relevance in other similar organizations. In order to support transferability in this study, I used thick description to fully describe the context, setting, staff and students within the organization. In addition to the reflexivity journal described above, three other sources of data for the study are described below.

Interviews. I conducted an initial interview with my career center staff liaison, and next conducted interviews with any staff and students who agreed to participate in the study. The liaison shared my recruitment materials with the entire unit by email to solicit participation. I

interviewed staff during and after I conducted site observations of the physical career center, the campus, two summer class sessions and a fall recruitment event. I interviewed two students who agreed to participate in the study, and then conducted a final interview with my staff liaison at the end of the process to share back observations and gather feedback on the data I collected.

The interviews were semi-structured and involved a combination of question types, including: experience and behavior questions, opinion and value questions, knowledge questions, and background/demographic questions (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Feeling or sensory questions were added during the process of the study in response to the observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I frequently restated what interviewees shared, and asked them to confirm my interpretations during the conversations. I also asked interviewees to clarify observations and provide as much context as they were willing to. I conducted a combination of in-person interviews at the career center site and virtual interviews over Zoom.

Observation and Document Analysis. Critics of observation as a method of data collection in case studies have raised the inherent subjectivity of human perception (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While this is an important consideration, careful, systematic observation can contribute depth to a case study by adding data relevant to understanding a particular context and triangulating any findings through other methods. It may also illuminate relevant incidents which may be further explored through follow-up interviews. Contextual dynamics may reveal themselves through observation in ways that they may not in interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given the nature of racial equity in career services, observations help to illuminate power and social dynamics critical for a deeper understanding of the topic.

At the suggestion of my doctoral committee, I chose to conduct two in-person visits to LPU. The first visit was conducted during the summer and the second during the fall semester.

These two visits were intended to allow me to observe the center and its activities during both a low-student-engagement and a high-student-engagement period in the academic year. The center also preferred that I conduct two visits, so that I could get a sense of the range of student traffic throughout the year. Services and programs also differ in the summer compared with the school year, so this was another reason for multiple visits. I observed the physical setting of the office for two days in the summer and two days in the fall, including spaces where student interactions occurred. I observed interaction among staff, between staff and administrators, and between staff and students. I also observed two summer class sessions, and a series of fall recruitment events.

I introduced myself and engaged where appropriate in the activities I observed, in order to support the relationship between myself and the staff and students being observed. I assumed the *collaborative partner* role, which describes the researcher as both observer and participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This role also reflected my intention to proactively inform participants of the study's purpose and intentions, and to gather their feedback and insights as I conducted the study. I recorded my observations as field notes, which served as my second significant source of data. These were *highly descriptive* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), including descriptions of the setting, people, and activities, my own comments, and any direct quotations I was able to capture.

As a third source of information about the site, I reviewed website materials, physical documents, and relevant artifacts available at the career center. Analyzing documents and artifacts is another way to expand understanding, ensure trustworthiness, and triangulate emergent insights about a field site (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, website content and relevant documents, which contained language used to describe students, staff, services, and especially equity and inclusion, helped to inform my understanding of the context, culture,

values, and practices of the center. These were described in my field notes, in as much detail as possible. Any statements regarding equity and racial equity were analyzed.

Table 1 describes each research question, data source that addressed each question, and interview question designed to elicit information about that topic.

Table 1. Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Question	Data Source	Example Interview Question
What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?	Observations, Staff Interviews, Student Interviews, Document Analysis, Reflexive Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do issues of racial equity show up in the work you do? If so, would you give an example of when this might happen? • Has your office taken action to measure racial inequity in your work? If so, would you share an example?
How do career services professionals define racial equity?	Observations, Staff Interviews, Document Analysis, Reflexive Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When I say the term racial equity, what comes to mind for you?
What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?	Observations, Staff Interviews, Student Interviews, Document Analysis, Reflexive Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you describe the origins of this career center? Is there a story your team shares about how the

		<p>center was created or has evolved?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Can you tell me about a time when you worked with a student at the center? What was that like?● Imagine you are meeting with a student, and they ask you “What does a career trajectory typically look like in 2023?” How would you describe the typical story of a career?● Would you give me an example of the kind of advice you give students when you meet with them?● Do you draw on lessons from your own career experiences as you advise students? Would you give an example of a time you did this?
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you share stories about other students and graduates you've known as you advise students? Would you share a recent example of when this happened?
What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?	Observations, Staff Interviews, Document Analysis, Reflexive Journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do you believe that your institution supports action on racial equity? If so, would you share an example of what this looks like? What strategies would you recommend for advancing racial equity in career services?

Data Analysis Procedures

There were four sources of data for this study: participant interviews, observation field notes, document and artifact analysis, and a researcher journal. In order to analyze the data, I took a process-oriented approach, which focuses on the relationships between events and actors, and on the contextual influences which contribute to behavior, beliefs and events (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Honoring this understanding of the case, I used an iterative, flexible process to coding and thematic analysis. This was to allow my understanding of the complex relationships

between actors in the unit, and their evolving beliefs, to drive my analysis and conclusions. In line with Bartlett and Vavrus' description of vertical comparison, I focused my analysis on relationships between human and non-human actors (such as digital tools, data, and publications), comparison of beliefs and assumptions of White and BIPOC students and staff, and on language and discourse on equity and racial equity (2017).

Tusting (2020) wrote about contrasting stances on analyzing discourse data. While some researchers prefer a more systematic approach to coding data, in part to uphold rigor, such as computer software analysis, others believe that analysis on issues of culture should be more organic and involve iterative phases of reading, writing, and analysis. Limited qualitative research has been done on racial equity in career services units, and so for this study, I developed a balanced analysis approach in order to allow for flexibility in analysis while attending to systematic rigor. I both used a coding system – implemented through NVivo coding software - and conducted iterative phases of analysis, gathering, reading, and reflection. I took an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to analysis, allowing the data to drive my conclusions, rather than beginning with a set of ideas about how the data might look or what I might focus on.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) and others have described the importance of thematic analysis, a technique used to identify patterns in qualitative data. I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis (*Figure 2*), with a few modifications described below.

Figure 2. Braun and Clarke's Phases of Thematic Analysis. "Using thematic analysis in psychology," by Braun, V., and Clarke, V., *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

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Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

I modified Braun and Clarke's phases to include a mid-analysis consultation session with a few participants and my contact at the research site, and to allow for significant reflection, given my positionality to the research (2006). Ultimately, I conducted several rounds of analysis, with significant input from my research committee and from participants. To ensure trustworthiness and transparency – and to support any future research which may replicate my methods - I describe my analysis process in detail below:

1. The first round of analysis took place after my first site visit. I transcribed my first 11 interviews with 10 participants, using OtterAI's transcription software. During this process, as Braun and Clarke suggested (2006), I compared the audio transcripts to the transcriptions to check for errors. Next, I imported the text transcriptions of the interviews into NVivo coding software. I gathered my first round of documents for analysis and finished my first site visit for live observation. I also observed two summer class sessions, and took extensive reflexion notes. The intention was to complete about sixty-percent of the data collection, including most of the observation and interviews. I conducted a first round of coding - creating useful conceptual information from the raw data, in

order to derive meaning for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I coded primarily for content, rather than for deeper meaning, separating the data into five coding families: Career development process codes – text and speech related to the process of conducting career development in the unit; Equity codes – text and speech related to the topic of equity in general or racial equity specifically; Office culture codes – text and speech related to the culture or practices within the unit; Student experience codes – text and speech related to student perspectives and experiences; and University and External Factors codes – text and speech describing cultural or structural factors from outside the unit that impact the practice of career development and equity within the unit.

2. At this point, I paused the coding process in order to conduct mid-analysis reflection, research, member checking, and planning. I conducted two member-checking conversations with participants to ensure that I adequately captured their perspectives. I also shared a few concepts from the literature – which represented my initial thoughts on the site visit - with these two participants to gather their perspectives. I gathered their feedback on two initial insights that emerged from the first site visit –ambiguity about definitions of equity in career services offices and the challenge of directly addressing racial equity in career services offices. One of these conversations led to a follow-up interview. At this point, I assessed my research plan to see where I might need to adjust, and made a few changes based on the data I had gathered so far. I decided to pursue more interviews that would further illuminate the subtle differences that had emerged in my research

question about definitions of equity and racial equity. I also decided to hone in on data and the life design career model as non-human actors in the unit in future conversations, based on having observed this in the first site visit. I then communicated these goals to my site liaison and we worked together to refine the second group of interview participants. I visually represented a few emerging ideas related to each research question in a data display to identify angles for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

3. Next, I conducted the second round of interviews and then reviewed all of my initial codes. I had a total of 65 codes, organized into families. To ensure *rigor* and that I used a systematic process during the coding stage, I went through all 65 codes and wrote specific definitions for each code, in order to create clarity on the exact meaning and criteria for each code (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As Braun and Clarke suggested, at this point, I kept all codes, resisting eliminating any codes or foreclosing on any ideas at this point in the process. Braun and Clarke suggest examining initial codes to identify which are more about topic – grouping data solely in terms of the topic it refers to – and which codes might be evolved into themes – units of meaning that are relevant across the data set (2022).
4. For the next phase, I reviewed my codes to determine which could be evolved into themes. I made a master list of all codes and color-coded them into four groups, some of which overlapped: topical, potentially connected to a theoretical framework, related to a research question, or none of the above. Next, I visually represented the groups of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2022) related to each research question, creating a series of charts mapping their interconnections and any

patterns I saw. Codes which were both related to a research question and represented a pattern captured by at least two participants or data sources (including observations and documents), I evolved into themes. I added new themes which connected groups of codes and answered research questions. Any codes which connected to a theoretical framework, I reviewed to assess whether or not it represented a pattern across the data. Because my methodological approach involved vertical comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) among participants by role and identity, I chose to include a few themes that were only present across two participants if they connected directly to a research question. In order to indicate which themes represented majority sentiments and which represented the sentiments of a few participants only, I created two theme categories: *Consistent* and *Contrasting*. Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive TA method does allow for the inclusion of themes that are only present in a few interviews, so I drew on this philosophy to connect my method with my vertical comparison methodological approach. The nature of beliefs and assumptions about race warranted careful consideration of participants' ideas, even if they did not represent the numerical majority in the space.

5. I next reviewed themes to assign each to one of the three research subquestions. If a theme was completely unrelated to a research question, I removed it from the list after assessing if relevant data from the theme could be integrated elsewhere. During this process, I met with individual members of my committee to weigh in on my codes and themes and offer any new meaning or challenges to my thinking. I continued to keep reflexion notes during this process to surface any limitations

in my thinking or areas of confusion. I conducted a few more member checks by email to be sure I was interpreting data consistently with the intentions of my participants. I also received a request from a participant to use a flattened racial classification system to further protect confidentiality. I emailed participants to confirm how they would like to identify among three categories: BIPOC, White, and Multiracial.

6. At this point, in September of 2023, I conducted my second site visit. I observed the site for two additional days, and observed the center's fall recruitment week events. I continued to review my themes during this period, to highlight areas of contradiction. After my second site visit, I created a draft of themes, organized by research question, but did not finalize. I conducted a 90-minute member checking session with my field site liaison, gathering feedback on my drafted list of themes and subthemes. He responded that he felt they "seemed to be accurate." He shared that the themes of my first research question were framed particularly well. We then created a plan for sharing back themes and conducting listening sessions with staff in the unit.

Because my study was situated in Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative approach, I interpreted the data through the process of constant comparison, comparing the perspectives and beliefs about racial equity across racial identities and organizational positionalities, i.e. staff and students, actors internal and external to the unit, and staff at different levels and in different roles within the unit. One comparison that emerged from the process was examining the role of stakeholders in shaping perspectives on racial equity – staff who were primarily accountable to universities administrators, students, or external employers. These stakeholder relationships,

which are dynamic, as Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) suggested, drive priorities and considerations for equity for different actors within the unit. Since each of my interview protocols included opportunities for participants to tell stories, comparison illuminated similarities and differences in staff and students' beliefs and experiences of the evolution of equity in the work of the unit. The second analysis consideration that emerged mid-analysis was the importance of non-human actors in the case, which invokes actor-network theory, described earlier in this chapter (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

In their text on Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) suggested that it is appropriate to include perspectives that do not appear across the entire data set if they address the research question. My research question and subquestions explore beliefs, practices, and institutional knowledge regarding racial equity, which vary considerably among individuals with different identities and positionalities within the organization. Thus, I chose to elevate to themes any codes that appeared in at least two interviews and which addressed a research question, rather than include only themes which contain codes that appear across the entirety of the data set.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested a list of criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. Included in this list are criteria for credibility and transferability. I will present a brief account of my incorporation of these criteria in order to ensure the trustworthiness of my study.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria are:

For credibility:

- Prolonged engagement – spending significant time and having significant contact with the site of study

- Persistent observation – conducting in-depth observation through prolonged engagement
- Triangulation - using different data sources and methods
- Peer debriefing – pursuing exposure to a disinterested professional peer to assist in developing ideas and conducting analysis
- Negative case analysis - searching for negative instances in the data which are related to conclusions and themes
- Member checks - continuously testing information and conclusions by gathering feedback from respondents

For transferability:

- Thick descriptive data - developing a thorough and coherent narrative about the context

To ensure credibility, I designed the study, in consultation with my research advisors, to involve prolonged engagement with the site. I spent several days in both the summer and the fall in-person at the site, conducting continuous observation, analyzing documents, and engaging with participants and individuals present at the career center. The total period of engagement with the site lasted for more than six months. For persistent observation, I chose to observe key elements of the center’s programs and services. The intention behind both a summer and fall visit was to ensure that I was able to observe the center during both a typically slow and typically busy period of time during the calendar year. I also took time to observe their services in different modalities. I observed a synchronous virtual event, multiple in-person events, in-person one-to-one student meetings, and recorded class sessions where I was not a participant. I attended to triangulation by using a variety of different data sources: administrator and staff interviews, student interviews, an interview with an outside professional at the institution, physical and virtual observation of the space, programs and services, review of documents and external news

articles, observation of staff interviews conducted by external parties, and my own reflexion journal.

I utilized peer debriefing by conducting conversations with two other researchers in the field of career development with expertise in DEIA, including the president of the National Association of Career Development and a staff member at another institution's career center who expressed interest in the project. I also consulted with my research advisor and members of my dissertation committee throughout the study. I shared preliminary themes with a member of my dissertation committee with expertise in workplace dynamics to solicit his feedback. He provided contrasting feedback on my initial themes, resulting in theme revision. I also solicited feedback from a higher education scholar who specializes in critical race theory and inclusive pedagogies.

I sought out negative cases in the data, especially given the complex nature of beliefs and assumptions about race. I specifically attended to contradictions or ambiguities within coded data segments. In order to attend to negative cases, I created a *Contrasting* category for themes in order to avoid cherry-picking conclusions that did not reflect the entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was one way to ensure attention to negative cases and contradictory beliefs, assumptions, and practices.

I conducted member checks throughout the study. During interviews, I restated my understanding of participants' comments after every answer, and continually requested their correction and clarification for any ideas they shared. In a few instances, this resulted in participants withdrawing certain ideas or clarifying them. At one point, one participant shared that he felt underrepresented students may benefit least from services, and then when I restated this sentiment, corrected his statement. He then suggested that underrepresented students benefit

most, before asking that I drop both ideas from the interview and simply note that everyone benefits equally from services. I did as asked.

After initial interviews, I followed up with five participants by e-mail to clarify their statements. I conducted two follow-up interviews with two participants to gather their feedback on specific themes I was developing. In order to conduct final testing of conclusions, I conducted a meeting with a group of representative administrators and staff to share themes and gather feedback (as Lincoln and Guba suggested).

In order to address transferability, I provided a thorough narrative of the context of the study, including demographic and structural information about the university. Because student numbers, demographics, history, and structure impact the operation of a career center, I gave special attention to these aspects in my case description. I also noted the receipt of a significant grant which impacted the work of the center. I sought to ensure trustworthiness by attending to each of these criteria throughout my design, data collection, analysis, and report writing. My intention is for this research to be trustworthy, and to represent potential transferability to other contexts.

Limitations

Because case studies are inductive and typically occur within one or more bounded contexts, they do not necessarily capture the complete nature of a phenomenon. Yet, if qualitative research studies attend to trustworthiness, relevance, and other measures of credibility, they may illuminate the nature of the topic in context (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) have written about the importance of attending to context in conducting case study research - that is, paying attention to issues of power, culture, evolution over time, complexity, macrocultures and subcultures. The complexity of this type of inquiry

necessarily defies generalized statements about the nature of beliefs and practices about race. Yet as mentioned above, this study may offer some transferability of findings to other relevant contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Yet, this study will attempt to describe the ways that beliefs and practices regarding racial equity impact the work of career development. LPU represents an exceptional case, and therefore may possess characteristics that cannot be generalized to all institutions. Nonetheless, aspects of the beliefs and practices present at this site may illuminate broader themes at play in other career services centers.

Summary

Beliefs and practices regarding racial equity have received limited scholarly attention, warranting a closer examination of how racial equity plays out in career development practice in career centers. This study seeks to provide greater understanding of efforts toward racial equity in career services offices and ultimately offer insight about how career educators at other higher education institutions can better understand and address issues of racial equity in career development practice. This work represents an opportunity to expand our understanding of racial dynamics at college and university career centers, and aims to contribute principles of equitable career services practice to the literature.

Chapter 4: Findings

College and university career services offices in the United States have been charged with addressing equity as they work to prepare students for their careers after graduation (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2019; Hooley et al., 2018; Reid, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020). This call comes at a time when the world of work is changing, and the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath have prompted concerns about economic inequality and declining sectors of work (Aarts et al., 2021; Brunetto et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). Continued evidence of structural racism and its impacts on both BIPOC college graduates and workers have challenged higher education practitioners to address issues of racism as they tackle equity (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; McNair et al., 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Yet resistance to racial equity work continues as the 2023 supreme court decision to prohibit consideration of race in admissions at two institutions shapes the racial climate in education, and national debates over the existence of systemic racism (Nadworny, 2023; Neville et al., 2013). While some career educators have responded to this call, there is little evidence of consistent attention to racial equity across career services units (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; Givens, 2022; Mathews, 2023).

Career center leaders must recruit and retain staff, establish a mission and vision, and make strategic decisions to support all students at their colleges and universities. They must attend to multiple stakeholders, situate themselves within the priorities of their specific institutions, and address the needs of employers. This study aimed to explore the beliefs and assumptions about racial equity that career professionals hold in order to demystify how these ideas shape the practice of career development in higher education. I explored these beliefs and assumptions through a qualitative case study of a single university career center. This center was

identified as an exceptional case, in that it had established equity as an explicit priority and dedicated significant resources toward addressing equity through its programs and services. I examined the formation of the equity aspect of the center's work, along with the ways in which staff understand and take action on equity four years later. I observed the office and its programs, analyzed presentation materials, descriptions of their work, and student-facing promotional materials. I interviewed leaders within the unit and outside of the unit, including the founder of their recent equity initiatives and a diversity and inclusion representative at the institution. I interviewed staff and students at the center who hold different racial and other identities, in order to better understand how individuals conceptualize the equity work of the office.

This chapter will present a portrait of the center, and the institution it sits within, and describe the findings of this study. I will provide significant contextual information on the case, as it addresses my research question and subquestions. I will present my findings organized into themes, and broken down by research subquestion.

It is worth acknowledging again that the research on the topic of racial equity in career services is limited. I do my best to honor the sentiments and values of the participants in this work, and to name the complexity of undertaking equity at an elite institution in a political context where some colleges and universities are not able to legally consider race in their admissions decisions. In a few instances, I may provide more general information about participants' roles and backgrounds so that they remain anonymous. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, racism is a contested space in contemporary America, and I wish to ensure that participants are not identifiable. I am immensely grateful for this career center team's willingness to invite me into their work in order to advance the conversation on equity in the field of career development.

The findings of this research aim to address the following primary research question, and three subquestions. These questions guided the data collection and analysis of this inquiry:

1. What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?
 - a. How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?
 - b. What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
 - c. What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

Case Overview

Large Private University (LPU) is a four-year, private university. It is classified as a Research One institution, which signifies high research activity and granting of doctoral degrees. The main university campus is located in an urban area. LPU has a relatively low admissions rate, with around 30,000 students. In the last decade, the institution has invested significant capital into diversifying its student population, and recruiting first-generation, limited income students. In terms of identity, the first-year, undergraduate class has substantial racial diversity. The FLI designation is used by the institution to address issues of equity on the basis of first-generation status, income, and socioeconomic status. As mentioned in Chapter 3, I have chosen to conduct research at LPU in part because of the diversity of the student population and the explicit attention to equity in the university's career and experiential learning unit.

The career center at LPU is housed within a larger division for career and experiential learning. This larger unit reports directly to a senior administrator at the university, who reports to the university president. This reporting line means that the career center falls under Academic

Affairs, rather than Student Affairs, which is a different division. This structure is consistent with a decade-long trend in higher education, wherein many career services offices have been shifting out of student affairs units. According to a survey by the National Association for Colleges and Employers, a significant portion of offices that have shifted to academic affairs named a new institution-wide focus on career outcomes as a reason for the move (Gray, 2023). The career and experiential learning unit has approximately 30 administrators and staff. As of the end of my research, the center had worked together to formalize five core values for their team, including equity and innovation. They were in the process, after a four-year evolution of their work under a new leader, of clarifying their vision, mission, and values as a team.

Observation Notes

In order to conduct rich observation, I observed administrators, staff, and students in a variety of settings and spaces. I sought to ensure trustworthiness and the provision of thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by keeping more than fifty pages of notes on all observations, and a separate reflexion record. I chose to conduct two in-person site visits so that I could observe the center during the summer, a season during which the center has less student traffic, and during the fall, a season when the center has more student traffic. I include a list of the settings and events I observed in the table below, for easy reference. Below that, I share my observations throughout the study and reflections on those observations.

Table 2: Observation List

Event / Setting	Length	Date	Modality
Career Center Space and Interaction (Summer)	12 hours	June 20-21, 2023	In-Person
Summer Class Session 3 on Life Design	1.5 hours	June 23, 2023	Virtual

Summer Class Session 2 on Mapping the Environment	1 hour	June 25, 2023	Virtual (Recording)
Recorded Interview with Administrator on Life Design	1 hour	August 2, 2023	Virtual (Recording)
Career Center Space and Interaction (Fall)	5 hours	September 14-15, 2023	In-Person
Employer Connection Event with Student Leaders	2 hours	September 14, 2023	In-Person
Student Drop-In Hours	1 hour	September 14, 2023	In-Person
What Can I Do with My Major Workshop	1.5 hours	September 14, 2023	In-Person
Fall Career Fair	4 hours	September 15, 2023	In-Person

The Physical Space

The career center's physical building sits on the north side of the university's urban campus. I reached the center by car and was easily able to identify the building. It sat apart from other buildings, beside an athletic field and accessible by street, with its own dedicated parking lot. Outside the building were a collection of tables and chairs, shaded with umbrellas, for students and others to sit outside. The front courtyard was paved in red brick, a nod to the rest of the school's more traditional architecture. The exterior style of the building was geometric, modern, clean, and white, reflecting its recent construction. It had large windows on each side. Its exterior facade and interior furniture and decor matched the school's colors.

Just inside the main doors, there was an open work and study space. A white and beautifully curving front desk displayed the name of the center. Here, I was greeted by a receptionist, a Black woman, who smiled and welcomed me. The open work and study space contained a variety of tables, chairs, and couches. Individual study spaces were recessed into the walls. Collections of three, two, and four chairs, some with tables, sat around the large room. A variety of waste receptacles, including compost, trash, and recycling stood by the door. Many of

the walls were windows, allowing lots of light into the room. The floor was done in gray, wide, wooden planks with a speckled gray rug on top. A few enclosed conference rooms surrounded the main space, and each contained a teleconference screen, table, and chairs. These conference rooms had transparent glass walls. Bright recessed lighting illuminated the entire room.

Electronic screens with welcome messages appeared around the center. Mild, elevator music played in the main space. Most rooms contained white, wall-mounted cameras, ostensibly for security.

The building had three floors, with the main, ground floor accessible to students. There was a large conference room for larger presentations just off of the main lobby. There was an elevator which had coded card access to allow staff and students to access the appropriate floors. In the basement, there was a large kitchen with reclining chairs and a study space for staff. The third floor contained a computer lab and staff offices. In the back of the main level there was another staff kitchen, conference space for staff, and study spaces for students – each outfitted with display and conferencing technology. The building contained several gender-neutral bathrooms. Each of the reservable conference rooms were named after natural locations around the world, such as forests and parks. Various concepts related to career were embossed on the glass walls in different languages and scripts. I noticed a sign posted on the wall that said: “FIND YOUR PURPOSE” and featured words for purpose in nineteen different languages, including European, Asian, Indigenous American, and African languages. One wall included quotes by three BIPOC figures, one African American, one Indian, and one Zimbabwean.

Words such as climb, immerse, and explore appeared on the walls, with inspiring quotes about career and purpose. A mountain climbing theme was evident in some of the naming conventions in the space. One quote referred to an ordinary life versus an extraordinary life, and

other quotes expounded on the value of serving the community and the world. Several interactive features could be found around the student space, including selfie prompts and ideation boards.

The Staff and Students

Based on the photos on the career center's website, of the approximately thirty staff in the unit, twelve of them appeared to be BIPOC. The career center was occupied in the summer by a handful of staff and students. Front desk staff greeted visitors at the door. Students were working and studying in the various conference rooms and in the open space. Staff seemed to be doing the same. Most people were friendly and greeted me as I moved around the space. There was free coffee. Staff were moving quickly around and seemed to be often occupied in teleconference calls. As they were working, they wore focused, unsmiling expressions I interpreted as serious. As I spoke with various staff, they were all friendly to me and generous with their time. Yet, they all seemed to be busily occupied with their work, even in the middle of the summer. Most staff worked on a hybrid schedule, spending a few days in the office and a few days working remotely. The parking lot was mostly empty during the summer, though there were some cars. I observed that many of the BIPOC staff appeared to be working at the front desk or held operations roles in the office. I saw one staff member ask a Black woman about getting a facilities issue repaired, and she said she would take care of it.

In the summer, staff ran virtual workshops and courses, and they seemed to have significant enrollment of students calling in from around the world. Students in the space seemed to be fairly at ease. I spoke to a few and some of them were working on career related projects, while others were studying for other classes. They expressed appreciation for the free coffee and the beautiful space. One referred to the space as his own best kept secret for studying, bemoaning the fact that more and more students were learning about the center and coming to use the space.

During my second visit in the fall, the center was even more busy, with more students present, and staff delivering programs and engaged in various meetings. There were about six or seven staff working with students in the main space at any given time. They greeted each other warmly, and the BIPOC staff greeted each other with enthusiasm and by name. I sat with a BIPOC career educator as he conducted office hours. He was approached exclusively by BIPOC students as I observed. I attended three events and sat in on drop-in hours in the center. Again, I noted that two Black women sat at the front desk. Most of the students in the center appeared to be Asian, or White. There were a few Black students. Students using the center appeared to be relatively diverse in general. The students I encountered seemed to express their genders in different ways.

Student engagement at events was consistent, with a significant portion of the undergraduate student body registered for the fall career fair, and nearly 2000 undergraduate and graduate students attending. Every event had visible diversity, with students of different races and gender expressions present. There was clear use of multiple forms of technologies, including regular gathering of data and use of QR codes for quick registration through Handshake, the center's registration system. Food was served at every event I attended, and students seemed enthusiastic and engaged. All staff engaged in the fair and associated events, helping out with logistics and coordination. One staff member who works remotely from another state shared that she came in for the fair and to spend some in-person time with the team. The center Director took up the work of a staff member who was out sick on the day of the fair and expressed the desire to "do her proud."

An Advising Interaction

I describe the following advising interaction to illustrate the approach to career advising used by an educator in the center. A graduate student – ostensibly a BIPOC woman - who was interested in working in equity and inclusion came in for drop-in advising. The educator, who identified as a Black man, first shared his own role at the center, his interests, why he enjoys his work, and his career story in brief, in order to make the student feel more comfortable. After the student shared her story, he began with the phrase, “I am happy,” and put both hands on his chest, indicating his pleasure at the story she shared and her recent success obtaining a part-time job in her field of interest. What followed was a personalized interaction, wherein the educator provided advice and perspective, and asked many questions. He often referred to his own experiences as examples. He also shared facts and takeaways from recent news articles he has read about the students’ field of interest, careful not to speak in definitive statements and giving the student explicit permission to disagree. He noted that perspectives on resumes and career differ based on experience, and that ultimately it was up to the student to choose her own path. At one point, he got up and ran to retrieve a large dry-erase board. He brought this back, along with colorful markers, and invited the student to brainstorm her curiosities. At the end of the half-hour session, he asked the student how she was feeling. “Much better,” she said. This interaction illustrated this particular educator’s approach to career advising.

Observation Reflections

The entirety of the career center building evoked a sense of intentionality, attention to culture and diversity, and beautiful, modern – perhaps even futuristic – aesthetic design. There was a sense of imagination, creativity, tranquility, and possibility in the building. Staff moved with energy and purpose. No one seemed to be idle or disengaged. The building seemed to be

expensive, representing a significant investment in the career outcomes of students, and in the center's work. Dedicated parking on an urban campus for a career center is not something I have seen before. There was a clear sense of attention to inclusion in the design and naming of the rooms and spaces. The use of different languages connoted an appreciation for cultural difference. The use of wood in the space, and naming of the conference rooms after aspects of nature evoked a sense of peace.

I did notice that most of the BIPOC staff I encountered in the space worked at the front desk, in operations or on the dedicated equity team. Few seemed to be in leadership positions. There were several students in the space, of various racial identities. Staff seemed to be willing to speak with me and talk somewhat openly about equity. A few staff seemed concerned about how their comments would be perceived. Students seemed to be nervous about interviewing with me. One Black student expressed anxiety about saying the wrong thing. Another retracted the only comment he made about race, not asking me not to include it. There was a sense of urgency among staff in the summer and fall that might be interpreted as tension. They gathered student feedback at each of the events I observed, and continually updated each other about the attendance numbers at the career fair. The continuous gathering of data, which each of my participants highlighted in their interviews, may contribute to staff members feeling pressure to achieve positive feedback and high attendance at each program and service they provide. I wondered about the culture and sense of competition, given the prestige of the university. I got the feeling that this was an achievement-oriented office culture, in a new and brightly-lit space with high expectations placed on them by the university.

Document Analysis

I analyzed documents provided by the career center staff, both those pertaining to equity in some way, and general documents, materials, website pages, and social media. I sought to support my vertical comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) by analyzing the language used to describe the work of the unit, and language used when addressing BIPOC student populations. In the appendices of this document, you will find my observation protocol. I also kept a reflexion record while I recorded notes on the documents themselves. I kept both physical and digital notes on the documents the center provided. The full list of documents I analyzed is included in the table below.

Table 3: Document Names and Descriptions

Name of Document	Description
News Article	News feature describing the career center's newly constructed building on campus.
News Article	News feature describing career centers engaging with equity. LPU is on the list of featured centers.
Video on Equity	Public video including LPU student voices on issues of equity in career.
News Article	News feature on one of LPU's diversity programs for professional clothing access.
Website	LPU career center's website, including information about the center, their mission, staff, and services.
Presentation Materials	These presentation materials were used for a student leader retreat on identity and purpose facilitated by the center.
Black Male Initiative Fall Presentation	These presentation materials were used for a fall presentation to a Black male student group.
Black Male Initiative Spring Alumni Panel and Briefing Document	These materials were used for a spring panel of Black male alumni.
Course Syllabus	Syllabus for an inclusive leadership course offered through the center. Course was approved but did not run due to low enrollment.

Storytelling Course Curriculum and Twitter Promotion	Curriculum for a personal storytelling course, and accompanying Twitter promotional materials.
Diversity Program Promotional Materials	These materials were used to promote a program designed for marginalized students on professionalism and inclusion at work; includes Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, video content, a blog post, and a few student reflections on the program.
Bio Page for Equity Team Member	This is a biographical web page for a member of the equity team, describing his commitment to equity.
Interview with Equity Team Member about Diversity Network	Recorded interview about LPU's support for first-generation and limited-income students.
Diversity Program Website and Frequently Asked Questions	Website with information about the main diversity program in the unit, along with frequently asked questions about the program.
Networking Guide for Marginalized Students	These presentation materials share information about how to prepare for networking opportunities as a marginalized student.
Career Center Social Media Pages	Social media pages for the career center, including Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter.
Scholarship Prompts for the Summer Course	Prompt language for students who wish to apply for scholarship support for the summer career course.

Document Analysis Notes

Staff at the center provided a significant number of documents relating to presentations on equity and inclusion, equity programming and promotion, course content and curriculum, video interviews with staff, and a staff biography. I was also able to analyze the center's website and find a few articles and videos about the center itself, some of which related specifically to equity.

In total, the center had significant material describing their equity initiatives. There was also language that spoke to inclusion and access in their general information and website. They mentioned their commitment to equity on their main page, and their images included BIPOC

students. Their staff page also indicated the presence of BIPOC staff on the team, ostensibly twelve out of around thirty staff, though few BIPOC people appeared to be in leadership roles. They mentioned their focus on data and outcomes as a driver for their work in general. They also cited recent research on career development.

The presentation materials for Black men and BIPOC students referred often to exploring, curiosity, and joy. They also used asset-based language, for instance indicating the intention to support students in “seeing themselves as an asset.” A resume presentation included attending to identity as well as the technical aspects of career preparation. The language of identity and values was present in most materials, including the summer class for the general student population. There was reference to “finding community at work” in presentation materials for students of color, and careers were often described as a “journey.” The phrase “Black boy joy” was used in a few materials.

There was specific attention in multiple documents to the importance of network and mentors, especially emphasized for BIPOC students and Black men. There was also language that described the importance of seeking well-being, as well as traditional professional success. There was use of the phrase “what is your why” and discussion of “salient identities.” Finally, there was frequent reference to “embracing your story,” as a way to establish a foundation for career. The course curriculum included time for reflection on values, identities, and story. There was discussion in the summer course about the “cycle of socialization” which described aspects of students’ social worlds. There was limited reference in the syllabi and presentation materials for the general student population to any systemic aspects of career. I see no mention of discrimination, barriers to success on the basis of identity, explicit description of any -isms, or anything else that might challenge the concept of equal opportunity. This was true, even for the

explicitly DEI-focused program. Materials for this program gave little indication that it was intended for URM or FLI students, saying instead that it was open to all students.

In general, there seemed to be some inconsistency in presentation of ideas about career. The life design elements were present throughout, yet the equity focus seemed to shift based on the setting or the person who created the materials. Some materials reflected a traditional model of career as a climb to success. Others emphasized joy and wellbeing as primary life design goals. One guide to professionalism for underrepresented students instructed students – on the same slide – to simultaneously “tell your story,” “feel free to creatively express yourself,” and “draw it back to you as a contributor.” This simultaneous emphasis on adapting to professional expectations, and pursuing authenticity, creativity, and freedom also appears in the themes later on in this chapter.

Participant Profiles

This section will provide information on the individual interview participants in the study. There were a total of eleven participants, a collection of administrators from within and outside the unit, staff within the unit, and two students. I conducted a total of thirteen interviews – two staff interviewed twice to clarify and expand upon their responses. I recruited participants based on diversity of identities and diversity of positionalities to the equity work of the center. A few staff participants work specifically on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and others have specific student populations that they support. The administrative leaders are responsible for the center as a whole, and provided perspective on the context of the work, and the evolution of strategic priorities. Through the interview process, I focused on Bartlett and Vavrus’ (2017) concept of vertical comparison, attending to how racial identity, job title, stakeholder

responsibility, and other background elements shape perspectives on racial equity work within the unit.

I first interviewed a member of staff in the career center who worked specifically on equity initiatives, and identified other participants to reach out to in consultation with this staff member. I only interviewed staff and students who had been to the career center and were familiar with its work. I interviewed two administrative leaders in the center itself, and one senior leader in the wider division. A university partner with expertise in equity and inclusion, and who had collaborated with the center, provided an outside perspective on the equity work. Five staff from various levels in the organization, and various identities, provided their thoughts on equity and how it has been carried out in the unit. Finally, I interviewed one current student who worked in the center, and one alumnus who graduated a month before our interview. These participants shared a student perspective on the unit and how it had impacted them.

Below I provide a table with demographic information on all of the participants. This table includes a snapshot of participants' identities and positionality to the center, as well as their time in their current role and in higher education (if applicable). Participants shared this information in a demographic survey completed at the beginning of each interview. I have assigned pseudonyms to each participant to protect their identities, and have described their backgrounds in general terms to reduce the likelihood of identification. It is important, given the nature of this study, to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of all participants in the study, as well as the institution which agreed to host my research. At the request of participants in the study, I also represent their racial identities in generalized categories – BIPOC, White or Multiracial – in order to preserve their anonymity. I have created general categories for time spent in position and age for the same reason.

Table 4: Participant Demographics

Participant Pseudonym	Role	Time in Current Position (Yrs)	Time in Higher Education (Yrs)	Age	Gender Identity	Racial Identity
Sofia	Staff	3-5	3-5	30-34	Woman	Multiracial
Maria	Staff	3-5	5-10	35-39	Woman	BIPOC
Sarah	Staff	Fewer than 3	More than 10	35-39	Woman	White
Arthur	Administrator	Fewer than 3	More than 10	45-49	Man	White
Jared	Administrator	3-5	More than 10	35-39	Man	White
Carlos	Staff	3-5	5-10	30-34	Man	BIPOC
Marta	Staff	Fewer than 3	More than 10	35-39	Woman	White
Jayden	Recent Graduate	N/A	N/A	20-24	Man	Multiracial
Oliver	Student, Career Office Employee	Fewer than 3	1	18-20	Man	White
Jamal	Administrator	3-5	More than 10	45-49	Man	BIPOC

Chris	University Partner	Fewer than 3	More than 10	35-39	Man	BIPOC
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Frameworks and Data Analysis

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

At the center of this qualitative case study was the concept of exploring the influence of power and identity on beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in career development. Bartlett and Vavrus’ (2017) version of case study includes the concept of vertical comparison, examining the nuanced perspectives of individuals with different positionality to an issue. In this inquiry, I explore the different perspectives of administrators, staff, and students of different identities and positionalities to the work of the unit. The findings of this study are intended to provide an opportunity to learn from these professionals’ and students’ lived experiences to better understand the ways that beliefs and assumptions about race and career influence the work of career centers.

The conceptual framework underpinning this study was antiracism, specifically the premises that (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Kendi, 2019; Smith, 2019):

- Due to global and national history, and the long-term impacts of overtly racist structures and policies, racism is deeply embedded in contemporary American institutions, structures, and policies
- In order to undertake antiracism, it is necessary to take action to identify and change racist thinking, structures, and policies

These ideas underpin my research questions in the sense that I assume history and policies shape beliefs and assumptions about race and work, and that the participants in my study are not

neutral or a-historical in their perspectives on race and identity. We each have beliefs about race, whether or not we are conscious of these beliefs. Similarly, this conceptual framework suggests that both the world of work and LPU itself represent systems that produce differential racial outcomes as a result of the founding and history of overt racial discrimination in both. Thus, the goal of the study was to explore individual administrators,' staff, and students' awareness of and perspectives on these systems and beliefs about how career centers should best prepare students to navigate professional life.

My theoretical frameworks emerged through the process of data collection and analysis, as is common in inductive qualitative case study research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interdisciplinary and complex nature of the study necessitated two theoretical perspectives, and I chose to draw on: color-blind racial ideology (Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2013) and actor-network theory (Landri, 2020). These two frameworks, taken together, facilitated a more nuanced and complete understanding of the beliefs and assumptions about racial equity and career in the data.

Color-blind racial ideology illuminates the ways in which the denial of racial differences, racial inequities, and racism itself manifest. It also provides a framework for understanding the impacts of this ideology on people of different racial identities. Actor-network theory has helped to illuminate the role of networks, including professional associations and digital systems, in shaping beliefs and assumptions about work and racial equity held by participants. These two frameworks help to surface different facets of the complex social, political, historical, and contemporary narratives at play in this case.

Data Analysis

My methodological and conceptual assumptions drove my selection of methods for data analysis. In order to interpret the data, I used an inductive approach to coding that allowed for flexible and iterative development of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During and after data collection, I reviewed all documents, observations, and audio interviews in order to familiarize myself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and develop some initial ideas about what theories I might draw on and member checking conversations I might have (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I then conducted a round of systematic coding of the data set, gathering all relevant data and resisting the impulse to foreclose on any potential codes or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I revised my list of codes and organized them into potential themes, which I reviewed, defined, and named. I conducted member-checking throughout, surfacing potential themes with a few participants to confirm their relevance. I organized my themes by research question, and reviewed themes to look for any patterns, codes, or data that might have been left out (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I kept reflexion notes throughout the data analysis process, and consulted with members of my dissertation committee, in order to reflect on the interactions among myself as researcher, the topic, and the data (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022). More detail on my analysis process can be found in Chapter 3.

I continued to refine my themes even during the writing of this report, acknowledging Braun and Clarke's suggestion that insight can continue into the framing and storytelling stages of research (2022). I felt that it was important to attend to a trustworthy, iterative, and thorough analysis of the data, given the relatively limited qualitative literature on the topic and the myriad ways this data might be explored. I was aware, throughout the process, of the richness of the wisdom of my participants and the importance of conducting research with a diversity of

perspectives on career development. Many participants encouraged me in my work and expressed their commitment to supporting research on racial equity in the field.

Emergent Themes

I have organized the themes described in this section by research subquestion. This was to allow for balanced coverage of the topic. I have included relevant quotes where possible, in order to uplift the voices and words of participants. The research subquestions were designed to attend to definitions, stories, and context, respectively, as these three areas emerged in the literature as key drivers of beliefs and assumptions about racial equity and career. Subquestions were formulated to provide focus, given the broad nature of the main research question, and to allow for deeper exploration of the topic.

Themes will, therefore, be organized into two categories: *Consistent* and *Contrasting*. Vertical comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) seeks to trace the evolution of policies and concepts through assemblages of actors in a given space. Participants in this study hold various perspectives on both work and equity. In analyzing the data, it became clear that one way to develop themes was through the process of seeking *consistent* themes, that is, patterns that appeared consistently across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) version of reflexive thematic analysis, which I used in my data analysis. I also wanted to attend to vertical comparison. I considered the views of a few participants important in theme development, because they brought a unique and valuable lens or special insight because of their unique positionality in the work. Thus, I also include themes that are *contrasting*, in the sense that they represent a sentiment important to the topic, though they may not have appeared across the entire data set. As we saw in the introduction to this study, in some ways, many beliefs about race and work contain contradictions. Organizing themes in this

way allowed me to surface contradictions in the work and beliefs within the unit. Again, my main research question was: *What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?*

Research Subquestion One

Table 5: Emergent Themes for Research Subquestion One

Subquestion One: How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?	
Consistent	Contrasting
<p>THEME 1: Driven by Data</p> <p>SUBTHEME 1: Closing the Gaps</p> <p>SUBTHEME 2: Beyond Engagement and First Destination</p>	<p>THEME 2: Caring for People</p> <p>SUBTHEME 1: We are all Subjects</p> <p>SUBTHEME 2: Always Adapting</p> <p>THEME 3: Designing for the Most Neglected</p> <p>THEME 4: Joy and Well-Being</p> <p>SUBTHEME 1: Attending to Trauma</p> <p>SUBTHEME 2: Students Define Success</p>

This inquiry surfaced different definitions of equity and racial equity within the unit. For this first research subquestion, there are four themes that represent different perspectives on how to define equity in career development work: driven by data, caring for people, designing for the most neglected, and joy and well-being (I use this hyphen intentionally to emphasize the importance of the morpheme *-being* in the word). Representing *consistent* perspectives across the data was the first theme, driven by data. This theme captures the focus on data expressed within

the unit, with subthemes: closing the gaps and beyond first destination, addressing different aspects of this theme described by participants. The other three themes represent *contrasting* perspectives shared by participants. The second theme, caring for people, captures the emphasis on care, respect, and shared humanity described by some participants, with subthemes: we are all subjects, everyone takes part, and always adapting. The third theme, designing for the most neglected, describes a perspective shared by one participant as a way to frame racial equity and drive more just student outcomes. The fourth theme, joy and well-being, captures the perspective of one participant who emphasizes the value of joy and well-being, including mental and physical health, for students as an outcome of just life and career design. It also captures the emphasis on joy and well-being described in life design, the career model centered in the unit's work. The subthemes: attending to trauma and students define success, emerged out of conversations about how joy and well-being might be actualized in career advising.

I will also note, in the interest of attending to contradictions in the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and vertical comparison (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) that, Jared, an administrator, suggested that understandings of equity are “largely” shared across the unit:

We can all agree on what these values are. But how we articulate those across the board, I think this is work that we have to do right now...I think the mindset on that is pretty similar throughout the staff, but we are doing the work now to ensure that the language is understood and owned and authored by the team.

Jared suggested that the team shares equity values, even if their specific articulations differ, where Arthur felt that different and potentially competing definitions exist. I will next describe four iterations of these definitions articulated by different participants.

Theme 1: Driven by Data

This section describes the consistent surfacing of the center's focus on data as they created and grew their equity definitions and efforts. This focus was evident across all interviews, in observations, and in analysis of both the website and other materials shared. Even participants who shared contrasting definitions of equity referred to the unit's focus on data as a way to contextualize their ideas. The subthemes within this section refer to specific sentiments participants shared regarding their focus on data and how they choose to define equity, including racial equity, in nuanced ways related to the data the unit collects.

The unit collects two types of data. The first is student engagement data, which represents the number and nature of student interaction with the career center, including attendance at events and programs, and use of services. The second form of data is career outcomes data, information collected about LPU graduates' first educational, professional, or other activity after they leave the university, typically their first job. Included in this first destination data is the employment industry and function of graduates' first jobs, their employers, graduate schools that they attend, their geographic location, and their starting salaries. This set of data is referred to by staff in the unit as first destination data. Administrators and staff in the unit use this data to get a sense of the success of their efforts to prepare graduates to begin their post-college careers. This data is shared with their university leaders and stakeholders as an indicator of their effectiveness, and the first destination data is publicly available on their website, presented as "outcomes."

In order to address equity, the center hosts a data team who disaggregates the engagement and first destination data by multiple demographic factors, including:

- URM – underrepresented minority (BIPOC students, excluding Asian students who are not considered to have the same level of targeted historical discrimination)

- Gender
- FLI - first-generation and/or limited income students
- Degree level
- Degree program
- Citizenship status
- Athlete or non-athlete

These filters are used to identify differences in first destination outcomes by demographic.

Employment status and salary in particular, serve as a quantifiable metric that represents the “quality” of graduates’ first destination. At the moment, this first destination data is used as the primary way for leadership in the unit to assess equity in graduates’ outcomes. When asked about the unit’s definition of equity, most shared that data drives equity priorities in the unit.

Subtheme 1: Closing the Gaps. The most consistent definition of equity among staff and administrators in the unit was that from the beginning of their focus on equity, their primary goal has been closing demographic gaps in their engagement and outcomes data. This was articulated by all three administrators interviewed, and referred to as the unit’s primary focus by other staff. In addition to these two data sets, one administrator also shared that leadership compares the equity gaps they identify with data from the National Association of Colleges and Employers in order to reinforce their equity priorities. In the words of this administrator:

[We] are always grounded in the data. We’re always starting from the standpoint of let’s collect good quality data that reflects the outcomes we’re looking for. And I think there’s an importance in differentiating between the impact that we can have on access and the impact we can have on outcomes. Those are both valuable...those are two different ways we can look at this...we do have the ability to filter down [by demographic]. But the idea

there is if there was another way to slice that data we would want to do that. Because the more ways that we can find those gaps in outcomes or those gaps in access, the more we can say we need to prioritize this element because there's an issue. (Jared)

Jared went on to share the way the unit defines equity in relation to data:

From the early days...there was always a part of the conversation that was...we're doing this, because this needs to be equity-based work, we need every student to have the opportunity to achieve their potential or a desired outcome, based on the support and service that we can bring.

This subtheme, then, defines equity in terms of closing gaps in access and outcomes. Racial equity would therefore be defined as closing access and outcomes gaps for underrepresented minority students, and by closing gaps for first-destination students, many of whom are BIPOC. Since National Association of Colleges and Employers data is also brought to the table when determining gaps to address, their data would also inform equity and racial equity priorities.

The unit's primary equity focus, identified by all three administrators, is closing the gaps for FLI students. Near the beginning of the center's focus on equity, LPU received a grant of more than one billion dollars to address the needs of FLI students. The wider experiential learning unit, along with the career center, received a portion of this grant to specifically close engagement and outcome gaps for FLI students. This has been their primary focus, not only because of the grant, all three administrators agreed, but because the gaps for FLI students were the most "concerning" (Jamal) to them as represented by their data. Jared spoke to the grant funding saying, "the gift...is explicitly tied to supporting...first-generation, limited income students...there is an explicit university mandate to be closing gaps for those students."

When asked about the process of selecting FLI status as their central equity priority, rather than gender or race for example, Jamal, the unit's lead administrator said:

When I analyzed the data five years ago, I was able to see that our employability rates were really high. But if you analyze them by demographics, there were gaps...we found that there were gaps for students who have limited income backgrounds, Pell Grants...and then others...We found salary gaps that were alarming for women. For underrepresented minorities, the differences weren't significant. I was surprised when I first saw that because I wasn't expecting it. You know, and maybe that was just my own bias that I was expecting that perhaps Black graduates would be at more disadvantage than their White counterparts when it comes to how long it takes them to get a job after they graduate. No, that's not what the data suggested. But when I start to think about it, and I started to think, yeah, so like, when we think about what it takes to get into [an elite institution], the disadvantages that are going to show more are going to have to do with income and first generation...when we're talking about jobs in the first destination survey, what actually ends up really playing a big part of this are the navigational skills, skills that the students have during the job search process, the level of advocacy that they have at home, and the networks they get to tap into. And sometimes, these three things, a lot of times they transcend race.

This story illustrates the process by which, focusing on data, administrators in the unit decided to focus on first-generation and limited income status, rather than race. The funding also supported this priority.

A significant portion of the large grant to support FLI students was spent on hiring an equity-focused team in the unit. Administrators indicated that these seven equity-focused

positions are mostly funded by the grant. Carlos, a member of this equity team, shared that he is aware that his role is primarily funded by the grant, and wonders if the unit would value his work if they had not received the grant.

Sarah, a White staff member, expressed the sentiment that “the point of [the equity team in the unit] is so that we can reach those targeted populations.” She saw equity as diversifying the main services and programs of the unit by engaging students in historically underserved groups, such as FLI students. She shared that while her job is to engage her specific majors, the members of the equity team are responsible for engaging diverse student populations.

Marta also expressed interest in closing engagement gaps for diverse students, saying: My question was, how do we ensure that we have a diverse team of students going [to these programs] and not just a first come first serve? Or only offer [programs] that biotech majors are going to do? So how do we have a system of both advertising engagement with our employers, with our students, and the process for selection that allows us to be aware of a lot of different elements, identities, etc, so that we can make sure we are bringing people into that conversation?

Marta expressed interest in moving beyond simply getting to 100% engagement, and rather, having conversations about how to engage students in culturally appropriate ways.

When asked about unit administrator’s equity priorities, Marta named their interest in closing first-destination outcome gaps for students of different demographics. She mentioned that administrators conducted a presentation about their strategic goals, and presented the data to the team:

[Our unit leader] gave this presentation about the equity piece for us as one of the pieces we're looking at shifting. [He shared] that students have access to all of these different

experiences. So access is one big piece of it. I think the piece that oftentimes gets missed in the presentation is class and classism....That's something that is not always acknowledged...Cultural and class-wise, there are some big hurdles I don't know that we undertake as a whole to recognize...That leadership team has really been feeling that our students should all be getting opportunities, all be getting jobs. Their pay should be rising higher, more. And then there was a gap this year between our like humanities students and everybody else. There was humanities, there was pay, there was a gender gap. So those are the big ones I can remember from the presentation six months ago....there's some genuine hope for...bridging the gap, or whatever it is (Marta).

Marta recalled this presentation, and that administrators shared the desire to close gaps in access, outcomes and engagement data.

Similarly, Sarah said that “there is a real commitment to equity [in the unit]...you hear [our lead administrator] talk about how we need to be engaging with all of our students...when we think about equity, we think about making sure that everyone, our FLI students, our students of color, who may not come in with the same knowledge of how to navigate college and post-college life, may not have the same networks, that they are able to access our resources and start building for themselves what other students might have inherited through families. And I think that is the baseline of what we're trying to do here.” There is an awareness among members of the team of the equity and access intentions of unit leaders.

Sofia, who works to connect students with employment opportunities, also identified her equity priority as closing “significant” gaps in first destination data. She was able to cite the gaps in salary information from memory during our interview:

Right now, I think we're seeing a 15k discrepancy between men and women. So if it's a female... no, it's 25 in the latest data. But again, not statistically significant. It's just what we're seeing, the 25k difference. And then we have the [Underrepresented Minority] discrepancy. So if that student is a black female, maybe they're starting with their job at 25k less, and then the implications of that. So then I'm like, oh, well, then it is our job. Because that's their first destination. It's like, we want to get into salary parity, at least in the first destination, which is kind of our deliverable (Sofia).

Sofia describes the importance of significance in the equity gaps in the data. She ultimately articulated feeling responsible for closing gaps by population, if they are “significant” (Sofia). She also named the intersection of the gender and URM gaps in her comments, identifying that while a racial gap may not be considered significant by the team, a combined racial and gender gap, such as for black women, may be. The implications of intersectionality in the data is not something the administrators in the unit addressed.

Subtheme 2: Beyond Engagement and First Destination. The next subtheme described the sentiment that the unit should explore and consider data beyond student engagement and first destination. As participants described the unit’s focus on data for equity, and the two axes of this focus – engagement and first destination – they surfaced critiques of relying on these two aspects to assess the quality and equity of their work. In the words of one staff member:

I think what is currently or what has been driving our work...is how many likes we get, how many times we can get students to scan in...this is considered our engagement number...and the goal is to get 100% engagement...It’s a really light kind of touch for that, you just scan in, and then you’re considered an engagement...to do engaged work

you have to be learning...we have a lot of programs we just run and I don't necessarily believe they are super quality (Marta).

This staff member articulated a difference between participation and learning. She also echoed the quantitative approach to evaluating success in the unit, through engagement numbers.

Arthur also spoke to the limits of engagement data, saying that some staff feel as if engagement is enough, and that equity would require that "if a student isn't showing up, you have to go out there and find out why and knock at the door...especially if they're from FLI populations." Other staff, he said, believe that "you can create these programs. Students don't show up, it's on them." Arthur spoke about the limits of defining equity in the pursuit of equal first destination outcomes, saying "I was skeptical of that data as not being of value for 60% of our students." He believed that most students' first destinations were not indicative of their future success, due to graduate school attendance, gap years, and other experiences. Arthur also raised the issue of stakeholders, which I will address more in the third research subquestion. Arthur spoke to the values of LPU's board of trustees, sharing that they care most about the first destination data as a proxy for the return on investment for attending their institution. He emphasized the importance of data to demonstrate impact and success to university leaders.

Arthur also shared that he is more concerned with data five to ten years beyond graduation, which he considers a better indicator of graduate outcomes. He stated that the unit is in the process of collecting data beyond first destination. As for his personal definition of equity, he believed that a better measure of equity would be the future diversification of the workforce of powerful companies such as Goldman Sachs. "Are we going to see a much more diverse group of students, alumni at our networking events?...Are we training students to break down these barriers and actually make an impact beyond just getting their first job?" (Arthur). Here,

Arthur defines equity as creating more diversity in companies with economic power and prestige, and diversifying the alumni who come back to engage with the center. He did acknowledge, however, that “you need more tangible outcomes to present at your annual review. But...what keeps me going is, potentially we could be training the next generation of leaders in biotech and medicine and finance.” He articulated two different definitions of equity work for the career center, and identified which approach resonated with him.

Sofia also spoke to the limitations of defining equity strictly in terms of engagement and first destination metrics, sharing that:

My theory, which could be totally wrong, is that if the student has access to [resources], well, likely the first destination will be okay. But what happens after?...Maybe they’re going to experience a lot of discrimination and annoyances at their job.

Her definition of equity moved beyond first destination to the total experience of work, and she expressed concern about underrepresented minorities’ needs being left out of a purely first-destination-focused approach. Sofia also considered distribution of staffing and resources within the center as a component of equity, noting that graduate students are not given nearly as much staff time as undergraduates. This sentiment came up in two other interviews as well.

Chris, who brought an equity lens from outside the unit, suggested that the unit’s data, and its interpretation, may have limits, especially in assessing the importance of race. He also raised the issue of intersectionality, highlighting potential intersections between FLI students and BIPOC students. Chris said:

It just seems like we like to parse out these data points, to tell this narrative in terms of what we’re doing, when we don’t look at the deeper layers of that data to see what it’s really telling us...I’ve never seen this data...share it broadly right? With campus

partners...when I'm talking about their division to a researcher like yourself, or even to students, it helps for me to have a better understanding of what types of data you are looking at.

Here, Chris suggested sharing data with equity-informed partners at the university, but also looking more deeply at the data to define equity priorities. He felt that when it comes to demographic impacts such as class and race, "looking at one or the other is not enough."

Maria also critiqued the idea of using data to "check boxes," and preferred customizing success metrics for different student populations. She suggested that engagement and outcome data could involve reading career center emails and more nuanced ways of engaging. Feedback from students who do not attend events was something else Maria advocated for. She defined equity in part as making change and innovating in order to interrupt doing the "same old thing to get the same results."

Theme 2: Caring for People

Another definition put forth in the data was defining equity and racial equity as care for people. This point of view was shared primarily by two staff members – Marta and Sarah – who identified as White women. One staff member, Marta said:

Equity, humanness, caring, the whole bit...if you're the power in charge, you are looking out for your people...transparency. You are also looking out for them saying, hey, this thing would be a really great opportunity...You're out there doing a type of care work...how are we going to be good neighbors to one another?...that for me sits more closely in alignment with a lot of the [equity team's] work.

When asked about the unit's definition of equity, these staff members shared a sense of the collective data-driven definition of equity, but added that they feel inequities in treatment among

staff in the unit in the form of communication issues, lack of care for their interests from leadership, and lack of looking out for one another.

Subtheme 1: We are all Subjects. When asked about her definition of equity, Marta said that care for people is important to her, to Sarah, and to a few other members of the team. She elaborated on one component of this care, describing it as distinguishing between treating people as subjects rather than objects:

I used to work with a lot of community partners. And it's like, how we treat each other? Are you a subject or an object? And I'm not objecting people. They're not objects. We're not doing it. Subjects together working on something. Subject to object, not gonna work.

Marta shared that she does not feel that this priority is shared by the entire staff, and that administrators do not always attend to this form of equity in their supervisory relationships. She also shared that she feels that socioeconomic class as a dimension of equity is neglected in the unit.

Subtheme 2: Always Adapting. Another iteration of the care definition of equity captured the importance of continuous adaptation to the needs of community members and students. Marta said:

Equity, for me, it is oftentimes looking at the various ways institutions, organizations, communities, can adapt to the needs of our people. Awareness of action towards that... not one bare minimum standard, but the constant, being able to flex, but also being able to know, what are we flexing? What and why? And for whom? Who has the time and power to do this?

This quote describes adapting to different needs, and looking at equity from different perspectives. It includes awareness and action. It also requires continuous response, not a one-

time shift. Marta also described the importance of taking a critical look at power and resource allocation.

Carlos confirmed that some staff seem to have a definition of equity that looks like equal access. He referenced a popular concept of equity that suggests a move from treating people equally to attending to the question “how do we make sure that people have equal access and a sense of where they can actually be successful.” Carlos shared his thoughts on the limitations of this definition, naming the importance of “the need to change the way we have people accomplish a goal, or get an outcome...that is something that oftentimes I don’t see [in the unit]. It’s hard to do that all the time. And scale that up.” Carlos shared that caring for people warrants a continuous attention to needs, raising the question of how to prioritize resources, and create scalable interventions.

Theme 3: Designing for the Most Neglected

This theme refers to the idea that equity entails specific and primary attention to the student population with the least engagement and/or most historical exclusion from a particular service or program. This concept was articulated by Maria, a staff leader in the unit who works with a diverse population of students, many of them international and BIPOC. Maria offered a concise definition of equity that drives the work of her team, “we’re designing for the person who is the most neglected, because the rest will come anyway.” This invokes the concept of design, embedded in the life design ethos of the unit. It also strives to address inequities for the most neglected. Though this theme was articulated specifically by only one participant, I chose to include it because it represents a unique definition of equity which addresses the first research question. It also relates somewhat to the data-driven definition of equity communicated by

administrators in the unit, though Maria articulated a focus on URM and international students who identify as women, since they were the least represented at many of her events.

Maria went on to describe a tangible instance of her work to design for the most neglected, speaking about a competition whose winners often identified as White men. After the program was redesigned, it has seen the highest engagement and strongest outcomes for BIPOC and international students. The redesign resembled the design-thinking process, gathering student perspectives, identifying barriers to the success of URM and international students, and redefining success with inclusion in mind.

Maria considered this program one of her successes in her role, and has presented the data on this effort in professional venues. When I asked her what advice she might give to other leaders who want to practice her definition of equity, she said that she drew on her own lived experiences of inequity to drive her equity work. For those without those lived experiences, she recommended paying attention to student feedback, especially gathering feedback from students who are not participating in career programs. Maria said that in order to get “identity representation,” it is important to listen to URM students. She shared that when she gathered feedback from Black students, they shared experiences of discrimination at work, and requested a safe space to have honest conversations about racialized issues, such as hair. Maria admitted that had they not gathered that feedback, they would not have known that these conversations were necessary for these students to participate in programs. She said, “start asking how you’re making an impact beyond just check boxing, and focus on community atmosphere and building trust with the diverse set of students, and really just paying attention” (Maria). Maria shared that it is not only important to design for the students who do not participate, but to gather thoughtful feedback from those students to inform the redesign.

Theme 4: Joy and Well-Being

This theme emerged from definitions of equity shared by Carlos, and to a lesser extent Chris, whose roles focus specifically on working toward equity, racial and otherwise. This theme relates somewhat to the unit's definition of equity in that administrators in the unit were concerned with graduates' job satisfaction, but it is also distinct in that joy and well-being were not described as the main focus of the unit's equity goals, which instead centered participation in programs, and first destination employment and salary. It should be noted that joy and well-being are emphasized in the original text on life design, which is the philosophy underpinning the unit's work in general (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Other staff members and students alluded to the importance of joy and well-being, though they described it as a goal of career in general, and not as a component of equity. Sarah, for instance, referred to the importance of "sanity and boundaries and wholeness" as an important part of career learning for students in general. The unit's practice of life design addresses the importance of personal reflection and attending to values in career. These reflective pieces appear throughout the work of the center, including in their summer curriculum.

Carlos spoke of joy and well-being as key aspects of equity, especially for FLI and BIPOC students. A few of the programs led by the equity team in the unit invoke the term "Black boy joy," for example. These programmatic materials captured the importance of joy and well-being for students who may hold physical, psychological, or spiritual trauma as a result of racism and experiences with discrimination on the basis of race, income and/or gender, such as Black men.

Subtheme 1: Attending to Emotion and Language. When asked what he does in his work, Carlos says that he helps students "design joyful lives" and that he "centers the whole

person.” He described his appreciation for the acceptance stage of life design in that it allows him to facilitate students’ reflection on their past, present, and future. He described using an anti-deficit approach (Harper, 2010) in order to empower students, but at the same time sitting in “acceptance and empathy in order for them move forward because...here was some trauma, or there was some history that prevented them from feeling as if they can live their best life for themselves.” He shared an example of a few students who held intersectional identities as international students and had underrepresented backgrounds and who “stated that they felt like they could not actually live [the life design goals] they wrote down because...everybody in their families back at home sacrificed so much for them to be in the U.S. and at [LPU].”

Carlos also suggested that the emotional component of career is important for URM students because:

We are in spaces where we are challenged by our identities where others are not because of their privilege...I think emotions are important to keep in mind because if you don’t...then we’re ignoring the fact of the experiences that the individual might have that might prevent them from living a well-lived and joyful life.

Carlos’ definition of equity moves beyond, for instance, a graduate’s employment, to include a sense of joy, health, self-esteem, and well-being. He identified the importance of joy and well-being for URM students in particular.

Carlos also shared his understanding that systems create negative impacts for students based on their identities. He described regularly having conversations with students about their past and present experiences with discrimination, relating to race, income, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and other intersections, and indicated that processing those experiences allowed his students to more fully engage in career and life design.

He also highlighted the importance of language in his definition of equity. He shared several words that he does not believe are used in equitable ways, such as resilience and minority. He described observing inequity in some of the unit's practices, and a lack of adequate attention to inclusive language in materials and during hiring processes. Concerns about inequities in hiring, staffing, and promotion were shared by all of the BIPOC staff I spoke with, including the outside equity leader, Chris. I will include more about this when I present themes for the third research subquestion.

Subtheme 2: Students Define Success. Another aspect of supporting students' joy and well-being, as articulated by Carlos, related to the need for career and life design educators to allow students to define success for themselves. He shared that his definition of equity includes checking biases about what students are interested in doing with their lives. He felt that educators should let students define their own goals and explore what success looks like to them. This, he thought, would allow students' identities and values to emerge in the process of career and life design, resulting in more equitable work. Carlos shared that he "likes to talk about diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice. Because all five are different." This multidimensional lens on equity echoed his holistic definition of the term.

Along with the idea that students should define success for themselves, Carlos presented the idea that individuals have different definitions of what good work looks like. For instance, he said, "there's a variety of perspectives on how much you should share in a workplace." He suggested that perspectives differ on whether or not identities are relevant to career development at all. Carlos said, "I tried to get my colleagues to realize that we also have to share our stories. Not everybody is willing to do that. And that's the hardest part, as the official diversity person in the office." Carlos shared the challenge of getting colleagues to share and reflect on their own

identities and stories, and therefore to explore the connection between who you are and how you define success.

Chris spoke about the importance of perception in career, and the need to pay attention to the ways in which BIPOC students may be negatively perceived in the workplace. Chris described a need for programming that makes space for students to evaluate their own goals and discuss experiences of discrimination. Chris saw this as relevant to BIPOC graduates' success. The attention to joy and well-being described in this theme represent another dimension of equity held by career practitioners.

Research subquestion one explored different definitions of equity and racial equity in the unit. I have presented the primary definition articulated by participants and centered by administrators. I have also chosen to include three contrasting definitions in order to illuminate other nuanced perspectives on equity held by staff in different positionalities to the work. The significance of these definitions will be described further in the discussion chapter.

Research Subquestion Two

Research subquestion two explored the stories, narratives, and assumptions that shape career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers. This question was intended to provide context for professionals' definitions about career and highlight ways that beliefs about work and career shape their practice of equity. Data for this question was gathered from observations, document analysis, interviews, and my reflexion notes. Course and workshop observations helped to supplement the information shared in interviews. Since the organization uses life design as a framework for career development, this model informed many of their ideas about careers. Individual staff and administrators emphasized different aspects of life design in their interviews.

Table 6: Emergent Themes for Research Subquestion Two

Subquestion Two: What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?	
Consistent	Contrasting
<p>THEME 1: Lives Should Be Designed</p> <p>THEME 2: Not About Race</p> <p> SUBTHEME 1: Class Not Race</p> <p> SUBTHEME 2: We All Face Adversity</p> <p> SUBTHEME 3: Not an Identity Office</p> <p>THEME 3: Keep Climbing</p>	<p>THEME 4: Race Matters</p> <p> SUBTHEME 1: Safety First</p> <p> SUBTHEME 2: Begin with Identity</p>

Theme 1: Lives Should Be Designed

This theme refers to the conceptions of career put forward by administrators and staff at the center in their work, in their materials, and in their interviews with me. Around three years before my research was conducted, the unit implemented a life design model of career education. They moved away from a traditional model of career services, and adopted the life design approach, a design-thinking based model for career building, which emerged out of Stanford University's design-thinking space (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Within the life design framework, careers are not framed as linear paths, but rather a series of problems which require thoughtfully designed solutions. This approach advocates for the importance of adaptability, curiosity, exploration, risk-taking, holistic thinking, and

embracing failure for its learning potential. It encourages individuals to think like designers in building meaningful and joyful careers. Careers are represented as opportunities to find meaning and pursue purpose and joy. Individuals are encouraged to consider their whole selves, and design careers that also support their health, relationships, spirituality, and lives in general. The unit described careers on their website as integrated journeys of inspiration that allow everyone to make bold moves and achieve their aspirations, regardless of their background or social capital. (I have chosen not to include a direct quote here to reduce the potential for identification). Rather than emphasize career planning, the center advocates for engagement in inspiring and empowering experiences. This approach shifts the focus to experiences and connections, the bedrock of the career center's mission, and core tenets of the life design approach (Burnett & Evans, 2016).

Life design is the explicit conceptual model of career that the center employs, and every participant referred to using life design in their practice. Yet, individual educators described emphasizing different aspects of the model according to their own backgrounds and interests. Carlos shared that a student can ask different educators on the team for advice, and get many different answers depending on individual staff backgrounds. Marta expressed this same sentiment. I also heard one educator share this idea with a student during advising. With innovation and curiosity at the heart of the work, staff are encouraged to take ownership of their own practice with students and to try new approaches. This is something Jamal said that he intentionally introduced into the culture:

In terms of just hiring a bunch of people with different perspectives and different identities. What they need most is clarity of vision and direction. We really work hard to try to provide that...I would say that initially, there were people who...wanted more than

just vision and direction, they wanted clarity of how to, you know, give me exactly what I need to do. Which we didn't do...that feedback I was getting constantly in year one is, but how exactly do you want it? What I was trying to say is that is up to you. We know the outcomes we want to reach. I understood initially that the reason they were asking that is out of fear, because of the fear of failure or afraid of making mistakes. I think once they realized that it is okay, then I think they took it, they took off... life design is built on the principles of design thinking. So we're using the same principles in the way we build our work too...design thinking is about prototyping, trying things out, prototyping, testing, it's ideation, it's innovation. So you have to have high tolerance of failure. And an appreciation of failure as part of the process. Huge part of life design as we teach students is, you know, it's okay for you to apply for a job and not get it. It's an important part of the experience...that is part of the growth process. So the narrative shifts there, too. And it shifts...for our team as well. We want our team members to also get curious with the ideas that they have.

Jamal describes introducing design thinking both in the work of the center and in the culture of the staff team itself. Jamal spoke often about capital. He described a commitment to ensuring that all students are able to define satisfaction in career, via the accumulation of social capital and experiences.

Jared described using design to create meaning out of data in his leadership capacity in the unit. He said, "As we develop our work as designers, we have to try these things out so that we can collect, analyze the data, and make the next informed decision." He works often with values and saw that as a key component of life design:

...the idea of life design as the approach to career readiness, there might be a little eye roll there, or there might be a little bit of, okay, just as long as we get to do the resume work. Then when it is experienced, that it's not just let's have a discussion about values, but we have a discussion about why we want to articulate our values in these artifacts, in these documents, in these conversations in service of making deeper connections and finding action... Those are the steps not just to the transactional outcome of apply for a job or apply for grad school and get in the door, but apply for the right opportunities that are aligned with what we want out of work and what we want out of life (Jared).

When asked about the most important capacities for students to develop, Sarah cited communication, adaptability, strategy, teamwork, mindfulness, and self-awareness. She said:

People aren't in their job forty years the same way that they were previously. And so the workforce is constantly evolving. Look how rapidly technology is changing how we operate... What is valuable to you, the saliency of your different identities are going to continue to shift as you navigate life. And so the idea of life design is meant to help you figure out that intersection of... who am I right now and what's going on in the world and how do I make a decision about my career in a way that feels like it's in alignment?

These ideas speak to the life design model, and the need to balance being present with experience and adapting to changing circumstances, rather than planning out an entire career ahead of time. When asked about the origins of her ideas about career, Sarah said that she had gathered some of her ideas about what students need from the employers she works with. Some of her other values she has pulled from her background in authentic career building at her last institution. She spoke about her observation of her brother's career, and told me his story, which

taught her about what career skills are important. She centered integrity and authenticity in her work, which is reflected in the materials and workshops she created.

Arthur leaned into the challenge and risk aspects of life design, noting that students should embrace challenges and learn to grow. He believes in critical thinking and in exposing diverse students to economically powerful spaces in order to allow them to gain more access. Arthur said, “It's one thing that gives students a sense of belonging and a sense of comfort. But that should be the starting point for them to start breaking out and branching out...” Arthur brings his liberal arts background, and interest in equity, to the work he does in life design.

Carlos described himself as human centered. He emphasized the life design concepts of acceptance and joy, and encouraged students to question their socialization and self-concept, to expand their understanding of what they are capable of. He centered empathy in his work and encouraged students to think for themselves. He leveraged belonging and storytelling in particular in his work with staff and students, given his own experiences of navigating issues of belonging in workspaces. He said, “It’s our goal as the [career center] to help students design well-lived and joyful lives, and help them think about that in their own capacities. In my specific work, I like to add: how do we see who we are and what we bring as an asset?”

Sofia cited the “curb cut” principle, a life design concept which illustrates that an accessibility solution for some users can benefit all users. She expressed commitment to the use of data, and believes that user experience data can improve the unit’s work with all students. She considered herself “a design thinker by training” and thinks of life design as “just an extension of design thinking.”

When asked how he might describe the story of a typical, modern career to a student, Jared said:

Well it depends on the student...I think the work we do in life design puts a premium on prototyping experiences, prototyping conversations, so essentially taking action, trying things out, building your network, having these conversations, because moving forward, what's more important than the job title and the career is being a lifelong learner and being able to adapt with the times and as technology advances.

Though the work of life design has a clear throughline in the unit, each educator draws on different aspects of the framework to find innovative ways to actualize the model.

Theme 2: Not About Race

This theme captures the sentiments of participants that the primary equity work of the unit is not and should not be focused on race. Each participant spoke about the role of race in their work, or lack thereof. Both the outside DEIA administrator and internal leaders spoke to this theme. This theme is also reflected in the absence of explicit mention of race or racism in most of the center's materials, and the assertion that they "don't talk about race" (Chris). In my observations, I did not hear any administrators or White staff members mention race, and I both saw and heard about moments when White staff avoided the subject, or asked a BIPOC colleague to cover course material that involved race. After the Supreme Court's banning of the use of race in admissions at a few institutions during my study, the unit informed me that they would not be willing to share engagement data disaggregated by race. Within this theme, I will describe three subthemes: class not race, we all face adversity, and not an identity office.

Subtheme 1: Class Not Race. This subtheme refers to the idea that class has a more substantial impact on career than race. For the first research subquestion, I described the theme driven by data. Within this section, I quoted Jamal's statement that the unit focuses their equity work on issues of first-generation and limited-income students more than on race. He shared that

the outcome data for underrepresented minority students indicated “no significant difference” in first post-graduate destination and income, and therefore the unit does not intervene on that gap. He wondered aloud if class advantages “transcend” race for BIPOC students with access to income and/or connections. Jamal acknowledged the presence of racial discrimination in the workplace, saying that he had felt it himself. He had also heard stories from Black coworkers about experiences of being racially profiled and discriminated against. We discussed the possibility of gathering data beyond the first destination to assess the impact of racial identity, and he shared that the unit is undertaking this now. This represents the perspective of Jamal as lead administrator for the unit, and the main architect of its equity work.

I asked a few of the administrators and staff members who identify as White to speak about which equity gaps the unit prioritizes and how they make those decisions. Marta shared that she feels administrators have a genuine interest in closing equity gaps for students, but that the unit’s approach may look more like assimilation than genuine investment in marginalized student communities. She compared the process to integration of White and Black schools during the U.S. civil rights movement. She mentioned that she wonders if their approach to equity is missing something, saying that the unit believes that the key to equity is to tell students:

...you need to make X number of dollars to be successful. Students need to have X number of impactful experiences and conversations...despite your culture and class. And not to say that that shouldn't and couldn't happen. But to get from here to there, we are missing a huge chunk. We are missing what happens for those groups of students in their experience. In the same way as when we integrate [schools] we are missing a huge thing of what was happening in different communities.

Marta said that she feels the unit wants to “elevate this and elevate that” but that their equity goals require “a depth of investment and people power to which [they] are not set up to do.” This assessment contrasts somewhat with other staff who shared that there is significant investment of people power in the unit, yet Marta's statements referred specifically to depth and nuance of understanding and action related to the needs of URM and FLI students.

Marta went on to say that she feels class is something that the unit does not talk about and tends to hide. She mentioned that staff members in the unit come from different class backgrounds and signal class in different ways. She feels that it's important to acknowledge those things among the members of their own team, and to consider the experiences of students who move into different class environments through their internships and experiences. She shared that she has talked to other staff in the unit who acknowledged that they do equity work with students that they don't do with themselves as a team.

I asked Chris, an outside DEIA administrator at LPU to share his thoughts on the tension of addressing class and race. He said that he came from a few institutions that avoided addressing race directly in their equity work, due to legal barriers around race and admissions. He felt that this was true in the career unit at LPU, saying, “I think that race isn't necessarily in the conversation...And unfortunately, because I think at this university, we don't like having conversations about race” (Chris). He believed that it is critical to address both and to view them from an intersectional perspective. He shared that his conversations with students often involved elements of race and class. He felt that it was critical to look at the deeper layers of data, and expressed his wish that the career unit consulted with more DEIA knowledge holders at the institution to assess the nuances of race and class, rather than relying solely on FLI status as a proxy for both. He went on to share research that he had looked at on the impacts of racial

discrimination on the careers and educations of Black women and others. He shared that he has observed tension in career offices in trying to do equity work on race in particular, because of the unique pressures of working with racist companies. He cited the elimination of several equity positions at many companies after they were hastily created following George Floyd's murder in 2020. He shared that the political landscape appears to be worsening around addressing racism:

Corporations were already struggling in their DEIA efforts, and especially to talk about and even consider race. And so I can only imagine as we are living life throughout the next few years, what that's going to look like and how that also impacts career services centers. It's like a cascading effect. So I'm curious what that's going to look like. Also kind of scared (Chris).

Chris expressed concern that career centers will avoid centering or even addressing race in their equity work, due to the political climate and their need to work with employers. I describe more about the tensions of working with employers in theme five of the third research subquestion, bridge to employers.

Arthur, a unit administrator, shared that he believes racial barriers in career are not well understood across the career team at LPU, saying that members of the team conflate race and class often. He shared his own detailed examples of the types of barriers that exist on the basis of class and race. When asked to describe potential career-related challenges for White graduates with limited access to income and social capital, Arthur said:

I think, for the student without a lot of money, including White students, there's probably going to be less flexibility in terms of their career path and the sense of, like, they cannot [say] I'm in between jobs. Their parents aren't going to be able to float them. I think that there's going to be a lot that they're going to have to learn, like we talk about financial

literacy...balancing your checkbook and understanding what types of loans, but I think there's also knowledge about money they're going to have to get on their own. And they're going to have that probably define their own relationship to money...they have probably jumped several social classes, by virtue of the fact that they came from no money and are now an [LPU] grad. [Their first salary might be] more than the median household income in the United States. They are going to...over the course of their career, make multiples of what the average person makes, so, for all intents and purposes, they are moving up a social class, but...they could fall off of that...it's less margin for error...At the same time, they're White. And that comes with a whole host of privileges that they are never...No matter what space they go into, their presence in that space is never going to be questioned...They want to go into finance, consulting, all of those things. They're okay. Almost all professions, they're gonna be the majority. So maybe more mobile within the space or mobile within the country in terms of where they could live and feel comfortable.

Describing BIPOC graduates, with access to money and social capital, Arthur said:

I think especially...I think any women of color, in most professional situations...their presence in those spaces is going to be challenged and questioned. And so no matter how much money they have, I think the research shows that there's just sort of like...I don't want to say trauma, but sort of a psychic damage to that, in a way that you're in these spaces and your presence there is being questioned, so no matter how much money you have, the daily ins and outs of work are going to be more challenging. Moving up is going to be more challenging. I think a lot of my friends, especially my Black female friends, there are just certain places they cannot live, entire sectors of the country. You

know, I'm not raising my family there. I think it's much easier for the poor White guy to find partners across a broader spectrum than it is for women of color. I think that their partners are a little bit more limited, which has financial implications. Their options are more limited in terms of where they move, and I think wherever they move to, their presence there is going to be challenged.

Though the unit's leaders have chosen to prioritize FLI students' needs, this administrator was able to articulate challenges that BIPOC graduates might face on the basis of both class and race. He also demonstrated the ability to talk about class barriers without bringing in income, something Sofia expressed a desire to learn how to do. After describing class and racial challenges, Arthur added that he feels that "higher education does not do a very good job of talking about social class." He said:

I think the reason that we are focusing on first-generation, limited income is that funders and universities ten years ago saw the writing on the wall with affirmative action. And I think they are like, well, we better start thinking about ways to diversify our student body and building things that would survive a constitutional audit (Arthur).

When asked if he feels that universities focus more on race than class, he indicated that he thinks higher education has a better understanding of race than class and that they "clumsily use" first-generation status and limited income to talk about class, but that those elements do not capture everything.

Subtheme 2: We All Face Adversity. One idea I encountered in my observations was the implication that race represents only one element of identity and adversity, similar to other individual attributes such as personal interests and values. Speaking about the equity work in the office, Sarah shared that she feels identity work and values work are fun things that many staff

members want to lean into, but that it is critical to address technical pieces of career development such as resume building. Her reference to identity, values, and interests in the same sentiment implies that these each have similar weight and value for students. On the topic of social class, however, some White participants in the study seemed to view class as systemic, naming multiple ways in which class shows up on the team and for students. Three White participants – Arthur, Sarah, and Marta – each shared that they feel class is a neglected equity lens in the unit. None of the BIPOC participants expressed this sentiment about class.

Any discussion of discrimination or systemic inequities in the workplace seemed to be limited, outside of one-to-one appointments conducted by a few BIPOC staff members. Jared, an administrator, said that he considers the inequities of the workplace challenging to think about and discuss because they can't be controlled. He said that he does acknowledge that different students are going to enter the workforce and face more adversity based on those structures and systems. When asked if staff talk to students about discrimination or systemic inequities of any kind, Jared said: “I mean, I think broadly, the answer is yes. I think some of that comes through.” He referenced a few panels that one BIPOC staff member has conducted, and a DEI program that has been run (it is not explicitly for BIPOC students, but marketed to all students). Jared elaborated:

I absolutely think those are conversations that should be had and should be acknowledged...I think it's a disservice to not do it or to ignore the fact that [systemic racial discrimination] is something that in my experience, would be a reality for many. So yeah, I mean, that's what we're here to do is to inform and help support our students. By ignoring or being intentionally ignorant of something, I think is a disservice to our work...I think we acknowledge it in our curriculum as well. I think it's not something that

we have not talked about or do not talk about in some formal spaces. But it's maybe not a mainstay. It's not at the core or in the center of our curriculum right now, which is more of the generative design work. But I would encourage any educator to not shy away from those conversations, or if they didn't feel comfortable having those conversations...that's why I think having a staff with a diverse set of expertise and experiences, we can leverage each other with that.

Five different participants mentioned the use of an identity wheel exercise with students in advising and in workshops and classes, as one activity which explicitly addresses the issue of race with students. I was able to observe the use of this activity during a summer course session. I describe the activity in detail below in order to illustrate the association of racial and other identities with personal career preferences and interests.

Summer Session: Building an Autoethnography. This exercise was delivered by an instructor who identifies as a White woman, with accompanying slides. The instructor presented students with an identity wheel and asked them to think about these personal dimensions and to reflect on how these aspects of themselves may shape their career needs and aspirations. The identity work of the summer class was framed as “building an autoethnography.” In the opening slide on the topic, the following words appear together as aspects of autoethnography: identities, communities, experiences, relationships, mentors, beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations, joys, interests, strengths, goals, and aspirations. These words appear as an illustration of clouds emerging out of an individual's head. The course next offered an explanation for why students should engage in this “personal reflection.” Three reasons were given, including: to support students in setting goals, articulating their stories, and identifying their lenses and biases that limit their learning potential. A quote was then shared about the importance of belonging, self-

acceptance, and vulnerability: “‘Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance’ (Brene Brown, PhD).” Systemic or historical discrimination beyond the individual was not mentioned. Students were encouraged to think about significant personal moments in their lives. The instructor next shared her own significant moments, many of which revolve around her interests and personality, such as experiences of being shy, and struggles around mental health. Halfway through the session, a graph about the cycle of socialization was shared. This described how everyone is impacted by external communities and systems. The words discrimination, history, biases, stereotypes, and privilege appeared on this slide. The instructor said “let's put this into context.” She provided an example involving a student who is interested in medicine and has not reflected on their beliefs about success. The instructor shared that this student could take a more active role in designing their own career. Next, the instructor displayed her own identity wheel. The slide included an image of an iceberg, which said that only 10% of identities are visible, and that 90% are invisible. On her wheel, values, beliefs about success, spiritual background, interests such as fitness, strengths, and beliefs about herself as a leader were included. At the center of the wheel were the words: mentally resilient, heterosexual, mid 30s, midwesterner, woman, and white (sic). Heterosexual and white appeared in the same space as midwesterner. The instructor spent the rest of the session on values and purpose, and did not mention race.

This exercise illustrates one way that race and systemic discrimination are presented by staff in the unit, as aspects of personal identity and adversity, like other elements such as unexamined bias, beliefs about work, and personality traits. In interviews, racial gaps in engagement and outcomes were described as facets of the data set, along with gender, FLI status, major, athletic status, and other personal factors. In the summer course, identity was described as

one element of self, like other forms of personal adversity or characteristics such as personality. Sofia referred to the act of discussing these aspects of individual difference as “demographic work.”

Arthur, an administrator, shared the sentiment that all students, not just BIPOC students, face issues of discomfort and belonging on a college campus. He said:

...when I first went off to undergraduate, all of that felt foreign, and I'm technically not first gen, I'm White, and all of those sort of privilege categories but like, the work of the university is, I think, for all but students of faculty, pretty foreign.

He suggested that this discomfort is by design, and is shared by all students, other than children of college faculty.

Carlos, a member of the equity team on staff, spoke about his experiences trying to encourage the consideration of identity and story. He shared that it has been challenging to get other staff in the office to “understand the point of sharing your story.” He said that people only talk about values, morals and beliefs, and not about social identities. He said plenty of work is done on those aspects, and that he feels he has to be the one to bring in the social identity piece.

Subtheme 3: Not an Identity Office. This subtheme refers to the belief that the career center should not be doing similar work as that done by student identity offices on campus, such as the multicultural student center or the counseling center. There are a few staff on the unit’s equity team who are working with BIPOC student groups, and “translating” (Sarah) language and resources offered to all students into something meaningful for these students. The goal, described by Sarah, is to increase engagement for these populations.

Some work in the unit is being conducted by BIPOC staff specifically to address the needs of BIPOC students. At least one staff member on the equity team is conducting workshops

specifically for BIPOC students. This educator has created workshop materials which contain references to joy, well-being, and bringing students' whole selves to work. Another administrator who works with PhD students collected feedback from BIPOC students on why they were not engaging with programming. These students cited a lack of space to have honest conversations about experiences of racism and discrimination at work. The administrator subsequently changed the format to create space for those conversations, and saw higher BIPOC student attendance. Each of these initiatives were designed specifically for BIPOC students, and emerged out of the individual lived experiences and expertise of the two educators who drove them. Black boy joy workshops were operating without the awareness of the unit's leader, who expressed interest in them but no knowledge of them. The leader was immediately able to guess who created them, however, among a staff of thirty educators, based on that person's interests and identities. This speaks to the uniqueness of that educator's contributions.

When asked about the equity-based initiatives of the unit, and her feelings about them, Sarah shared that one challenge is avoiding redundancies with counseling and identity-based support offices. She said:

We are an equity-based organization within the context and within the framework of a career center. I think sometimes that's hard to differentiate from equity-based initiatives and programs housed in student development. And many of us come with a student development background. So we want to do the peer-to-peer stuff sometimes or, you know...we want to situate students in their identities at the heart of the programming that we do. And at the end of the day, we're the only department that is responsible for getting butts in seats in terms of people in jobs...the buck stops with us, I would say. So when students are trying to plan and they are thinking about, like, who's there to help me get a

career, if that's not also what we're doing through the lens of equity, then we're not serving anybody. If they feel like they have to do it alone...a lot of us come into this space wanting to have these conversations about who you are matters. And let's examine that, because that's going to shape and guide how you make decisions and where you find your fit and how you navigate challenges right? And I think all career conversations need to begin there, that part needs to be included and threaded into all that we do. And it needs to be done through a career service lens. It can't be done through a counseling lens...Because there's only one department that is then responsible for supporting the students who are coming with real needs (Sarah).

Sarah described concerns about duplicating the work of identity-based offices and counseling offices. She also spoke to concerns about losing student numbers, lowering student employment outcomes, or failing to provide career support if the unit focuses too heavily on “who you are matters” work:

I feel like we have a student Maslow Hierarchy of Needs. They're going to say it's the technical. I need connections. I need resumes. I need X, Y, and Z. The rest of it feels like fluff...I think our staff would almost...not totally flip it. But we would say our base is we need you to know who you are. We need you to have asked these meaningful questions. We need you to find ways to connect and get the support and the mentorship you need. And then we'll help you build from there. So it becomes this dance... if we market it purely as come figure out yourself or like sometimes even identity in the workplace, are we getting smaller attendance and engagement?

Sarah described tangible career development needs such as interview preparation as “real needs,” as opposed to “who you are matters” and identity work. She contrasted “hands on,

practical things,” with “these bigger conversations [about self-awareness],” saying that students will feel unsupported if the center cannot address students’ acute, technical needs. To illustrate this, Sarah shared a recent statement she heard from a colleague about the experience of an international student:

As an international student, you have a limited amount of time before you get kicked out of the country. What I need to know is how to find a job. I don't necessarily need to have a whole lot of conversations about my identity and belonging, at least not initially (Sarah).

The fourth theme in this subquestion – a contrasting perspective - will address the tension between identity-based career practice and career practice that does not address identity. For this theme, I will describe a student perspective on the role of identity in career practice.

Theme 3: Keep Climbing

This theme refers to the idea that successful careers involve continuous upward movement and growth. This idea arose in interviews, is supported by the life design framework, and was reflected in the physical space of the office. In the main lobby of the career center, a few career-related words appear on the wall, immediately visible from the entrance. One of these words is “climb.” Just to the right of this wall, the main presentation room in the office is called “Summit.” These words invoke the metaphor of a mountain, and imply that careers involve climbing, and presumably reaching a summit.

Sarah used the metaphor of nutrition to describe the career work of the office. She expressed concern that staff educators weren’t providing students with enough substantive knowledge, preferring instead to focus on feel good material and topics.

I think we have this idea of what we think would be helpful for students, because we have hindsight, we want to offer them that upfront. And we can have that too, but sometimes, we have to almost add the carrots into a sugary meal...you know what I mean? (Sarah)

She described the “who you are matters” work as the sugary meal, and the carrots as “real needs” she sees as more directly related to career.

Carlos spoke to the concept of challenge in a different way, highlighting the importance of challenging privileged students on their bias, so that they can be more prepared to work in diverse environments. Carlos also spoke about the concept of success, and the goal-oriented nature of advising, academia, and the way coaches and educators are trained. Due to the short nature of advising sessions, he believes that they are designed to be transactional and that they are structured to best support students who come into the center with a clear goal in mind. Carlos wondered aloud what it might be like “if we did not have one-on-one conversations ever again. How will we help students?...That’s what I want to find out. Because that is more geared towards collectivism. Like how do you as a group succeed?” Carlos highlighted the tension between an individual career emphasis and a more group-oriented or collective approach. I will explore this further in the next chapter.

Arthur, an administrator, spoke most directly to the concept of growth and embracing discomfort. Speaking about the equity work of the unit, he said that the office does a lot of work around belonging and identity, but that he is “much more interested in building social capital and culture capital, which no one is talking about on campus.” He went on to tell the story of a networking event that the center had put together, and invited BIPOC students and FLI students to:

The keynote speaker was this woman who was a lovely woman. She was an alum of our school of education. The best I could tell, any time someone has a gap in their resume, they're working as a consultant. I'm like, so you're unemployed... And you know, she had this nice conversation. And then two weeks later, we had our networking event that was open to everyone with our finance alums. And these are like the big heavy hitters. And because it was virtual, it was the big heavy hitters in venture capital and finance and biotech, and all of these areas ...who tend to be almost overwhelmingly White, overwhelmingly male, but not exclusively. None of those students at the FLI networking event were at the event. That's where the power is...it might feel good to talk to that woman but she is currently unemployed in the field of education, and you're looking to break into these fields and so that's what I wish that these different groups did more was, okay, it's one thing that gives students a sense of belonging and a sense of comfort. But that should be the starting point for them to start breaking in and branching out...As we've been interviewing directors [for the equity team], we need you to help get these students to these other programs, and to these industry-based programs so that students who are like, 'I'm interested in biotech' aren't just hanging around and having conversations with other FLI students interested in biotech, but are actually connecting to alums, even alums that don't necessarily look like them. But who are in biotech and who are hiring. That's how you build social capital and connections, not just talking to other people who you feel comfortable with...You're never out of your comfort zone, but you're actually not building social capital. Social capital is going to allow you to reach all of it (Arthur).

He went on to describe a shift he's observed in the culture of student services, where he feels the focus has changed from retaining BIPOC students and encouraging them to adapt to elite spaces, to critiquing these spaces for their lack of inclusion and equity. Arthur said that he sees people in the profession more frequently asking why BIPOC students need to break into powerful, majority White spaces at all, rather than staying in communities they feel comfortable with. He expressed his contrasting view that equity will be achieved only if BIPOC and FLI students are pushed to embrace discomfort and change powerful organizations and systems from the inside. He shared that he believes the purpose of a liberal arts education is to be challenged:

...we should put you in classroom situations where the things that you take as true are challenged, and you should learn how to engage with that and explore and like most people at the end of their college education, you should come out of it with different opinions and different goals and different values. That shows we're doing our job (Arthur).

These sentiments reflect the idea that success requires growth and moving out of zones of comfort. The presence of the mountain metaphor also speaks to the importance of aspiring for more, and continually moving in an upward direction.

Theme 4: Race Matters

This theme refers to the sentiment, expressed by five staff and student participants – all of whom identified as BIPOC that race is an important aspect of career development and life design. Within this theme, I will describe two subthemes: safety first and begin with identity. This theme represents a contrasting perspective to theme two in this section, not about race.

When presented with the idea that income could transcend the career impacts of race for some students – something one administrator shared, Chris disagreed:

Saying that just because a Black woman may come from a wealthier family or come from a certain income level, or might have connections...and I do think that should be acknowledged compared to another Black woman that may not. That does not mean by any means that that particular person is not going to encounter challenges and barriers because we live in a historically and systemically racialized and racist society.

Chris specifically raised the issue of perception, suggesting that negative racial perceptions impact individual students' and graduates' sense of career identity. These are impacts income and network cannot eliminate.

I asked Sofia whether she feels as if race itself matters, or if class and first-generation status are a close enough proxy in career education work. She responded that she does not think class is a close enough proxy for race. She shared that she believes it is simply “scarier and harder to make claims about race.” She felt that this may be the reason why the unit centers class and first-generation status, because these aspects feel more “tangible.” She echoed the idea that racial discrimination may or may not show up in a first destination report, such as the one the department currently compiles. Yet she hypothesized that racial impacts may show up more overtime:

Well, likely, the first destination will be okay. But what happens after potentially...because they can have access to social capital, they have access to mentorship, they have access to networks, right? Essentially, that is an assumption. So maybe that first destination, but then they're going to experience maybe a lot of discrimination or annoyances at their job. And it's a question I frequently ask myself because we've gotten from the [equity] team, we get a lot of questions about [the equity program] I run. The purpose is to get students in internships. Ideally, students from

historically marginalized groups and internships, that's the group we're trying to focus on. But [Carlos] has been super outspoken because of things he hears from his students, which is like, it's not enough to just get them placed at the job. The company has to be good. Like, has to be thoughtful and diverse (Sofia).

Sofia shared that the employer team is working to better support historically marginalized students in obtaining internships. She is educating herself by seeking out outside experts on racial discrimination in the workplace, in order to strengthen her efforts. This was something she undertook, with encouragement from the equity team, even though race is not an explicit focus of the center's work.

Subtheme 1: Safety First. The safety first subtheme refers to the idea that for some BIPOC students, safety in career education spaces is a necessary condition for them to engage. Arthur, an administrator in the unit, spoke about data he has seen that indicates that BIPOC students do not necessarily feel a sense of belonging at LPU. Carlos highlighted a similar idea, saying that his BIPOC students and other students with marginalized identities, such as gender identity, have experienced discrimination during their internships and post-graduate jobs. He specifically mentioned having a conversation with a student who “had a challenge with an employer misgendering them.” Sofia mentioned these instances as well, saying “[Carlos] has been super outspoken because of the things he hears from his students, which is like, it’s not enough to just get them placed at the job. The company has to be good. Like, has to be thoughtful and diverse.”

Similarly, Maria shared a story about Black students who chose not to engage with career programming at the center. She said:

The Black students weren't coming. So we created [a Black excellence event] that had only Black speakers, Black students, Black professionals in different careers. Come have honest conversations, let's talk about microaggressions, talk about hair, let's talk about things that in the professional world...there's not a safe space for our students of color to speak about. And let's create that environment. So I think had we not listened to the feedback, we would not have known that that was a requirement (Maria).

This feedback process allowed staff to learn that some Black students considered a safe environment a requirement to engage with career programming.

Regarding inclusivity in the center, Carlos shared that the center is known on campus to be somewhat inclusive, and that he has not heard of any negative student experiences with the center. Yet, he shared that he feels BIPOC students are more inclined to visit the center if they have been referred to a specific staff member who is known to the BIPOC community on campus and is deemed safe. For himself, Carlos spoke about the importance of “feeling like I can be myself in a workplace.” He wants to know that he is free to flip his hair, for example, saying “...if I go into another space that is more masculine, me flipping my hair as a queer, Black man, it might not be the best thing to do” (Carlos).

During interviews, I spoke with Jayden, a recent graduate of LPU who identifies as a Black man. Jayden shared his perspective on the work of the center, and speculated about the feelings of other Black students. Jayden shared that he hesitated to visit the center for a few years, in spite of being made aware through email about their work. He expressed feelings of intimidation and anxiety at the prospect of “designing his life.” Ultimately, Jayden connected with Carlos, who also identifies as a Black man. Jayden described the physical space of the center as feeling more open and free than other academic buildings on campus, such as the

library. This encouraged him to spend time studying in the space, and meeting with Carlos. Jayden shared that he has not interacted with any of the staff beyond Carlos in a substantial way. He said that he found Carlos to be approachable and open to connecting about topics other than technical career pieces, which was important to him. After meeting Carlos, Jayden said that he had visited the center at least ten times, and has continued to visit after graduating.

Jayden shared that because he has social anxiety, relationships are important to him. He values his relationship with Carlos and other professors and staff members he has connected with. These connections make him feel more comfortable, and allow him to admit that he needs help. I asked Jayden if race matters in career development and he said, “yes, I think it does matter.” He went on to say that he would rather go to a Black career advisor than someone of another racial identity:

I'd rather go to [a Black career advisor]. It would just make me feel more comfortable.

Honestly, without even speaking to them, literally just looking. Seeing the person would make me feel more comfortable. Not to generalize people of the same race. We don't all have the same experiences, but a lot of us share the same experiences...because there's a familiarity in our life.

Jayden shared that he is more willing to trust the advice of someone who understands and shares his experiences. He shared that he would not be willing to visit a career center that had only White advisors visible. I asked him if the visible presence of other BIPOC advisors, such as advisors whose racial identity appears to be Asian, might make him feel more comfortable. He said that the visible presence of advisors of other BIPOC identities would be helpful, but not as helpful as a Black advisor. He could not specify what is different about a Black advisor beyond familiarity, yet he said, “there is something.”

Subtheme 2: Begin with Identity. The second subtheme is begin with identity. This represents the idea that identity exploration should serve as the foundation of career education for many students, especially those with marginalized identities, who can next begin the process of career and life design. In their interviews, Arthur and Sarah each agreed that self-exploration and identity reflection can be an important first step for students in the life design process, but that this work serves only to support the more practical and growth-oriented work of life design. These sentiments were described in the subtheme: not an identity office, earlier in this section. In contrast, a few staff participants and one student expressed a contrasting view that addressing identity-based experiences is a necessary foundation for many minoritized students.

Jayden shared that discussing the experience of being a Black man on campus and other life topics was an important first step for him to be able to engage with the career development work of the center. It was only after meeting with Carlos and developing a relationship that Jayden was willing to attend resume, professional dress, and other workshops. In general though, Jayden shared that it was the “life stuff” that was most useful in his time working with Carlos and the center. He expressed struggling to organize his life and manage his anxiety around the experience of school, and appreciated Carlos being willing to work through that with him. Ultimately, Jayden ended up pursuing an internship after graduating, with Carlos’ support.

He felt that receiving emails from the career center during his first year was important, though he did not visit right away. He said that he would have appreciated more events of a personal nature, such as organizing your life or exploring your identity and experiences. He said he is aware of the center’s collaborative events with cultural groups on campus. When asked if his friends knew about the center, Jayden said they “definitely know about it” and “have definitely used it.” He shared that his BIPOC friends, however, visit with “more hesitation.”

Jayden shared his thoughts about why some BIPOC students may not seek out support from the career center:

I mean, sometimes I think about a lot of BIPOC students coming from similar backgrounds of having to always work hard, and having a perfectionist mindset. And then I think that is something that specifically makes it difficult to ask for help or seek out support. When you feel like you can't, because you have this image of yourself. And you've been doing things yourself. It's just like, you can do it on your own. You don't need to reach out for help. It's not that bad yet.

This hesitation in seeking out support may connect to the sentiment shared by Carlos that identity exploration and acceptance may open the door for career work. Jayden's suggestion that some students may view the career center as somewhere you go when things are "bad" illuminates another perspective. According to Jayden, some BIPOC students may be accustomed to seeking out support from cultural centers and affinity spaces when things are "bad," and may consider the career center a similar resource.

Carlos said that he often works with BIPOC students around experiences of discrimination or trauma related to their racial identities or other intersectionalities. He spoke about the acceptance piece of the life design framework, sharing that he works with students to see themselves as an asset, to reflect on their past experiences, and to accept where they are. He appreciates life design's emphasis on working with the "whole person." He also spoke about his use of equity frameworks, such as Harper's anti-deficit approach (2010), that describe the importance of regarding BIPOC students in more positive, asset-based ways. Carlos said, "People are going to continue to be challenged, who are underrepresented in certain ways. And I

think those frameworks help people with privilege support people who are underrepresented, because they can also see the assets that people bring” (Carlos).

Carlos shared that he likes to begin with social identities because shifting mindset and developing a sense of possibility for the future is important for some students to be able to undertake life design. He says that some students need to sit in empathy and acceptance in order to move forward because they may have experiences of trauma or other challenges that, in Carlos’ words, “prevented them from feeling as if they can live their best life for themselves.” Carlos said that the career center has served international students who are from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds who have grappled with these topics. This contrasts with Sarah’s story from an international student from Turkey, who said that he did not have time to think about social identity. Carlos also described a meeting he conducted with a student who initially resisted talking about self or identity, but ultimately was able to connect with Carlos around a shared hobby, which opened up a door to a deeper conversation in Carlos’ eyes.

Carlos shared that he is drawing on his own lived experience of expanding his sense of possibility for his own future as a person with intersectional minoritized identities. Part of this process was unlearning things he had been told by authority figures, and internalized beliefs about his own potential. He shared that he does not like the word resilience, because it tends to ignore the systems that force him and others to be resilient. He expressed that it was important for him to acknowledge that our systems were not created for him, and to accept that this is the world we live in. This acceptance process may be more important for students for whom educational and professional systems were not created.

Carlos suggested that beginning with identity allows him to ultimately address issues of discrimination and systemic inequity with students. He described a student relationship wherein

he was able to learn about the student's experience of being misgendered by an employer partner of the career unit. He ultimately had a conversation with that student about systemic bias and discrimination, but felt it was important to establish a relationship and discuss personal identities first. He said:

It depends on, oftentimes, the relationship I might have with the student or their interests...If I learn more about their identities that are salient to them, then I am able to lean into the systems that exist...Usually it gets to the second or third conversation, where we would talk about systems. Not often is it the first kind of question. One student had a challenge with an employer misgendering them. That didn't come until...I saw the student regularly at meetings pre-Covid. And then post-Covid they came to office hours, and then it was the second conversation in-person that we then talked about that challenge. They saw me. This is a really important part of representation and staff showing up into spaces where students are. Because if that didn't happen, maybe they would have come because they get emails from me. But I'm not too sure (Carlos).

Carlos sees relationship building and identity-sharing as foundational to building relationships and trust with students. This trust, he shared, often allows him to learn about students' experiences of discrimination with employers or in their internships.

Research Subquestion Three

The third research subquestion has five themes that address the contextual factors which support racial equity in career services offices. While some of these factors are unique to this center, many aspects of the following themes capture dynamics present in the field of career services as a whole. The *consistent* themes capture sentiments shared across interviews, and reflected in observations and documents. The *contrasting* themes capture sentiments shared by a

few participants which provide a contrasting view on the topic. Contextual factors include: physical and digital presence of the center, office culture dynamics and patterns, institutional investment and staffing, and stakeholders. These elements are captured in the following themes: institutional support, confusion about equity, results and achievement, representation in leadership, and bridge to employers. Within this section, I will describe the evolution of the center’s equity mission. I will also address the differential positioning and priorities of staff in the unit, based on their roles.

Table 7: Emergent Themes for Research Subquestion Three

Subquestion Three: What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?	
Consistent	Contrasting
<p>THEME 1: Institutional Support</p> <p> SUBTHEME 1: Free Reign from the Beginning</p> <p> SUBTHEME 2: Beautiful Space</p> <p> SUBTHEME 3: Many Staff Members, Imbalanced Distribution</p> <p>THEME 2: Results and Achievement</p> <p> SUBTHEME 1: Culture of Action</p> <p> SUBTHEME 2: Staff Competition and Burnout</p>	<p>THEME 4: Representation in Leadership</p> <p> SUBTHEME 1: Promotion of BIPOC Staff</p> <p> SUBTHEME 2: Inclusive Hiring</p> <p>THEME 5: Bridge to Employers</p>

THEME 3: Confusion about Equity	
SUBTHEME 1: We Don't Talk About Race	
SUBTHEME 2: Communication is Key	
SUBTHEME 3: Equity Skill Gaps	

Theme 1: Institutional Support

The first theme focuses on support for the center and its equity work from university leaders at LPU. Nearly every interviewee described the unit as supported by LPU administrators, naming specific elements of the center that had received significant investment, including staff, spaces, and services. Three subthemes emerged from the data: free reign from the beginning, beautiful space, and many staff members, imbalanced distribution. In order to expand on these subthemes, I will first share information about how the equity element of the center's mission emerged and how it has evolved. Many of the themes and subthemes in this section surfaced as a result of a change in direction that administrators at the center undertook four years before the time of this study.

Subtheme 1: Free Reign from the Beginning. The current administrative leader of the wider unit under which the career center falls – Jamal - came to LPU about five years ago, two years before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Jamal had a significant history of practice and scholarship in career education, and had a national voice in the career practitioner community of higher education. Jamal shared that his focus upon arriving at the institution was to support growth and innovation in career development and experiential learning, especially for

undergraduates. He received institutional support to center these priorities, and to use significant resources to elevate the profile of career education at LPU.

Jamal shared that, right away, he began to gather and examine data:

It wasn't until we started digging into the data...that I started to see that there was a problem with the satisfaction with those career outcomes. It wasn't that the students weren't getting jobs. They were getting jobs, certainly at higher rates than other institutions. But they weren't really happy with those choices. And they felt that the institution had let them down that way, because they graduated, and they weren't really clear and sure about what they wanted to do....So that's, I think, what has shifted the conversation for me from career outcomes to life design...When you think of career outcomes, you measure that with how many people are getting jobs after they graduate, and how long it takes them to get those jobs, and what they are making in salaries...Usually the question that people care about is like, are they working in their field of study? Well, yeah, that's a data point. But what if they're not interested in that.

Jamal brought in the life design model as a potential solution to the problem of graduate career satisfaction.

After introducing life design, Jamal identified another issue to address. He collected more data, and determined that some of the fundamental principles of life design presented barriers related to income. In focus groups he conducted with students, he heard from some first-generation and limited-income students that the risk-taking and exploration components of the life design model did not feel accessible to them. As a result, Jamal decided to add equity as a second priority for the unit. This priority emerged, also, from gaps that Jamal observed in the

outcomes data when he broke it down by demographic. He identified limited-income and Pell Grant students as having the largest employment gaps six months after graduation.

Jamal did also disaggregate the six-months-out employment data by underrepresented minority (URM) and found that “the differences weren’t significant.” He expressed surprise at this outcome, saying:

I was surprised when I first saw that, because I wasn’t expecting it. You know, and maybe that was just my own bias to it that I was expecting that perhaps Black graduates would be more at a disadvantage than their White counterparts when it comes to how long it takes them to get a job after they graduate. No, that’s not what the data suggested. But then I started to think about it, and I started to think, when we think about what it takes to get to an institution like [LPU], the disadvantages that are going to show more are going to have to do with income and first generation...in first destination surveys, what actually ends up really playing a big, big part of these are the navigational skills, skills that the students have during the job search process, the level of advocacy they have at home. And then the networks that they get to tap into...And sometimes, these three things, a lot of times they transcend race (Jamal).

This early decision to focus on the needs of first-generation and limited income students has driven their equity work, especially in light of the nearly two billion dollar grant they received around the same time, which was earmarked specifically to support FLI students. This grant funded the creation of the seven-person equity team in the unit, whose explicit mission is to close engagement gaps for FLI students and other underserved groups.

The office has had significant investment from LPU’s administration to grow the staff, restructure the unit, and build a new, dedicated space. Chris, an administrator outside of the unit,

shared that having the backing of LPU’s president has significantly empowered Jamal and the career center team:

A lot of what you're able to do within a unit depends on your senior VP and their relationship with the people in power. And so I think, because there's a lot of trust there, to be honest, [the career center], that entire portfolio is able to pretty much do a lot of whatever they want...and given the liberty to be able to do so. In a way that, to be frank...other divisions are not necessarily given that liberty to...From a partner perspective, like myself, and someone that's not within the division, it almost seems like they're given a blank check to do whatever work they want to do.

Yet, Chris also expressed appreciation for Jamal’s early willingness to connect with equity offices on campus, to integrate equity into the work of the center. Chris shared that this was the first institution he has worked for where a career services leader approached him – as a DEIA leader - and invited collaboration. At his previous institutions, Chris said, career services “operated in silence.”

Oliver, an LPU student and student worker at the center, shared a similar sentiment, saying that “...at [LPU], in terms of the material resources being poured into [the career center], probably for good reason, there’s adequate of those. So I’m not really worried about that.” Oliver expressed a belief in the efficacy of the center, and the desire that the career team continues to receive institutional support.

Arthur, an administrator in the center, also echoed the institutional investment in their work. He cited the large grant for FLI students, and that the center was able to hire, even during the pandemic hiring freeze, because of the grant. Jared, another center administrator, described the trust the institution has placed in Jamal as a leader, including significant buy-in from faculty

due to the innovative life design approach. He shared that the provost, the president, and the board of trustees all agreed on Jamal's vision and the needs he had identified. This has been the case from the beginning. As for the equity piece, those leaders agreed on the need to address FLI student engagement and outcomes, and provided funding to support it.

Jared described a particular moment during Parent's Weekend the previous year that captured his sense of the support from higher administrators, and the university president. He shared that the president "spoke explicitly about the offering of life design to undergraduate students as a differentiating factor [for LPU]." Jared also shared that of the ten initiatives that LPU named as priorities in their strategic plan, one of those initiatives was explicitly about life design and experiential learning. This spoke to the level of investment of LPU administration in the work of the unit. Jared shared that the unit was "well-resourced and supported."

Subtheme 2: Beautiful Space. This second subtheme includes participants' statements about the beauty of the career center's physical building on campus. This was something that emerged from my own observations of the space described earlier in this chapter, and something that appeared in digital documents about the center. An image of the building is present on the center's main website, and in articles written about the center's equity work.

In their interviews, students Jayden and Oliver both mentioned the beauty of the career center's building and the importance of having a nice space to visit. Jayden described the career center as "a nice study space" and one that he would "cherish before people figure out that it exists." Jayden described it as preferable over the campus library. Oliver described it as a "great study spot and beautiful building" and said that these things have helped increase the number of students who use the center. He said that the physical space helped the staff to spread the word about the work of the center. When asked to describe the center, Oliver said:

I would say bright. It's like physically a lot of White walls and windows. So it's very bright. I would say busy, like...there's a lot of stuff happening. Very open space, so you can really feel that a lot of stuff is happening. And then I would say welcoming because...there's a bunch of writing on the walls and the vibe and communication of everybody who works here really signals welcoming acceptance.

Chris, an administrator outside the unit, also shared the importance of the center's physical space. When asked what he has heard about the career center's work, Chris said:

I think the biggest thing, if I'm being honest, is probably their facility. It's a beautiful space, as I'm sure you know, if you've been there. Very open concept, very updated. From a DEIA perspective, very accessible, gender-neutral bathrooms. They have a phone booth, where you can go and make quick calls. So I know that the students really love utilizing their space. I think also the way they named their rooms, you know, comes from...really kind of speaks to diverse backgrounds and experiences, particularly for Black, indigenous and other folks of color. So I think that's probably one of the biggest things that I hear about whenever I hear about [the career center].

Each of these three participants communicated the importance of the physical building in the minds of students on campus.

From a staff perspective, Marta spoke to her appreciation for the physical space in facilitating her big-picture thinking, saying: "I mean, I do love this kind of physical space. Because I live in mapping. I live in systems like, I'm going to look at it." She referred to the fact that the space has many visualization tools, such as white boards and markers to physically represent ideas. The other seven participants did not explicitly mention the physical space,

though they were asked for words to describe the culture of the unit, not specifically about the physical space.

I was able to find a news article about the unveiling of the career center's building, when it was new. This article specifically described the space as reflecting the values of the center. It included a quote by a staff member of the center, who described the design of the building as "very inclusive intentionally." It also included a quote from a student who said that though career is a stressful topic, she hopes that students will feel relief "that the building looks this nice."

Subtheme 3: Many Staff Members, Imbalanced Distribution. The third subtheme refers to the sentiment – expressed by Marta, Sofia, Jamal, Jared, Oliver and Chris - that the center has considerable resources to support staffing. Jared suggested that the unit was well-supported with staffing and that it was allowed to hire during the pandemic hiring freeze. Marta suggested that while the center staff may have some skill gaps, "the people power exists." Jamal shared that they have spent significant funds, provided by a large grant, and by the university, to hire. Chris referred to the institutional investment in the center as a "blank check."

At the same time, Maria raised the issue of equity in the distribution of staff. She pointed out that there are very different numbers of staff members serving different student populations:

There's like 35 in the [undergraduate] career center, but there's like one or two people in the rest of the offices serving [graduate students]. And many times the one or two offices are producing like two or three times more than the office that has like 35 to 36 people.

Why is that? (Maria)

Maria's concern appeared to be less with the staff numbers in the unit, and more with what initiatives are prioritized. Sarah and Marta each expressed a similar concern about prioritization

of staffing and resources, echoing Maria's sentiment that not all ideas and student needs are equally and adequately invested in by leaders in the unit.

Sofia also echoed this idea, sharing that she has seen significant investment in the undergraduate-serving teams of the office and less in the graduate program teams. She also noted that there seemed to be more investment into tracking the engagement and outcomes of undergraduates, and analyzing that data; less so with graduates. She agreed that graduate students were given less "care and attention," but also recognized that this is indicative of a larger trend in higher education, and not unique to LPU.

Theme 2: Results and Achievement

This theme describes the culture of action and achievement articulated by participants and present in observations and analyzed documents for the unit. This culture of action and achievement is tied to the life design model, which suggests a bias for action approach to career and life design. It also reflects the status of LPU as an elite institution. Participants frequently described the career center culture as a culture of action, offering various examples of how this played out in the work of the department. The subthemes within this section, culture of action and staff competition and burnout, reflect these descriptions.

Subtheme 1: Culture of Action. The first subtheme is culture of action. Six participants referred directly to a culture of action within the unit. Marta described the unit as "very different than any other higher education office I've ever been in." She described it as "quirky," and said that it has "weird Google stuff." She also said that there is "way too much happening." She did note, however, that with certain issues of equity, such as accessibility, "the action piece, maybe not there."

Maria described the culture as “a lot of room to think big, do big,” and Sarah noted that “things are happening at a rapid pace.” From an administrative perspective, Jared said, “We move a lot faster than is generally seen at [LPU] or in higher ed.” He also said, “As we develop our work as designers, we have to try these things out so that we can collect and analyze the data, and make the next informed decision.” Speaking about the demographic gaps in their student engagement and outcomes data, Jared emphasized the need to act on any new data that come up. This speaks to the life design model, and the centrality of taking action within the design framework.

During their fall recruiting events, I observed a fast-paced culture where the schedule contained many events per day, often occurring simultaneously. Staff members moved back and forth across campus working in groups on various events. All staff seemed to be occupied throughout the week, including engaging in weekend and evening work. When I remarked to one administrator that I understood the chaos of a career fair event and would quietly observe without distracting the team, she immediately corrected me, saying, “*organized* chaos.”

Subtheme 2: Staff Competition and Burnout. Eight participants spoke about the culture of hard work in the unit, and some of the staff spoke about burnout. Oliver, a student worker, described the office as a place where “everybody really takes their job seriously and really shows up and works hard.” Marta discussed the use of performance metrics within the unit, noting that key results metrics vary for different roles:

The OKRs that we create, our objective and key results, vary. And we sometimes intentionally write them so that we don't get bitten. So you can pretty much either knock your OKRs out in the first month, or they're so broad, it doesn't even matter if those exist. We oftentimes don't refer back to them.

Her reference to getting bitten seems to refer to perceived negative consequences if metrics are specific and not achieved.

Marta also spoke to burnout during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent waves of staff turnover:

I think there has been turnover. For the initial group of people who were here, some of them came from the old career office, some of them came from around here. And they went into COVID as a relatively new office...from what I understand, they went into basically providing programming online ten, twelve hours a day. All the time. Always available, always available, always available. We're here. We're here. We're here. We're here. I will tell you my experience at a different institution. Not that. Like real respect for the fact that our whole brains and bodies were going through something, and that our students were really struggling being online at work at school all day and then having to whatever. I had students who were EMTs, who were like, sorry, I can't come, I'm in an ambulance right now. Not happening. So really different experiences for those folks here. And I actually think it was incredibly unhealthy because they were all running all the time. There are only three people, four people [left working in the unit] from that generation of [staff].

Marta shared that a second group of staff came in after the group who worked during the start of Covid-19. She observed turnover in this second group as well, and she did not foresee that stopping. She anticipated more staff leaving, and said that “if people’s interests aren’t in alignment, and they go on, you know, to different places, that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

She specifically mentioned that she felt the equity team had the least turnover, because their previous director, a BIPOC woman, had done “...an amazing job really creating cohesion

for that team. What I understand was that that particular director really embraced the bring your whole self to work. And that team, at that time, felt most seen and most active” (Marta).

Sarah mentioned an issue in the office with balancing staff time, and Arthur raised the issue of staff retention from the point of view of an administrator. He said:

I am considered an old timer here... like an absolute veteran...the average time that people spend at the [LPU career center] is about two years...people don't end up staying here...they don't have that long term horizon (Arthur).

Arthur felt that developing a stronger mission statement as a team “might actually help retain people if they have more of a sense of the why behind the work they’re doing.”

Maria described an issue with staff turnover, especially for BIPOC women:

...care about the students [is]...almost held like a gun to your head...which obviously, then if you’re doing everything for students, and you tend to get burnt out, you cannot help the students. I’ve noticed that’s a common theme, not just here, but in conversations in higher ed. Colleague’s burnout is a huge thing for sure.

She referenced the “think big” attitude as something she’s experienced in the office, saying:

...so yeah, we can think big. But then you have to be the visionary, the educator, the admin, the pizza box carrier, the cleanup crew and all the different roles that come with that, in order to execute the think big attitude...It's going to lead to burnout (Maria).

She mentioned staff turnover presenting an issue, due to this pattern. She also suggested that if a staff member runs a successful program, people tend to seek that person out to expand the program. Maria described this as “coat-tailing” and said that people wrestle with the question, “should I be excellent or should I be mediocre?”

Marta shared a similar sentiment, saying that the goal setting process sometimes raises the question:

Can I do something impressive enough that draws enough students? And it's really about gathering students or creating a kind of product that will be innovative, etc., and basically get your promotion... But that's, you know, real reality in this space.

She said that the current driver for the work of the center is getting 100% engagement, what she called "getting enough likes." She said that she is aware of a certain standard of success being applied to students, calling it "maybe a corporate, maybe capitalist standard...to be successful in this kind of capitalist way." Marta named the first destination outcomes survey as an example of this, identifying post-graduates' success in terms of salary.

Marta said she has seen leadership lean into promotion opportunities and evaluate strategic priorities in terms of their ease: "you'll keep taking the promotion as long as they'll give it. Investment in equity. Sure if it's easy." This tension between equity and performance was highlighted by Sofia, Sarah, Arthur, and Chris. In terms of performance, Arthur described feeling pressure to demonstrate the impact of the center's work as numerical data for the board of trustees and other administrators, saying: "part of the reason why I got the promotion is like, I now oversee career outcomes for all undergraduate students and that's ultimately what the President and the Board of Trustees care about." Sarah expressed concerns about losing overall student engagement numbers by focusing too much on identity and self-awareness with students, rather than topics which are appealing to the entire student population. Sofia shared concerns about making a "business case for equity" with employers. Her perspective will be described in the fifth theme of this section: bridge to employers.

Jared described the student-facing-services space at LPU as “very competitive” due to the limited time students have to engage, and the various units competing for their attention. He indicated that this pressure sometimes leads administrators and staff to overextend themselves responding to transactional requests, just to add value on campus:

It's almost student facing offices competing for the attention of students where we can get it. And I think what has differentiated us and what drove a lot of my thought process early on in this change was this idea that we truly need to get to a place of co-creation. Which means we have to say yes when someone comes in with a very transactional, can you add a slide to this? And so early and often, we were finding opportunities to add value to our campus partners, to build the types of relationships that truly allow us to collaborate and co-create. I don't know if that is the norm. I do think at least on this campus, it differentiates us (Jared).

Competition and differentiation were described by participants as part of the culture of working in a data-driven career center at an elite institution.

In observation, I noticed a certain amount of tension among staff, expressed through sighing, statements such as “I was freaking out” during events, formal apologies for small and understandable mistakes, and tense reactions to casual observations of their events shared by me and by other staff. One administrator used military language in describing his lack of awareness of a particular workshop in the center, saying “I’ll concede to that.”

I observed one staff member express concern that she would not be let into the lunch area at the career fair without a lunch ticket, appearing visibly shaken, and had to be reassured by another staff member that she would be given lunch because she was an employee and was

wearing a staff t-shirt. Whether this undercurrent of fear was a result of the profession, the elite nature of the university, or something else, it was difficult to determine.

In an interview with Carlos, following the fall recruiting events, he shared that he has concerns about the relentless pace of the schedule for staff and students. He expressed feeling burnout and concern about his health after more than two weeks of events, including weekends and evenings. He shared that he feels that administrators are providing less support for staff breaks and floating days off, and that he does not know if anyone else is concerned about this because they have not discussed it. He also shared that staff in the office do not talk about capitalism, and its influence on their work and mindset. When presented with a list of White supremacy culture characteristics, including: sense of urgency, power hoarding, perfectionism, defensiveness, quantity over quality, and individualism (Jones & Okun, 2001), he responded that he had not seen this list before. He said he found the model “really valuable,” and immediately sent it to a colleague to start a conversation about these values in the office.

Theme 3: Confusion About Equity

The third theme is confusion about equity. This refers to ambivalence or confusion expressed by participants about whether or not the career center prioritizes equity. Nine participants expressed these sentiments, including staff, administrators, and an outside leader on DEIA. I will address three subthemes: we don't talk about race, communication is key, and skill gaps. These subthemes capture different aspects of this confusion about equity, shared by participants with different roles and positionalities to the topic.

When asked about whether or not the center prioritizes equity, Sofia said “I think it really varies depending on the school, and it really depends on what equity means.” She added that in her opinion, the undergraduate focused career team spends the most time on equity. She also

noted that the PhD serving program often considers equity. Perhaps less so in the masters serving programs. She acknowledged that this is a challenge for leadership and that “it’s not an easy thing to do. I get that” (Sofia).

Marta shared that she feels the unit has “a couple of power struggles.” She echoed Sofia’s idea that different groups within the unit have a clearer mission and goals than others. She also acknowledged that leadership has a challenging task in creating coherence. She did say that there is a general sense of shared goals, but that it feels “foggy.” Similarly, Carlos spoke to the issue of power, saying that he feels that the concept of power hoarding in particular is “really valuable” in understanding office and equity dynamics.

When asked about whether or not the center prioritizes equity, different administrators had different understandings. Arthur, like Marta, shared that he felt that because definitions of equity vary in the unit, staff are somewhat inconsistent in their practice of equity. He described the unit’s equitable outcome goals as “very nebulous.” He also said that there is some cohesion around the goal of obtaining 100% student engagement in programming. He sees that goal as a reflection of the center’s awareness of historically underserved students. He also named a contradiction he sees when the unit talks about being an equity driven office, when it exists within an “absurdly wealthy institution” that admits a relatively small number of marginalized students. He feels that there are other career centers at schools with higher percentages of first generation, limited income, and underrepresented students who are “actually doing the work without beating their chest about it, because they’re doing the work.” Somewhat in contrast to this, Arthur also said: “As I always remind people, I think the first-year class at [LPU] is only 16% White. So I actually don’t see a lot of White students. Like here, it’s a small percentage. It’s equal to the percentage of Black students and it’s less than Latine, far less than Asian and Asian-

American students.” I asked for data on student engagement disaggregated by race, and the center was unwilling to share it. I asked Carlos whether he feels that he does not see many White students, and he disagreed with that suggestion.

Chris, as an outside observer, shared his perspective about the tension in centering equity for a unit that works so often within racist structures. Jared, an administrator within the unit, expressed optimism about the center's ability to refine their vision and mission. He sees equity being centered in the unit, but he does believe that work needs to be done to “ensure that the language is understood and owned and authored by the team.”

Finally, Carlos, a member of the equity team, expressed some confusion about whether or not the organization is equity driven. He said:

I think it's an espoused goal. Not an enacted goal. Or value.... When I step outside and look in, I see that there is a lot of progress. And so I would have to say that outwardly looking in, I would say yes. Inwardly looking out, I'm more challenged to say yes (Carlos).

I presented Carlos with a model for evaluating an organization’s multicultural development, the MCOB Developmental Stage Model (Jackson, 2006). I asked him to indicate where he felt the unit might be in this model. He responded that while he could see the organization having characteristics of early stages in the model, he feels it most aligns with *Stage 5: The Redefining Organization*. Some characteristics of Stage 5 include: evolving beyond the concepts of nondiscriminatory and non-oppressive; working toward full inclusion of diverse members; committing to active and tangible progress; and, importantly, beginning to question the limitations of the current organizational culture and how policies, language, mission, services etc. may be redesigned to redistribute power, empower members, and ensure true inclusion and

participation (Jackson, 2006). Stage 5 is one of six stages in the model, and while it does not represent an organization that has fully centered equity and multiculturalism, it represents a significant commitment. Carlos' earlier expressions of ambiguity around where the organization sits, speaks to the complexity of centering equity in a large unit without total clarity on shared definitions and goals.

Subtheme 1: We Don't Talk about Race. The first subtheme within this section refers to the limited explicit mention of race or racism in conversations among staff, in courses, and in the materials, spaces, or marketing in the unit. The summer career course does include an activity with an identity wheel, in which race appears as an aspect of identity for students to consider as they develop their career aspirations. Marta confirmed that this activity and some self-reflection conversations are the only places she has seen race appear as a topic in the unit's work. Marta said that she and a few other staff have chosen to do antiracism training as professional development for themselves, however, in her words, "as professional development being offered, or even a conversation around how race impacts our experiences, not generally something we bring up." Marta went on to say that she feels that class and accessibility are not given adequate attention, though FLI students seem to be highlighted often, and there is a large grant earmarked to close gaps for FLI students.

When asked about racial equity programming, five participants mentioned a program they run with DEI in the name. This internship matching program is designed to prepare diverse students for a paid internship and employer mentoring. Though this was cited as a program that addresses structural inequity and racism, it is earmarked as "for all students" (Carlos). It is clear in the marketing that all students are welcome to join the program, and there is no specific mention of BIPOC students or race. When asked about this difference in marketing compared

with their stated intention, Carlos said that the equity team is tasked with recruiting FLI and URM students for the program. This results in diverse student participation, without any explicit mention of race.

Sofia highlighted challenges in talking about race directly, given that some employers have policy barriers to these conversations. She referenced the Supreme Court decision in 2023, and the policies of Florida governor Ron DeSantis as indications of a climate wherein race is controversial to discuss:

...when you choose equity publicly, from an employer perspective, you can get canceled these days. There's so much at stake. Which sounds ridiculous to say, but that's the reality. That's the reality. And you have Ron DeSantis outlawing diversity offices in universities or now the Supreme Court decision. So I think it's very controversial from an employer standpoint. Not that it shouldn't be done. But I think that is the reason why maybe career centers don't talk about it too much.

Sofia said that she has also collected student feedback from some BIPOC students who were concerned that their race would be the reason they were hired by employers.

When I asked if class or first-generation status is an adequate proxy for race, in her opinion, Sofia said:

I don't think it's a close enough proxy. I just think it's a lot scarier and harder to make claims about race versus...there's a tangibility to someone with low income, or someone being the first in their family [to attend college]. And maybe that's because of the tools I've been given to talk about those things. Or maybe I'm less afraid to make sweeping assumptions. Versus I think it's a little scarier and a little harder to make claims... Like what I said to you, it felt safer than if I were to say some kind of claim or assumption

about Black versus White students, even though there's probably plenty of things I could reference. But I guess I don't have the language for it. Or it would feel scary or both. I say Black students tend to XYZ, or have these specific struggles. And maybe that's what needs to be flushed out a little bit more. I don't know why it feels scarier and a little more uncomfortable to say. And I think it could be more problematic. Like, there was an article that Handshake wrote three or four years ago. And it was three hiring practices that disadvantage Black students. And one of them was a helpful article, but there were some assumptions in there that came off actually kind of bad. And they changed the article. So I'm assuming they realized that. **But** I used it, because there's some interesting data in there. And we use the data to make changes, but it [said career center's shouldn't] have an arbitrary GPA cut off [for internships]...the linkage felt kind of weak between Black students and low GPA. That's probably okay...The second one was [post-graduate salary]. That one's reasonable. I think everyone wants to increase salary. But they might have said something along the lines of, well, Black students care more about salary, because maybe they're supporting others, but that's not always true. You see? I just don't feel like I have the same data or tools to be able to make that same argument.

Sofia's concern about making sweeping generalizations on the basis of race is part of why she feels it is difficult to talk about. She also cited a lack of language and data to support racial equity efforts in the workplace.

Arthur shared a similar idea from an administrative point of view. He said:

I think we conflate race and class all the time and use class and FLI status as a substitute. What we really want to talk about is the experience of Black students and grads or Latine grads, but we use the term FLI as a proxy for both. Okay, they are different.

Carlos offered two reasons why staff may not be willing to talk about race in the office. First, he suggested that some staff are uncomfortable sharing personal experiences in a work setting. He believes that this relates to their different definitions of professionalism and what that means at work. He also described an unwillingness to be vulnerable or to fail for some staff, saying “people don't know how to work through failure.” He feels that some would be worried about making mistakes in conversations about race, and might therefore avoid the topic entirely. He noted that he is often the one to bring up equity issues, and feels that other staff do not consistently consider equity in their work. He clearly shared that staff in the unit do not talk about White supremacy, saying “That would be a curse word if I brought it up. They would not even respond if I used those words. We don't use that phrase here at [LPU].” Carlos believes that the unit's leaders would never directly name White supremacy as a reality.

Chris had the most direct feedback on the topic of not talking about race. He shared his belief that race is not talked about at LPU in general, saying:

At this university we don't like having conversations about race. And I think that comes from leadership, if I'm being honest. We only engage in conversations about race when there's a protest, or when people are afraid of protests. Other than that, our university as a whole is not race forward... If we were to ask students, let's say Black students at the university, I think they would say, well, the university isn't necessarily anti-Black, but it's also not pro-Black.

Chris shared his opinion that race matters, and must be explicitly addressed. He shared a story wherein a student who identified as BIPOC and FLI felt pressure to “pick and choose which identities to prioritize.” He reiterated the importance of intersectionality in the DEIA work he

does. Tension around explicit attention to race may connect to the confusion staff described when answering the question, Does the unit center equity?

Subtheme 2: Communication is Key. Seven participants spoke about communication in the unit. Sofia suggested that the biggest flaw in the center's ability to focus on equity is the fact that there are different groups of people working on different problems and that they lack a “through line.” She feels that structural decentralization at LPU is a problem for the center, and that it inhibits strong communication and prioritization. Decentralization here refers to the fact that members of the career team act as liaisons to different schools, populations, and majors.

Marta described the unit’s communication as “really interesting, in the sense that there is no rule or there are no standard practices for how we best communicate with one another.” She described a number of challenges with the use of chat technology, e-mail, and other varied communication channels. She mentioned feeling as if she gets included in projects simply because she is in the right room at the right time. Because she sees communication as “bogged down,” transparency is made more difficult. She mentioned that things are taken to leadership meetings and do not always get disseminated back to the teams.

Sarah described communication and coordination as a “massive challenge.” She said that sometimes people feel as if they are left behind or that there was not sufficient planning for programming. She also feels that career-related efforts around LPU’s campus are not properly communicated about. She said:

...our campus in and of itself is very siloed and has a ton of redundancies. So just the mass amount of like, trying to do coordination and communication, that is a massive challenge, even within our team, because things are just happening. Again, the

innovation, things are happening at a rapid pace. So sometimes people are feeling like we're left behind, or we didn't plan as well as we could have (Sarah).

Jamal shared that, as an administrator, he is not always aware of every effort going on in the unit. He mentioned that some staff have asked him to be more directive and tell them what to do, but he prefers to empower individual staff to “get curious with the ideas they have.” This has allowed for some innovative equity programming to be created from the bottom up. Jared shared that, due to the size of the unit and the volume of work going on, it takes an “extra level of work,” to ensure that efforts are shared around the unit:

...we've had a lot of evolutions of how our team meets and shares information, largely due to the disruption of the pandemic. And then taking what we learned there and getting a new building. But I think we've received some absolutely fantastic feedback from our internal committees within the [career center]. So that, being able to create spaces where we have an hour just to share out.

Sarah shared that she feels a real commitment to equity in the unit, and that they are learning. She would like to see greater buy-in from the entire institution. She feels that the value of the career center's work is not being communicated and supported across the institution. She feels that students are already challenged with courses and jobs to support their education. This lack of institutional support feels like a challenge to closing gaps for marginalized students.

Subtheme 3: Equity Skill Gaps. This subtheme describes gaps in knowledge and skills related to equity and racial equity among administrators and staff in the career unit. Another aspect of the ambiguity about the centering of equity in the unit may relate to different levels of equity skills and awareness among staff members and administrators. Sofia described a desire to have more training and language about the impact of race in career, and on equity in general, so

that she can better address it in her role. Carlos shared that one staff training session on equity had been done, yet more would be helpful. He also expressed a desire for equity work to be done by more of the staff, not just staff on the equity team.

Sofia and Marta also mentioned Carlos' role in calling out issues of bias on the team, and shared that others appear less willing or able to do so. Carlos described instances of staff misgendering job candidates, and using language that was not inclusive in the office and in the hiring process. Carlos shared that a former member of the staff told him that "being your full self is too much for people [in the office]."

Carlos also described a situation where an open position that was designated to involve equity work was ultimately filled by a White woman who subsequently removed the equity component of the job title once she took on the role. At the time, members of the equity team noticed this removal and commented on it to administrators, yet nothing was done. This may speak to a skill gap or an unwillingness to engage in this work.

Marta also said that inequitable comments are sometimes made in staff meetings, and it is often the equity team members who challenge these comments while others do not speak up. She shared that she is bringing in expertise from her last university on equity. She also shared that staffing is not the issue, rather knowledge and engagement with equity are:

The staffing power [to address equity] is possible. We're here. Our actual knowledge and engagement around DEI, equity, inclusion. All time, low. I would swear here if we weren't at work. That's a post-five-o'clock attitude. But I feel like I come in with some good base knowledge being like, Hey, guys, let's talk about biases that we might do, when we're hiring, etc. And that is all coming from a different institution who works hard at making sure their staff is working on that knowledgeable [practice]...Do I feel like a

super expert? No. So our [equity] team has some expertise in there as well. We're built to do that. But across the rest of the [staff], best guess. And you won't notice that unless somebody says something in the middle of a meeting and says, hey, that seems weird. Hey don't you think? And those people [who speak up about issues] end up being majority [equity team] folk (Marta).

Marta echoed the sentiment that it is primarily the members of the equity team who speak out about equity issues as they come up.

Four participants described bringing in equity expertise from outside of the unit or seeking it out on their own. Sofia sought out the chief diversity officer, and other resources in the broader career development and DEI communities. Members of the equity team have sought out equity learning outside of the unit, including Carlos.

Chris was able to name a few staff who have strengths in equity work in the unit, and felt that there are many who do not have this background and training. Arthur, like Marta, shared that he feels he has significant knowledge and skills in equity, but that others do not. Marta also described significant skill gaps around class and accessibility, saying that it would be difficult to work in the unit as a person with a disability, such as low vision: "...you have one person who's covering disabilities, for example, and they're saying hey, none of – and I mean none of – our resources are e-readable. And we're like, cool. That's a neat fact" (Marta). The knowledge and skill gaps identified by participants included gender identity, race, class, ability and their intersections. When asked if these knowledge and skill gaps impact the equity work in the unit, Marta said, "I mean I'm sure."

Theme 4: Representation in Leadership

This theme refers to the representation of BIPOC employees in leadership positions within the unit. This topic emerged in interviews with four different participants. On the career center and wider unit's website, there do not appear to be any BIPOC women in centralized leadership positions. Stories surfaced in a few interviews about equity concerns in hiring, especially for Black employees and BIPOC women. I will share data related to two subthemes: promotion of BIPOC staff and inclusive hiring.

Subtheme 1: Promotion of BIPOC Staff. Five participants mentioned concerns about the retention or promotion of BIPOC staff in the unit. Maria, when asked if she felt that the staff in the unit was fairly diverse, replied "No." She believed the unit could do more. She felt that turnover was higher for BIPOC women in the unit. She also suspected that women of color were more likely to leave the university first, and added that "no one does an exit interview." She shared that friends around the university who identified as BIPOC women were not being adequately supported and promoted. She had heard stories indicating that many university leaders are "clueless as to why these people leave, and they're blind to their biases." Maria suggested that there should be more transparency on career ladders and that salaries should be more commensurate with experience. Promotion pathways are not standardized. She expressed a desire for more feedback and clarity on how to move up in the organization.

Marta felt that there was informal mentorship among men in the unit that sometimes left out women. She indicated that this informal mentorship was supporting both White employees who identified as men and Black employees and other folks of color who identified as men. Jamal spoke about the importance of risk-taking for his supervisees and staff, as part of the life design framework. He also acknowledged that taking risks looks differently for people of

different identities, and that BIPOC employees may be more concerned about failure affecting their future at the organization.

Carlos shared that he has seen White employees moved through the hiring process because they had contacts at the organization. He had concerns about bias in the hiring process. He was glad that more BIPOC staff have been recently recruited, yet he feels that the unit could be more equitable in its treatment and promotion of BIPOC staff. He also spoke about the expectations placed on the equity team to do much of the equity work, which could then impact their ability to advance their own careers. He has also noticed that many of the workgroups in the unit are led by White employees. Moreover, he noted that many of the employees who identify as BIPOC are on the equity and operations teams, and are not necessarily represented in leadership positions. He pointed out that the operations team does not have a significant promotional structure, though turnover appears to be a bit lower for the BIPOC women in those roles. He shared that there are no Black women on the undergraduate education team (a team Marta and Maria referred to as the most financially supported) who are not in specifically equity-related positions. Chris, an equity leader outside the unit, directly shared that he sees a lack of senior leaders of color in the unit. I was able to directly observe racial segregation on the team, noting that most visible leaders in the center appeared to be White men, while all but two of the Black women I encountered were working in events and operations.

Subtheme 2: Inclusive Hiring. Chris shared from an outside perspective that he wishes the unit would seek more equity expertise as they are engaging in hiring and planning searches. He found it strange that they do not invite equity leaders to their hiring processes, even when hiring for equity-focused roles. He knew of at least one equity leader who had requested to be included in searches in the unit, and had to “politely force” their way in. He has also noticed that

members of search committees for the unit tended to lack diversity in race and class. Beyond Chris, two staff members in the unit shared specific stories of seeing other BIPOC staff overlooked for promotions.

Carlos raised the problem of inclusive hiring as well. He shared that he has noticed language in job descriptions that was not inclusive. He said that he believes this happens “because people who are writing these job descriptions are not fully knowledgeable themselves, or are rushing to do things and not considering what they can do to make it more equitable.” Carlos expressed an interest in addressing this problem, to support more equitable and inclusive hiring.

Theme 5: Bridge to Employers

The fifth contrasting theme is bridge to employers. This theme emerged from two interviews in particular, with Sofia, a staff member who works on the employer side of the unit, and Chris, an outside administrative leader on DEIA. Sofia contextualized her view of equity work in relation to her primary stakeholder, employers, sharing her take on why racial equity work is challenging. She described the wide variety of policy stances different employers take on equity and race, noting that in some spaces, it is illegal to distinguish between employees or students on the basis of race. She shared that she receives requests from the equity team to address issues of inequity with employers, but often feels that her hands are tied, or that she lacks the language and preparation to address those issues. She also brought up the policy debates about race going on in the Supreme Court (Nadworny, 2023), and other political debates about what racial history is legal to teach, happening in Florida (Peoples, 2023). Regarding the events in Florida, Sofia said, “It’s very upsetting, everything that’s happening.”

Sofia said that Carlos, who works directly with many BIPOC students, brings racial equity issues to her and asks her to address them with employers or to limit the promotion of opportunities with employers who do not value BIPOC students:

[Carlos] has been a really staunch speaker out, which I love about him. He always stands up.... And one thing he's brought up year over year, and I always push back. Maybe that's the wrong thing for me to do. He'd be basically like, I want the companies to be inclusive and I want them to be equitable. He wants them to be better vetted before we let them into the program or he wants to meet them before we let them into the program. And I'm like, I totally hear you and yes, but...my expertise [is] getting students jobs (Sofia).

Sofia said that Carlos has asked her to do training on equity with employers. "In a nutshell," Sofia shared, "what I'm saying is that sometimes I think it's really hard to figure out where my work ends...Because ideally, everyone would be doing their part...there's a lot of labor. Everyone's not doing their part." The unit's focus on first destination outcomes, such as salary, have encouraged Sofia to consider student outcomes part of her role, in spite of her feelings of overwhelm at the implications.

Chris shared his own observations of career service centers at the universities he has worked for, given his DEIA focus. He feels that both career centers and other externally-oriented higher education spaces, such as fundraising and alumni offices, seem to focus less on equity in their work than other higher education offices. I asked Chris to share his thoughts on why this might be the case. He attributed it to the fact that these offices are designed to engage with spaces outside of the university and organizations who may have racist policies and cultures. Chris said that the pressures that apply in a career center are not the same pressures that apply to him as a DEIA leader in higher education:

So for example, for them, they have corporate partners. They have folks that they need to respond to. They also operate in inherently racist environments. But at the same time, they also have metrics they need to meet. It behooves the [career center team] to be like, yeah, we got X prestigious company to sponsor this, or we sent this many students to this X prestigious whatever. So, I think that the pressures that career services centers encounter are deeply entrenched within racist systems, that, unlike me, where I'm mainly dealing with it from an internal perspective, within [LPU] - our faculty, our staff, our leadership - they're dealing with it from both internal and external. So they not only have to navigate all the racism in structures that operate within the institution, they also have to be mindful of and play nicely in the sandbox with all the external racism and racist structures that are out there. I think that's part of the reason why their jobs can be challenging and particularly that marriage of career services and DEIA may be challenging.

Chris went on to say that he has noticed the relative absence of BIPOC staff in offices like career centers and fundraising units, which he attributes to this culture of playing nicely with racist structures. Describing the challenges for BIPOC staff in those offices, Chris said:

...they have to navigate that in a very particular and peculiar way. Even if your heart is there, even if you want to do the right thing. It's like to be able to survive in the system and to be able to thrive, you know, I think can be challenging.

The synergy between Chris' comments, and Sofia's description of the delicate balancing act of addressing the needs of students, staff, administrators, and employers captures the importance of these contextual demands, especially as it relates to racial equity in career offices.

Carlos, who works primarily with students, expressed frustration with the way that the employer team seems to center employers in their work, rather than students. He has made several requests to the employer team to consider equity, specifically to be mindful of which employers they engage with and to advocate more for students, especially URM and FLI students. He felt that his requests were not being listened to, and that he had to represent students because the employer team was “all about employers.” When asked if he feels that it is hard to work in career services because of the need to play nice with employers, he said “That is accurate.” He also raised the topic of generations, saying that employers have different cultures and generational expectations around work. He felt that it was hard for him in working with students to prepare them for work cultures he considers to be inequitable.

During observation at the center’s fall career fair, I spoke with a few employers, all of whom spoke highly of the center and its staff. They described staff as responsive and helpful, often going above and beyond. One employer asked me to relay to the staff her company’s desire to sponsor the work of the center, saying they have tens of thousands of dollars “just sitting there.” She told me that if she could “clone” this career center and transplant it to other schools she works with, she would. Another employer described the career center team as “the best of the best.” This speaks to the attention the center gives to employers, and highlights the importance of employers in the business model and performance goals of university career services.

Toward the end of my study, Sofia decided to lead a new initiative to evaluate companies in light of antiracism and gender equality. Her message to employers was long and considerate. She said, “Think of it as a way to evaluate your company from a different lens.” This intentional framing of the initiative echoes the concern Sofia shared about employers resisting equity efforts. This initiative represents another step in the evolution of the equity work of the unit.

Summary

This chapter described themes and subthemes that emerged from analysis of the data in this qualitative case study. I have structured this section in terms of themes that were *consistent* across the data set, and themes that represented *contrasting* and compelling standpoints. In doing so, I have tried to uplift ideas and voices which are typically neglected in studies on equity in career services offices. BIPOC staff, DEI practitioners at the wider university, and students are not always present to provide perspectives on staff beliefs and practices. In the next chapter, I will apply the conceptual and theoretical frameworks underpinning this study to the discussion of the themes presented in this section. Theories on racial equity and on career education have much to contribute to this topic.

As I have shared, this is a complicated case, with many stakeholders and many actors. It is not easily bounded in time and space (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017), due to the ways that identity and career are continually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed over time and in different communities. I will use theory to illuminate different facets of the topic in the discussion, and then I will provide suggestions for addressing racial equity in career services as practitioners and as scholars, in light of the findings in this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In Chapter Four, I presented my findings in the form of themes and subthemes. In this chapter, I will review the study, discuss the findings, share implications for research, policy, and practice in the field, and present limitations of the study. The discussion of findings will take the form of a series of conclusions which emerged from the data analysis process, and each will be rooted in a theoretical framework. There are many theories which could be applied to the data in this study. I chose to center two that I found most relevant to the data, and with the hope that other writers will continue to contribute research in this area. It continues to be my aspiration that this challenging study will ultimately contribute to more critically-informed and effective practice of racial equity in career services units.

Review of the Study

This qualitative case study aimed to explore and ultimately demystify beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in a university career services office. Though efforts are being made to address equity in college and university career centers around the United States, there is little consistent evidence of the efficacy of these efforts in preparing BIPOC students to engage with the significant race-based challenges they will likely face in the workplace (Career Leadership Collective, 2021; de Brey et al., 2019; Reid, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Professional associations supporting the field of career development have also called for renewed attention to supporting BIPOC students (Givens, 2022; Mathews, 2023; Wells & Henry-Darwish, 2019). Yet, career centers, competing for the attention of university administrators, students and employers, face challenges in prioritizing equity in their work, including racial equity (Chan & Cruzvergara, 2021; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014; Givens, 2022; Mathews, 2023; Stebleton & Jehangir, 2020; Tang, 2003).

Little research has been conducted examining the beliefs and assumptions about racial equity informing the work of university career center professionals. This study intended to address that gap in the literature, and to contribute to a shared, empirically-grounded understanding of the nature of addressing racial equity in career services offices. This was not an easy undertaking, in part due to the lack of consensus on the need to prioritize racial equity in the workplace (Jan et al., 2021), and in the field of higher education (Nadworny, 2023; Neely & Montañez, 2022). As I shared in Chapter Three of this dissertation, I faced significant challenge in finding a career center at a Predominantly White Institution which would agree to host my research. LPU courageously agreed to do so because of their commitment to the goal of expanding our collective understanding of how to undertake equity and racial equity work in career services.

During the course of my research in 2023, debate on the legality of racial equity policies in higher education and elsewhere continued to take place, and the Supreme Court ruled race unconstitutional as an admissions factor at two prominent universities in the United States (Nadworny, 2023). Participants in my study referenced these events, as they themselves undertook steps to address racial inequities on their teams, with students, with administrators, and with employers. I was able to observe staff and administrators wrestling with complicated equity questions regarding their missions, values, and scope of responsibility. Staff and students shared stories of burnout, overwhelm, bias, triumphs, and unresolved tensions. This messy, ambiguous work represented a commitment to continuous action, a key tenet of antiracism, my conceptual framework. I continue to empathize with the weight of responsibility many of my participants felt to do this work the right way, in spite of structural pressures, and a desire to preserve their own wellness and faith in the profession.

Research Questions

My research questions were drawn from the gaps in the literature on racial equity in career services. The central question was: *What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?* This question was intended to fill a gap in our empirical understanding of the beliefs and assumptions of career services practitioners, with the premise that these beliefs and assumptions shape the practice of racial equity in career education spaces. The three research subquestions guiding the study were:

- How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?
- What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
- What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

The first two subquestions were formed to focus the study on key aspects of beliefs and assumptions about equity, definitions and stories. These aspects emerged in the literature as relevant in shaping the practice of social justice (Arthur et al., 2009; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2008). The third subquestion was intended to gather contextual information critical to the understanding of practitioners' beliefs and assumptions.

In order to address these questions, I conducted a qualitative case study, informed by Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) concept of vertical comparison, to gather information about the beliefs and assumptions of career administrators, staff, and students at LPU, an east-coast, large, private, urban, research one university in the United States. In order to address my research question and subquestions, I collected data in the form of eleven participant interviews; two in-person site visits, including observation of physical spaces, advising, and programming; virtual observation of course sessions; and document analysis. I also kept a reflexion journal throughout

the study, and conducted member-checking with participants. I ultimately chose to analyze the data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which involves significant reflexion on positionality and continual refining of themes in consultation with advisors, participants, and the literature. I felt that the complexity of this case warranted an iterative approach, and careful review of findings with my committee members and participants in the study.

Summary of Themes

Ultimately, thirteen themes emerged from the data analysis process, related to each of the three research subquestions. I will briefly summarize these themes below before providing interpretation using my theoretical frameworks. Detailed descriptions of subthemes can be found in Chapter Four.

Thirteen themes is a substantial number, and I chose to organize these themes into two categories: *consistent* and *contrasting*, in order to capture the comparative lens in my methodology and to highlight all expressed sentiments related to my research questions – rather than limit conclusions to views expressed by a numerical majority (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Research Subquestion 1: How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?

Findings for research subquestion one included the following themes: driven by data, caring for people, designing for the most neglected, and joy and well-being. These themes captured the different definitions of equity shared by participants during interviews. Driven by data emerged as the most consistent definition offered by participants, and was described as the definition most often used by leadership to make equity decisions. Driven by data refers to a definition of equity that focuses on examining and closing demographic gaps in engagement with

career services and in first employment destination after graduating. Demonstrated progress in closing these gaps was considered evidence of movement toward equity – by unit leaders and by stakeholders within and outside the university. This definition prioritized the largest demographic gaps in the data, as determined by unit administrators.

The other three themes represent definitions of equity shared by different individual staff members or groups of staff in the center. Caring for people refers to the idea that a key component of equity should be treating people in humane, kind ways, regarding them as subjects rather than objects, and continuously adapting to their needs. Designing for the most neglected refers to the idea that equity in career services means designing programs and services for the most neglected or underserved student, assuming more privileged students will attend anyway. Finally, the theme joy and well-being refers to the idea that equity efforts should address and ensure the joy and holistic well-being of students, not just their professional employment. Each of these themes builds on the stated equity definition in the unit, adding nuance according to the beliefs and values of staff and administrators in the unit.

Research Subquestion 2: What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?

Four themes emerged from the data addressing this research question: lives should be designed, not about race, keep climbing, and race matters. Each of these themes captured stories, narratives, or assumptions about contemporary careers held by participants, put forth by administrators in the unit, or endorsed by other staff members. The first theme, lives should be designed, refers to the philosophy of career development embraced by leadership in the unit – life design. The life design philosophy suggests that contemporary career success requires continual self-reflection, adaptation, empathy, ideation, prototyping, and adjustment (Burnett &

Evans, 2016). It defines success as the achievement of a joyful and meaningful life, and takes into account the whole life of the student, not only career. This philosophy was articulated by participants as shaping their understandings of career and success, and their career practice in the unit. It was something unit leaders embraced, and shared with students and stakeholders within and outside of the university.

The second theme, not about race, captured the sentiment that racial differences in engagement and first destination employment outcomes are not significant focus areas for the unit. Moreover, this theme also includes the idea that financial and social class limitations – represented by limited income and professional networks in particular - are more significant barriers to life and career success than race-based challenges. Unit leaders shared that their engagement and first destination data bore this out. One element of this theme was the belief that the unit should not try to replicate the work of an identity-focused office on campus, and should rather focus on career specific work.

The third theme, keep climbing, refers to the belief that successful careers involve upward movement of some kind, which may include, but not be limited to, earning higher salaries and moving into more powerful companies and spaces. The fourth theme, race matters, captures the belief that race is an important factor in career experiences and that the impacts of racism should be addressed in career practice. This theme also captured the narrative of a black student who shared that he would only be willing to work with a black advisor. It included, as well, a story shared by a staff member that international and black students were not fully engaging in the center's career programming because of barriers related to culture and race, and that black students did not engage because events did not include opportunities to have frank

discussions about experiences of racism. These four themes capture the stories, narratives, and assumptions about careers, career education, and life design reflected in the data.

Research Subquestion 3: What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

Five themes emerged from the data related to subquestion three. Participants shared many thoughts on the context in which the work of the unit was occurring, including factors related to the wider university, political and financial dynamics in the university and outside, student dynamics, unit operational structures and cultural factors, taboos and implicit norms, personal tensions and more. Three themes related to this subquestion emerged as *consistent* throughout the data: institutional support, results and achievement, and confusion about equity. *Contrasting* themes, raised by specific participants, included representation in leadership and bridge to employers.

The institutional support theme describes the significant support and resources provided to the unit by the university, including physical space, operational freedom, and investment in staffing. The results and achievement theme refers to the achievement-oriented culture in the department, including their action-orientation, emphasis on measurable results, and competitive cultural dynamics. The third theme, confusion about equity, describes the confusion and uncertainty participants expressed about whether or not, and how, the unit prioritizes equity.

The representation in leadership theme refers to the relative lack of BIPOC people and BIPOC women in positions of leadership in the unit, including participant concerns about promotion and inclusive hiring for women, BIPOC staff, and BIPOC women. Finally, the bridge to employers theme describes the tensions created by the need to help students obtain positions

with companies and to cater to the needs and norms of employer partners, some of whom do not prioritize equity and racial equity.

The themes reviewed in this section capture the main findings of this case study. There are many theoretical lenses which might illuminate important aspects of these findings. To ensure enough depth in this discussion, I will apply two theoretical frameworks to facilitate a stronger understanding of the topic.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

Antiracism

For this study, I drew on antiracism as a conceptual framework, as articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2021) and Kendi (2019). This framework upholds the understanding that:

- Due to global and national history, and the long-term impacts of overtly racist structures and policies, racism is deeply embedded in contemporary American institutions, structures, and policies
- In order to undertake antiracism, it is necessary to take action to identify and change racist thinking, structures, and policies

Antiracism recognizes the racial histories and policies which shape beliefs, assumptions, and practices related to equity and career. It eschews the idea of racial neutrality or a-historical conceptions of race, identity, and culture. It upholds that we all hold beliefs and assumptions about race, whether or not we are conscious of these conceptions. In this case, it captures the embedded racial bias, which continues to produce differential racial outcomes for students and staff, in both LPU as a university and in many of the workplaces students will encounter.

Color-Blind Racial Ideology (CBRI)

The first theoretical framework I used in this study was color-blind racial ideology, (CBRI). CBRI describes an evolving form of racism that seeks to minimize or deny the existence and impacts of racism and racial difference (Neville et al., 2013). Two dimensions of CBRI have been identified: color-evasion, which minimizes or denies the existence of racial differences and emphasizes sameness, and power-evasion, which minimizes or denies the existence of racism (Frankenberg, 1993; Neville et al., 2013). Research on CBRI has linked this ideology with reduced empathy for BIPOC people and reduced awareness/acknowledgement of institutional racial discrimination (Neville et al., 2013).

Useful to this case study are the four frames of CBRI, articulated by Bonilla-Silva (2021): abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. These frames represent explanations for racial inequality that facilitate the denial and minimization of racism. Bonilla-Silva (2021) described CBRI as a filter for the interpretation of information. As a lens on racial inequality, CBRI serves as a useful framework for the interpretation and discussion of data in this study.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

The second theoretical framework for this study was actor-network theory, as articulated by Landri (2020) and Hunter and Swan (2007). ANT explores the relationships among actors in a network (Landri, 2020). One unique aspect of ANT acknowledges the role of human and non-human actors in shaping social interactions, leaders, and policy. Landri (2020) described the importance of non-human actors in systems, and how they can drive and even shift social and structural relationships. A new technology, for example, can change the landscape of a system or institution. Landri (2020) also raised the importance of the “datafication of education” (p. 46) in

shaping educational leadership, policy, and planning. One iteration of this phenomenon of datafication is the use of digital platforms in educational spaces. Another element of ANT is the role of digital spaces, such as digital networks, for shaping knowledge and interaction. Each of these non-human elements raises relevant analytical questions for this case study. I will draw on CBRI and ANT to interpret and discuss the findings of this study.

Interpretation and Discussion

How are we to make sense of the complex and potentially contradictory nature of this study's findings? In applying my theoretical frameworks to the task of explaining my findings, several possible interpretations emerged. I will discuss these interpretations below, incorporating the theoretical lenses of CBRI and ANT.

Ambiguity in Definitions, Goals, and Practice of Equity

One clear dynamic, evident in the findings of the study, was the concept of ambiguity, confusion, and ambivalence among participants about whether or not the unit centers equity in its work. Administrators Jamal and Jared felt that equity was among the unit's top two and four priorities, respectively. Both agreed that the equity component of the mission was present from the beginning of their newest mission as a unit, established by their current leader four years ago. Jamal articulated that equity was essential in the enactment of their mission. The organization also has a seven-person equity team, and significant funding for the explicit purpose of supporting FLI students. Closing equity gaps in their program engagement and first destination data is a measurable priority that they have used internally and externally as a metric for success. Their physical space has been described as especially inclusive, even by external DEIA specialists within the university.

Yet in spite of these indications of the centrality of equity, one administrator in the unit and all of the staff expressed confusion in response to the question, Does the unit center equity in its work? The third research subquestion captured this ambiguity, within theme 3: confusion about equity. Arthur described the unit's equity goals as "very nebulous." Sofia, Arthur, Marta, and Carlos expressed doubts about whether or not the unit prioritizes equity. Carlos said that equity is "an espoused goal. Not an enacted goal. Or value." He added, however, that "When I step outside and look in, I see that there is a lot of progress." Sofia said, "it really varies depending on the school, and it really depends on what equity means." She also acknowledged that "it's not an easy thing to do." Marta suggested that the unit has "power struggles" when it comes to equity, and that the unit's goals feel "foggy." She said that administrators in the unit pursue equity "if it's easy." Staff said that inequitable practices and sentiments occur within the unit that go unaddressed by most staff. Several participants drew attention to the lack of BIPOC representation in leadership, BIPOC women especially.

'Playing Nice' With Employers

These expressions of confusion about equity raise important aspects of equity work. Hunter and Swan (2007) described equity as "notoriously difficult to 'pin down'" (p. 403). This messiness, the authors argued, is inherent in equity work because of the complexities of undertaking disruptive work within systemic contexts with competing values: "...equality and diversity workers have to 'play the game' by presenting matters of racism and profound discrimination in more user-friendly language; dressing up social justice interventions as commercial ventures – the infamous business case" (p. 403). Participants' confusion about equity in this case reflects a similar ambiguity around the true mission of their work. As Arthur

highlighted, they work for “an absurdly wealthy institution” with few marginalized students, and yet they are “beating their chest” about their equity work.

A similar tension was highlighted in theme 5 of the third research subquestion, bridge to employers. Because of their connection to employers, and the impetus to secure internships and jobs for students, the unit needed to satisfy a variety of organizational partners, in addition to addressing the needs of LPU administrators and students. Chris highlighted this tension, saying that from his vantage point, the unit faces “pressures” to satisfy employer partners, many of whom work within racist structures. Carlos echoed this, describing incidents of discrimination faced by students in internships and jobs, and the lack of action taken by the unit in addressing these issues. Sofia, as a staff member who works primarily to get students hired, expressed feelings of overwhelm at pursuing equity and student employment at the same time. She also named tensions with Carlos, given their different roles in the organization, and his requests for her to shift her focus more towards equity and put less emphasis on making employers happy. She specifically named the issue of needing to make the “business case for equity” (Sofia) with employers, and said that addressing racism, in particular, was challenging with employers who may not see that as a priority.

Competition and Capitalism

The unit’s entanglements with capitalism, the economy, and competition may create tension with their equity mission. Theme 2 of the third subquestion, results and achievement, and theme 3 of the second research subquestion, keep climbing, reflect the attention to progress, individualism, and competition embedded in the culture of the unit. The words “climb” and “summit” are physically inscribed on the wall of the center’s physical building, and several staff described the culture of the unit as action-oriented and competitive. Burnout was described as an

issue for several participants. Arthur suggested that BIPOC students may be too focused on comfort and not focused enough on breaking into powerful spaces, which he described as “overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly male.” He suggested that students should be “out of their comfort zone” and “building social capital.” Jamal, the unit’s leader, also described the importance of building capital and the language of “capital” appears on the website of the unit. One of the primary metrics administrators in the unit use to measure success in their first destination outcomes is graduates’ salary – a higher salary is considered more desirable. All of these beliefs and practices allude to the unit’s integration of capitalism into their work, including the equity work.

Marta expressed concern about the centrality of capitalism in the unit’s work, saying that the unit is applying “maybe a corporate, maybe capitalist standard...to be successful this kind of capitalist way.” She also suggested that staff members’ desire to obtain promotions within the unit may be compromising their focus on equity: “you’ll keep taking the promotion as long as they’ll give it. Investment in equity. Sure if it’s easy.” Marta felt pressure to do something “impressive enough that draws enough students” to “get your promotion.” Marta shared that, at her last institution, they had: “real respect for the fact that our whole brains and bodies were going through something [during Covid-19].” She did not believe LPU’s unit leaders demonstrated that same respect.

Maria and Carlos, BIPOC staff who engage in significant equity leadership in the unit, both expressed feelings of burnout. Maria said that she has experienced “coat-tailing” when she conducts a successful program, noticing that other staff often want her to expand her efforts when she experiences success. Carlos expressed concerns about his health due to burnout after working weekends and evenings in the fall. He said that staff in the unit do not discuss capitalism

or its influence on their culture. He confirmed that the concepts of white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001) feel “really valuable” in understanding the culture of the unit, including sense of urgency, power hoarding, perfectionism, defensiveness, quantity over quality, and individualism. These aspects of white supremacy culture connect to capitalism as well, especially sense of urgency and quantity over quality.

Hunter and Swan (2007) named the challenge of “dressing equity up as a commercial venture” (p.403). Incorporating ANT, this process may produce instability and contradictions in the network of the unit. Capitalism’s association with inequality conflicts in some fundamental ways with the equality the office seeks in their engagement and outcomes data to demonstrate their equity work’s success. Thus, ANT suggests that instability and ambivalence in the organizational system of the unit is an inevitable result of actors with competing priorities. In order to keep the network stable, administrators need to constantly negotiate this tension between capitalistic expectations of success and the need to demonstrate equity success with metrics, something Arthur described as “ultimately what the President and the Board of Trustees care about.”

Jared described the need for the unit to compete for student attention, saying that the student-facing services space at LPU is “very competitive.” This student-facing services space may be viewed as a network within the wider LPU network. Jared said:

It's almost student facing offices competing for the attention of students where we can get it. And I think what has differentiated us and what drove a lot of my thought process early on in this change was this idea that we truly need to get to a place of co-creation. Which means we have to say yes when someone comes in with a very transactional, can

you add a slide to this? And so early and often, we were finding opportunities to add value to our campus partners.

The need to differentiate themselves and negotiate within the network captures the instability they face, and the need to make concessions in order to advance their goals.

Different Things to Different People

Another aspect in the confusion about equity in the unit, may connect to my first research subquestion, how do individuals in the unit define equity? In the themes for research subquestion one, it is evident that different definitions of equity exist within the unit. Participants named this themselves. Arthur, an administrator, said: “So the party line, the correct answer is yes...Equity is at the center of all we do. I think the challenge is, and you may have picked this up, I don’t know that there is a kind of standard definition of equity...if you ask people, there’s just these competing definitions or maybe not competing but different definitions.” Similarly, Sofia said that the answer to the question – Does the unit center equity in its work? – “really depends on what equity means.”

Administrator and staff uncertainty about equity definitions might be captured in Hunter and Swan’s (2007) statement about equity and diversity work, namely that it “means different things to different people; and...different things to the same people, depending on the context” (p. 403). Carlos’ suggestion that he sees the presence of equity differently looking out from within the organization compared with looking into the organization from without speaks to this idea. Carlos shared that he is part of different networks outside of the university, which define equity in different ways and attend to different aspects of it. He may be suggesting, here, that his equity networks outside the university define equity one way, and that he feels that the unit defines it a different way. Or that his perspective on the work differs, depending on his

positionality in different networks. This complexity reflects the dynamic and mutable nature of networks, and the multiplicity of actors – human and non-human – within them. Also, as Jared suggested, definitions of values and equity priorities within the unit are still evolving and being re-articulated.

Translation. Jared, another administrator, suggested that he believes staff within the unit have “largely” shared definitions of equity, and that “we can all agree on what these values are.” Yet he identified the need to determine “how we articulate those across the board” and said that “we are doing the work now to ensure that the language is understood and owned and authored by the team.” This “work” reflects the nature of the equity focus in the unit as what Hunter and Swan (2007) might call “networks-in-the-making” (p. 405). Four years into their equity mission, the unit is still working to negotiate and define the work and their values. The network might be seen as “relatively stable, “yet “dynamic” (Hunter & Swan, 2007, p. 405).

Importantly, the formal attempt to stabilize and clarify mission and values in the network may be thought of ANT’s concept of “translation” (Hunter & Swan, 2007, p. 406). Translation “involves multiple interactions – negotiations, co-optations, seductions, coercions – between different actors – human and non-human (Hunter & Swan, 2007). Another way to understand translation is as “finding language that is agreeable across competing interests” (Hunter & Swan, 2007, p. 406). The process of assembling human actors in the unit, collecting feedback and priorities, and distilling them down to mission and values represents the ANT concept of translation. This process became important in the fourth year of their equity work, according to Jared. It is also something that Sofia described undertaking regularly, in her role as liaison to employers. Carlos expressed taking up the task of advocating for FLI and URM students. Notably, Sarah described the purpose of the equity team as “translating” the programs and

services of the unit into something meaningful for URM, FLI, and other student populations. This captures the political negotiations inherent in distilling the needs of these historically underserved groups for administrators and other staff.

Different Definitions of Equity

As we have seen in the themes articulated in subquestion one, staff in the unit define equity in many different ways and with different emphases. Some define equity as equality in engagement, first destination outcomes, or other metrics. Others define it as addressing the neglected or underserved students' needs first. Some define it as attention to the whole person, the right to self-definition, and their joy and well-being. Some believe that equity is the acquisition of power, access, and capital among FLI or BIPOC graduates. Some define equity as caring, kindness, humanness, or treating people as subjects, rather than objects.

Even within these definitions, nuances exist. For instance, though Carlos and Maria described similar commitments to equity for international and BIPOC students, Maria defined equity as "designing for the most neglected." When I shared the list of definitions with Carlos, he immediately told me that he did not like the word "neglected." He said that in his mind, the word invoked the concept of deficit, something he believes has been used to reduce BIPOC and FLI students' worth in conversation and policy. He shared that his awareness of anti-deficit approaches came from his exposure to the work of Harper (2010). He encountered Harper's work through his participation in in-person and digital networks external to the unit. Nuances in language matter in equity work. McNair et al. (2020) described the importance of shared language and clarity of goals in equity work in higher education.

Each of these definitions represents an aspect of the organization as a network, and each of the actors who hold these beliefs described finding ways to articulate them to others. Thus,

these actors and the definitions they hold can be seen as actively shaping the evolving network of the unit (Hunter & Swan, 2007). The network has been formalized as administrators in the unit undertook the work of clarifying the organization's mission and values in collaboration with the staff team during my research.

Motivation and Retention Considerations

The instability and multiplicity within staff definitions of their equity work may contribute, as Arthur and Marta implied, to staff motivation and retention in the unit. Several staff spoke about rapid staff turnover on the team. Marta shared that she believed turnover was lowest on the equity team. She said that the previous director of the equity team, a BIPOC woman, did "...an amazing job really creating cohesion for that team. What I understand was that that particular director really embraced the bring your whole self to work. And that team, at that time, felt most seen and most active." Arthur said that "the average time people spend at the [LPU career center] is about two years." He hypothesized that "if [staff] have more of a sense of the why behind the work they're doing," it may strengthen retention.

Differences in their why emerged during participant interviews. Sarah articulated a desire to address students' "real needs" such as resume building and exploring a sense of purpose. Her background in vocational discernment contributed, she said, to her interest in the field. Arthur expressed his own motivations to create more societal and organizational equity. He said:

Are we training students to break down these [access] barriers and actually make an impact beyond just getting their first job? So I think more broadly about that if that makes sense. I know it doesn't really help my team, right? You need more tangible outcomes to present at your annual review. But...what keeps me going is, potentially we could be training the next generation of leaders in biotech and medicine and finance (Arthur).

Arthur's motivation is centered around his own definition of equity, not necessarily reflected in the unit's short-term goals. Carlos described his motivation as helping students think about themselves in "asset-based ways" and "to design joyful lives." Marta and Sarah expressed interest in addressing classism.

Motivations and commitments to equity and to career and life design represent another implication of ambiguity in the practice of equity. In one sense, this flexibility in the network allows for staff to define equity in a way that works for them. Hunter and Swan (2007) described this flexibility as "how quite different constituencies are able to take up 'diversity' and yet fundamentally disagree about its political aims and objectives" (p. 404). Thus, the network contains some stability and instability. One element of the instability in the network is staff morale and turnover itself. As human actors move in and out, the network, and its nebulous conceptualizations of equity, shift. A balance appears to be needed as administrators attempt to stabilize the network by defining equity clearly, yet allowing different actors with different identities to connect to the equity work.

A Bigger Theory of Justice

As a final note on the topic of equity ambiguity, I wish to share a quote by Ronald Sultana, who has contributed significant written work on equity, social justice, and liberation in career development. I began this dissertation with Sultana's caution about critiquing career practitioners without acknowledging the larger structural factors driving inequity in work and education. I wish now to invoke his sentiments about the importance of having a bigger theory of justice when undertaking social justice work:

...to enact social justice at the micro- and meso-levels, we need to have a bigger theory of justice. As Walker (2003, p. 169) has put it, we need "a theory or principles of justice

which enable us to adjudicate between our actions so that we can say with some confidence this action is more just than that. Patchwork actions, the individual pieces of cloth, however bright and lively, are just that, bits of cloth. Only when we stitch the pieces (our actions) together to make a quilt do the patterns emerge and transform the pieces into something new; we need to know what we are trying to make and to be able to judge whether we have made it well (Sultana, 2014, p. 16).

Sultana advocates for a unified vision of what equity work should look like when it's done. Though ANT suggests that some uncertainty may be inherent in equity work that seeks to disrupt inequitable systems – often from inside those same systems – a unifying vision of equity, and continual attention to shared language (McNair et al., 2020) in the practice of equity in career centers may be critical to the success of equity work. LPU's leaders' efforts to translate staff, student, university leader, and employer priorities and move the work forward represent a messy, ongoing, and necessary process. I will next utilize both ANT and CBRI frameworks to explore the minimization of race in the equity work of the unit.

Color-Blind Career Education

One theme, clear from my first conversation with unit leaders, was the decision to focus equity priorities on closing engagement and career outcome gaps for first-generation, limited-income students, and to move away from centering the needs of BIPOC students on the basis of race. This is the first thing the unit leader told me, that they have centered FLI status in their equity priorities. This decision was reinforced by the large grant the university received to address the needs of FLI students specifically.

Throughout the study, it became clear that the unit had deprioritized race as an equity consideration in a number of ways, and that there is some disagreement within the unit about

whether or not race matters – at least enough to be addressed – in career education. ANT would point to this disagreement as a feature of an unstable network, and I will use ANT to examine the role of non-human actors in gatekeeping and mediating narratives about the role of race and racism in career. First, however, I will review some of the manifestations of this minimization of race in the findings.

Starting with an external perspective, Chris, an outside DEIA administrator, described the unit as facing different pressures than other university offices because of their entrenchment with employers and other racist institutions external to the university. Chris said:

...for them, they have corporate partners. They have folks that they need to respond to. They also operate in inherently racist environments. But at the same time, they also have metrics they need to meet. It behooves the [career center team] to be like, yeah, we got X prestigious company to sponsor this, or we sent this many students to this X prestigious whatever. So, I think that the pressures that career services centers encounter are deeply entrenched within racist systems, that, unlike me, where I'm mainly dealing with it from an internal perspective, within [LPU] - our faculty, our staff, our leadership - they're dealing with it from both internal and external.

Chris captured this tension, as well as the pressure the office faces to identify metrics of success. Hunter and Swan (2007) described the need to play nicely within racist systems as the compromising and negotiation required to do racial equity work, which often creates conflict and tension for those who undertake it. I propose, here, that the unit has undertaken strategies to mitigate this tension – principally the minimization of race – and I will describe a few of these strategies which emerged in the data.

Data as Gatekeeper

The deep integration of data and metrics came up again and again in interviews with participants. Every administrator and staff member who worked in the unit mentioned their use of data. Jamal described the centrality of data in forming their equity mission – to close gaps in program and service engagement and first destination data. The focus on data is captured in theme 1: driven by data, within the first research subquestion. Data represent unit administrators' metrics of success in their work in general, and their equity work in particular. Data also define their equity priorities. This can be seen in Jared's articulation of the importance of data from early on in the unit's newest era:

[We] are always grounded in the data. We're always starting from the standpoint of let's collect good quality data that reflects the outcomes we're looking for. And I think there's an importance in differentiating between the impact that we can have on access and the impact we can have on outcomes. Those are both valuable...those are two different ways we can look at this...we do have the ability to filter down [by demographic]. But the idea there is if there was another way to slice that data we would want to do that. Because the more ways that we can find those gaps in outcomes or those gaps in access, the more we can say we need to prioritize this element because there's an issue.

Jared viewed the data as representing the unit's impact on access and outcomes. He did note that the team also looked at data supplied by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) to verify the priorities suggested by their own internal analysis.

This raises an important point. Through the lens of ANT, the unit's data platform represents a pivotal non-human actor within the network. Their data serve to mediate and advocate for certain strategic priorities around equity. This non-human actor is then additionally

bolstered by another non-human actor, reports supplied by a national career education association. The impact of these non-human actors on the equity work and rationale in the unit was significant.

Hunter and Swan (2007) described the role of what they call the “gatekeeper” (p. 406) in equity work, through the lens of ANT. During the process of reconciling various diverse interests within a system, one important role is that of the gatekeeper. According to Hunter and Swan (2007):

The process of how networks are brought together and stabilised is called “translation.” Briefly, it involves multiple interactions – negotiations, co-optations, seductions, coercions – between different actors – human and non-human. Through these encounters, diverse interests are aligned by one of the actors becoming the gatekeeper, which interprets, co-opts and represents these various interests (p. 406).

The gatekeeper’s role is to align diverse interests by interpreting, co-opting and representing them. This captures the role of data in the career unit at LPU. Moreover, one of the roles the data may be seen to play is in the validation of the equity work in the unit, and the justification of its equity priorities. Administrators confirmed that the metrics which indicate the unit is closing demographic gaps for FLI students is beneficial in satisfying LPU’s President and Board of Trustees. One of the administrators shared that the data represent his primary focus as a unit leader, and facilitated his promotion to administrator. During my document analysis, I encountered an article written about equity-driven career centers in the United States. LPU’s unit was put forth in the article as a success story explicitly because of their demonstrated closing of certain equity gaps in their data.

The role of the gatekeeper involves translating and mediating priorities in order to stabilize the network. According to Hunter and Swan (2007), “translation is a process that displaces competing scenarios” (p. 407). They suggest that actors can be called upon to “prioritize one element [of their identities] in order to fulfill their role within the network to achieve network durability” (p. 407). This process of displacing a competing scenario, or prioritizing one identity element over another, can be seen as one purpose of the data in the unit. Jamal’s narrative about the selection of FLI status as their central equity priority details the role of the data in displacing race as a consideration:

When I analyzed the data five years ago, I was able to see that our employability rates were really high. But if you analyze them by demographics, there were gaps...we found that there were gaps for students who have limited income backgrounds, Pell Grants...and then others...We found salary gaps that were alarming for women. For underrepresented minorities, the differences weren’t significant. I was surprised when I first saw that because I wasn’t expecting it. You know, and maybe that was just my own bias that I was expecting that perhaps black graduates would be at more disadvantage than their white counterparts when it comes to how long it takes them to get a job after they graduate. No, that’s not what the data suggested. But when I start to think about it, and I started to think, yeah, so like, when we think about what it takes to get into [an elite institution], the disadvantages that are going to show more are going to have to do with income and first generation...when we’re talking about jobs in the first destination survey, what actually ends up really playing a big part of this are the navigational skills, skills that the students have during the job search process, the level of advocacy that they

have at home, and the networks they get to tap into. And sometimes, these three things, a lot of times they transcend race.

Jamal describes his own shift in thinking, as the data “suggested” to him that income and first-generation status were more impactful factors in career outcomes than race. His initial surprise at this outcome, presumably due to his own awareness of racism, especially for black graduates, shifted as he “started to think” in ways more aligned with the data. He formed a rationale to explain his interpretation of the data, and the unit’s equity priorities shifted thereafter.

The large grant for FLI students is another non-human actor which reinforced the stability of the priority of FLI students in the equity mission. In Jared’s words, “the gift...is explicitly tied to supporting...first-generation, limited income students...there is an explicit university mandate to be closing gaps for those students.” Given the grant for FLI students, prioritizing FLI students may be seen as a more stable priority than addressing inequity in racial outcomes. Had administrators chosen to focus on race, they may have encountered more resistance and had fewer staff and financial resources to draw upon. They may have faced tension in trying to pursue two priorities simultaneously. The unit moved forward with FLI status, even as staff within the unit held contradictory beliefs about its sufficiency as a primary equity metric.

Utility and Limitations of First Destination and Engagement Data. Not only did unit administrators choose to focus on FLI status as an equity priority, they selected first destination and program engagement data as their two indicators of equity progress. Jamal shared that first destination data was something they had access to, and that they are now, four years later, attempting to gather data beyond a students’ first destination. I shared findings related to the limitations of first destination and engagement data in the first research subquestion subtheme

two: beyond engagement and first destination. Selecting first destination data as a proxy for career success has limitations. Arthur described the pressure he feels to demonstrate success to LPU's leaders in the form of first destination data specifically, and his doubts about its utility. "I was skeptical," Arthur said, "of that [first destination] data as not being of value for 60% of our students." Yet he said that "part of the reason why I got the promotion is like, I now oversee career outcomes for all undergraduate students and that's ultimately what the President and the Board of Trustees care about." This need to demonstrate success in the form of data necessitates an accessible metric that connects in some way to graduates' post university careers. Because first destination data are collectible while students are still enrolled at the university, or are recent graduates, these data can serve as accessible metrics for outcomes, though limited.

Sofia articulated the limitations of focusing entirely on first-destination, especially as it contributes to the minimization of race as a career factor. Sofia said:

My theory, which could be totally wrong, is that if the student has access to [resources], well, likely the first destination will be okay. But what happens after...Maybe they're going to experience a lot of discrimination and annoyances at their job.

Sofia's attention to career beyond first destination was consistent with the life design philosophy of the unit itself.

As described in theme 1: lives should be designed, under the second research subquestion, the unit subscribed to a philosophy of career practice known as life design. This approach attends to the whole life of the graduate, not just their job, and looks longitudinally at career across the lifespan. For a unit which subscribes to this philosophy to measure success only up until the first post-graduate destination represents a fundamental philosophical contradiction. ANT would view this contradiction as a feature of operating within a university network with its

own rules, resources, and priorities. Needing to align their mission with the mission of the university, which includes demonstrating return on investment in an LPU degree, constrains the unit's ability to attend to the longer arc of graduates' careers and lives, in spite of their philosophy.

Similarly, though the unit's language speaks to equal support of "all students," participants highlighted the heightened investment of resources in the success of undergraduate students, sometimes at the expense of graduate students. This priority, too, connects to the priorities of the larger network of LPU. The strategic decision to select metrics that play well with the priorities of the university, staff, and employers allow the unit to continue satisfying diverse interests.

Disaggregation, Silos, and Significance. Another aspect of the role of data in narrowing the equity focus of the unit relates to the interpretation of the data themselves. Landri (2020) suggested that new technologies and platforms can reduce the role of human actors in creating and managing knowledge. Jamal and a data-team inside the unit conduct much of the interpretation of the data from a strategic standpoint. Chris, the outside DEIA knowledge holder in my participant group, shared his interest in being included in equity decisions and being drawn upon to help examine the unit's data with a diversity lens. Chris shared his interest in light of the fact that the unit has limited Black, BIPOC, or women represented on the leadership team (see theme 4: representation in leadership within the third research subquestion). Due to the availability of the data platform, unit leaders may feel less need to draw on other human actors in equity projects, like data interpretation.

In filtering engagement and first destination data for identity inequities, the unit uses FLI status and URM status as proxies for class and race. There may be an additional opportunity to

disaggregate both data sets to gain a stronger understanding of the impacts of racism by subgroup. McNair et al. (2020) and Dei (2005) have advocated for the importance of building institutional capacity to analyze data with an equity lens. McNair et al. (2020) have specifically written about disaggregation of data as a key component of addressing equity in higher education. The career unit at LPU has an opportunity to disaggregate their URM data by subgroup, to get a stronger understanding of black student impact, for example. During the study, black students were the most vocal BIPOC subgroup described by participants, and there was awareness of the lack of attention to their needs in the office. The unit may also benefit from disaggregating the FLI student data. Arthur shared that the FLI student numbers are a small subset of the total data. Yet, as Chris described, there are differential impacts for White FLI students and BIPOC FLI students, as well as FLI students of different gender identities. These intersections are important to examine and understand as a unit undertakes equity.

In looking at the public dashboard for their first destination data at the time of this writing, it is possible to ascertain the median first destination salary for non-URM, FLI, graduates who identify as men - \$74,006. The same metric for URM, non-FLI graduates who identify as women is - \$67,000. The difference between these median salaries is \$7,006, which is a substantial difference (approximately 10.5% of the latter population's salary). Thus, FLI status does not capture every aspect of equity. Race and gender may reveal significant differences. More qualitative data gathering, something Maria has championed and successfully conducted herself, may also add to the interpretation of their data.

Finally, it appears on LPU's public data dashboard that their response rate on first destination data was 51.5%. Because this was not, to my knowledge, collected via random sample, and represents the destinations of only around half of the graduates, it may not be

possible to reliably determine significance. Their decision to regard racial impacts as insignificant may not be accurate to the whole graduate population.

Minimization of Race

One salient aspect of the equity work of the center is its intention to address inequities without explicit attention to race. Minimization of race and racism is a key facet of CBRI, and of Bonilla-Silva's (2021) four frames of CBRI. Bonilla-Silva defined the fourth frame, minimization of racism, as "a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances" (p. 57). A similar ideology was evident in the findings theme 2: not about race and theme 4: race matters, under the second research subquestion. It also appears in theme 3, research subquestion three, subtheme one: we don't talk about race. This tension around the minimization of race and racism came up in interviews and was noticeable in my observations. Chris, an outside administrator, suggested that LPU as a university does not talk about race, and that in the career unit "race isn't necessarily in the conversation." Regarding the wider university climate at LPU, Chris said:

At this university we don't like having conversations about race. And I think that comes from leadership, if I'm being honest. We only engage in conversations about race when there's a protest, or when people are afraid of protests. Other than that, our university as a whole is not race forward... If we were to ask students, let's say Black students at the university, I think they would say, well, the university isn't necessarily anti-Black, but it's also not pro-Black.

The unit decided not to share any student engagement with me disaggregated by race during the study, citing the Supreme Court's ruling (Nadworny, 2023). Even the equity program most often described by participants as the center's most direct racial equity effort is explicitly

“for all students” (Carlos). I could not find any mention of race, racism or identity in that equity program’s materials. When I asked Carlos about this, he indicated that members of the equity team quietly recruit FLI and URM participants to advance equity.

Administrators and staff each shared their perspectives about the relevance of race and racism in career, and many of these beliefs and assumptions were not in alignment with each other. Carlos shared that the term “white supremacy” would be considered a profane term within the unit. Speaking about antiracism, Maria said: “as professional development being offered, or even a conversation around how race impacts our experiences, not generally something we bring up.” Arthur spoke about the conflation of FLI and URM identities, saying:

I think we conflate race and class all the time and use class and FLI status as a substitute.

What we really want to talk about is the experience of Black students and grads or Latine grads, but we use the term FLI as a proxy for both. Okay, they are different.

Sarah, a White staff member, expressed concerns about duplicating the work of identity offices rather than addressing students’ “real” career needs. Several staff members suggested that staff in the unit have equity knowledge and skill gaps around race in particular. Carlos described an instance of a new hire who identified as a White woman and chose to remove the equity component of her job. Jamal, referencing data, suggested that class advantages “transcend” race and that BIPOC students without limited income and with at least one parent with an undergraduate degree will likely be fine in their first job.

In many ways, these data points represent facets of a nominally equity-driven practice of career education that subscribes to a color-blind racial ideology which minimizes the impacts of race on career. As a theoretical lens, CBRI would characterize this color-blind approach to equity as a new form of racism. Neville et al. (2013) suggested that though a color-evasive approach

may be well-intentioned, it does not address the real disparities that exist for BIPOC communities:

The key color-evasion strategy of “not seeing race” is an aspirational goal of reducing racial prejudice, and it is something that few people would argue against. As Appiah and Gutmann (1996) reminded us, however, ignoring race as a strategy to promote racial equality is desirable in an ideal world. Unfortunately, the United States is far from ideal when it comes to race and racial justice, as is evident in the wide-ranging racial disparities that exist here. And thus although we would like to believe everyone has an equal chance to succeed, this is not the case in the United States...The data on racial disparities underscore the point that we do not live in a racially egalitarian or ideal society.

In Chapter One of this report, I described the metrics which captured disparities by race for many BIPOC graduates (de Brey et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Indeed, it is also possible to discern equity gaps in the unit’s first destination data. Because the unit has an impetus to act on any “significant” equity gaps, as Jared described, their only path forward in evading addressing race directly is to regard racial gaps as insignificant. Unit leaders maintain that this decision has been validated by both the data, and, according to Jared, by NACE.

Unit leaders have concluded that racial gaps were not significant outside of FLI status, in spite of the fact that all three administrators were able to describe their belief that the impacts of racism on the careers of graduates are real and substantial. Jamal described the impacts of racism on BIPOC leaders, and even shared his own experiences of racism earlier in his career. Arthur described the many and significant racial impacts on black women graduates especially, drawing on the stories of friends. While Jared confirmed that racial equity or even discussion about race

or systemic racism are not the “mainstay” of their work or “in the center of [their] curriculum right now,” he believed that they are nonetheless important. Jared shared his opinion that race and racism should not be avoided in education, saying:

I absolutely think those are conversations that should be had and should be acknowledged...I think it's a disservice to not do it or to ignore the fact that [systemic racial discrimination] is something that in my experience, would be a reality for many. So yeah, I mean, that's what we're here to do is to inform and help support our students. By ignoring or being intentionally ignorant of something, I think is a disservice to our work...I would encourage any educator to not shy away from those conversations, or if they didn't feel comfortable having those conversations...that's why I think having a staff with a diverse set of expertise and experiences, we can leverage each other with that.

Jared noted here that some educators may not feel comfortable having conversations about race and racism.

The administrators in the unit did not deny the existence of race or systemic racism, and so they do not represent total color- or power-evasion, as CBRI would describe it (Neville et al., 2013). Yet they did minimize its impact, suggesting that class can transcend racial impacts and that racism as an equity priority did not warrant their attention. Neville et al. (2013) have described CBRI as “a dominant racial ideology or worldview that serves to justify and explain away racial inequalities in society” (p. 458). Deeming race insignificant as an equity factor in career outcomes can be seen as a form of CBRI-based minimization and explaining away of racial disparities.

Several participants suggested that there are significant pockets of unawareness of White privilege and supremacy, institutional racism, and bias on the team. Yi et al. (2022) named

antiblackness, or the specific dehumanization, discrimination, and prejudice against black people in particular, as commonly associated with CBRI. Chris specifically described the university as not pro-black and as a place where race is not considered. He did not feel that LPU was anti-Black, again reinforcing the role of LPU and the career unit as sitting somewhere between pro-equity and race-evasive.

Caring and Competence

CBRI has been associated with racial microaggressions, reduced empathy for BIPOC individuals, and reduced skill in engaging with racial issues (Neville et al., 2013). Many of these aspects were evident in the findings of the unit. Participants described an inability or unwillingness among staff outside of the equity team to address microaggressions and inequities as they arose in shared spaces. This led to overreliance on equity team members to address these issues. Skill gaps were articulated by members of the team, and I observed a White staff member call on a BIPOC staff member in the middle of a class session to talk about the equity component of the session, presumably because she was unwilling or unable to do so.

CBRI has been found to connect to reduced empathy, especially among White individuals who subscribe to this ideology (Neville et al., 2013). Carlos talked about the importance of empathy in working with students, especially BIPOC and FLI students. He named “acceptance and empathy” as important components of career education for these students “in order for them to move forward because...here was some trauma, or there was some history that prevented them from feeling as if they can live their best life for themselves.” Sofia shared her thoughts on encountering a lack of racial empathy in employers. She felt that it was easier to appeal to employers to support limited-income students, rather than BIPOC students. She said:

...when I'm talking to industry or employers, it's maybe easier to appeal to them on a money front, or an experience front versus a race front. Because they might not at all... especially most of the people I work with are white HR people. I think it's not always clear. I think it's hard to reach them to understand like, this is what this would entail to be black and apply for a job versus [being first-generation to go to college]...it's hard to get the empathy.

CBRI might highlight the role of an equal opportunity narrative in permitting the support of someone on the basis of income more than on the basis of race. If the impacts of race are denied or minimized, it might reduce empathy for BIPOC graduates.

Theme 2: caring for people, under the first research subquestion, captures one definition of equity that prioritizes an ethic of kindness, humanness, and caring. This definition was voiced by both of my participants who identified as White women. Marta described this definition as:

Equity, humanness, caring, the whole bit...if you're the power in charge, you are looking out for your people...transparency. You are also looking out for them saying, hey, this thing would be a really great opportunity...You're out there doing a type of care work...how are we going to be good neighbors to one another?...that for me sits more closely in alignment with a lot of the [equity team's] work.

Marta specifically suggested that this definition of care is something that is important to her, to Sarah – my other White woman participant – and to a few others. She felt this definition was not valued enough by the unit as a whole. It may be that this culture of “care” and “humanness” connects to the first frame of CBRI, abstract liberalism (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). This frame suggests that humanness and abstract goodwill are sufficient practices to create equality.

Challenging or disrupting racism may be seen as harsh, unkind, restricting individual freedom. Another study might explore this connection in more depth.

Life Design and Western Individualism

Life design itself emphasizes individual agency and power (Burnett & Evans, 2016), which can obscure systemic drivers, such as racism, and their impacts on career trajectories and wellbeing. Hooley and Sultana (2016) have problematized western individualistic notions of career as reductive and potentially exclusionary. They described western, individualistic career guidance as “prioritizing notions of a free, autonomous, independent individual seeking to fulfill him/herself through choices made, and to design life projects for oneself” (p. 4). They suggest that the promotion of this notion of career without equal reference to sociology, systems, and inequities “inevitably comes at the expense of the advancement of socio-economic justice” (p. 4). They argue for a more social form of career guidance, in the interest of social justice (Hooley & Sultana, 2016). Along these same lines, Bonilla-Silva’s (2021) first frame of CBRI was abstract liberalism, a lens which suggests the existence of equal opportunity and advocates for economic liberalism and individualism, rather than social reform. This frame seeks to minimize the existence of the myriad historical and contemporary forces which drive racial inequities.

Focusing on western individualism, freedom, and equal opportunity, at the cost of minimizing racism, can be seen as a form of color- and power-evasion, in that it emphasizes individual freedom, and de-emphasizes racial barriers. This de-emphasis was reflected in the subtheme: we all face adversity, under research subquestion two. The course session I observed during the summer, Building an Authoethnography, actualized this philosophy. The session was facilitated by a White staff member who identified as a woman. She presented students with an identity wheel, and prompted them to consider their personal dimensions of identity. The use of

the term “personal” emphasizes the individualistic approach to career and race, rather than any acknowledgement of systems. It also positions racial identity as similar in importance to the other elements in its level of the wheel. The words identities, communities, experiences, relationships, mentors, beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations, joys, interests, strengths, goals, and aspirations each appear as clouds emerging from an illustrated head, signifying their similar importance as personal dimension of identity.

Later in the session, the words discrimination, history, biases, stereotypes, and privilege appeared on another slide. To explain this slide, the instructor said, “let’s put this into context” and described a student who has not reflected on the impacts of their beliefs about success on their career choice. Again, this example emphasized the individual, and their culpability in constraining their own life and career. The final representation of identity came in the form of an illustrated iceberg which included the suggestion that only 10% of identities are visible and 90% are invisible. This framing implied that invisible identities are more numerous, salient, or impactful than visible identities. This served to minimize the experiences and impacts of being visibly White, multiracial or BIPOC, by suggesting that these racialized experiences represent only 10% of identity. When the presenter shared her own identities, she focused on mental health, which may be invisible. Minimizing the role of visible identities such as race may be interpreted as color-evasion and power-evasion, in that it does not account for the significant impacts of racialized experiences on either White, multiracial, or BIPOC people.

The instructor presented her own identity wheel, and while she did add the word “white” (sic) to her wheel, she included mentally resilient, Midwesterner, mid 30s and other elements of her experience, visible and invisible, changing and stable, along with her racial identity. She did not say anything about her racial identity in her presentation, suggesting that being “white” is not

an aspect of her lived experience that she considers significant. This experience is out-of-step with the importance of racial identity to the BIPOC participants in my study.

Racial Impacts for Black Students

Both my findings, and the existing literature on career and race, highlight the salience of the Black experience for that subgroup within the BIPOC community. Carter et al. (2003) found that career services staff perceived Black students to be benefitting less from services, and possibly experiencing harm as a result of services, compared with White students and other BIPOC groups. Black inequities in wealth, education and postgraduate employment outcomes, and measures of mental and physical health and wellbeing in the U.S. are the most pronounced, due to antiblackness and other factors (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; McNair et al., 2020; Robinson, 1983; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Yi et al., 2022).

It was Black students' and graduates' challenges my participants most often named in describing the impacts of race on career. Seven out of eleven of my participants - Sofia, Jamal, Carlos, Arthur, Maria, Chris, and Jayden - spoke specifically about challenges for Black students and professionals unprompted. This was true even though only three of my participants identified as Black themselves. The four participants who did not specially mention professional challenges for Black students and graduates each identified as White. Challenges connected to the Black identity seemed to be something most participants were aware of. Three participants specifically articulated challenges for Black women as exemplifying the need for attention to race in equity practice. The only program I was able to locate in the unit carrying explicit attention to race was designed for black students, the Black Boy Joy workshops created by Carlos.

One of the four participants who did not mention the Black identity in her interview, and who expressed interest in shifting the focus of the unit away from identity work was Sarah. She

shared a narrative about why she feels that identity work and speaking about race should not be the focus of the unit. She shared a second-hand student story, to explain her concern about focusing too much on identity. Sarah told me that an international student from Turkey had told a colleague:

As an international student, you have a limited amount of time before you get kicked out of the country. What I need to know is how to find a job. I don't necessarily need to have a whole lot of conversations about my identity and belonging, at least not initially.

This request to focus on employment rather than identity is in line with Sarah's desire to address "real needs" (Sarah) related to career, rather than replicating identity development work. Yet this story may also underscore the difference in the experiences of some BIPOC subgroups compared with others, and the importance of intersectionality.

While identity may not have been salient for that international student at that time, one of my participants, a Black recent graduate, considered his Black identity to be a fundamental part of his life and career. This student shared that he would not be comfortable working with a White career educator, and that he would strongly prefer to work with a Black educator, ideally a Black man given his identities. When asked why this was, Jayden told me that he feels more "comfortable" talking to a Black educator because of their shared experiences of being Black. Jayden also told me that he believes his Black student friends may not want to visit the career center unless they feel that their educational or professional situation is "that bad." This echoes Carter et al. (2003)'s findings that Black and Hispanic students may be more likely to perceive career services as punitive, due to their higher likelihood of being referred to career services by staff, rather than encouraged to visit by friends and family. Carter et al. concluded that Hispanic

and Black students may get the “impression that career counseling is something they must comply with rather than choose for themselves” (2003, p. 402).

Chris directly challenged the idea that income and professional connections transcend the racial challenges of Black students and graduates, Black women especially. He said:

Saying that just because a black woman may come from a wealthier family or come from a certain income level, or might have connections...and I do think that should be acknowledged compared to another black woman that may not. That does not mean by any means that that particular person is not going to encounter challenges and barriers because we live in a historically and systemically racialized and racist society.

Chris contradicted CBRI here, directly asserting the impacts of systemic racism on Black women.

Safety, Comfort and Self-Esteem. While racial identity may not be primary for some White, multiracial, and BIPOC students, it may be that Black students are more likely to feel the impacts of racism and antiblackness in their educational journeys and careers. Also, due to the links between reduced racial empathy and antiblackness among White professionals who consciously or unconsciously subscribe to CBRI (Yi et al., 2022), Black students may experience less safety in interactions with White and non-Black career educators. Carlos suggested that some Black students may have experienced race-based trauma, and thus may benefit from a career education approach that is trauma-informed, or informed by an awareness of the impacts of race-based trauma.

Maria shared data she gathered from a group of Black students which indicate that they were disappointed by the lack of candid conversations within career programming about

experiences of racial discrimination in their internships and jobs. These conversations, they indicated, were essential for them to be willing to attend programs put on by the unit. Maria said:

The black students weren't coming. So we created [a black excellence event] that had only black speakers, black students, black professionals in different careers. Come have honest conversations, let's talk about microaggressions, talk about hair, let's talk about things that in the professional world...there's not a safe space for our students of color to speak about. And let's create that environment. So I think had we not listened to the feedback, we would not have known that that was a requirement (Maria).

This specific attention to the needs of Black students seems to have moved the needle on Black attendance.

Carlos spoke about the importance of safety for BIPOC students, and Black students. He suggested that BIPOC students may be more likely to visit the career unit if they are referred by someone known. This speaks, potentially, to the importance of safety as they navigate campus services. He shared that, in his work with students, he begins with personal sharing and conversation about interests and identity in order to build relationships and trust. Carlos feels that this trust building encourages students to share experiences of discrimination with him that they might not otherwise share. For Black students and professionals, the denial or minimization of race and racism may serve as a barrier to engagement with career education. For some students, such as Jayden, racial awareness is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition.

Another specific danger for Black students might be the internalization of deficit-thinking and antiblackness in narratives about success and equal opportunity. During a summer course session, a White instructor offered the following Brene Brown quote to students: 'Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level

of self-acceptance' (Brene Brown, PhD).” For a Black student who may not feel belonging due to overt or covert racism, this quote may lead to internalization of the message that their lack of belonging is a result of them not accepting themselves. This danger is not unique to Black students. CBRI suggests that internalization of racist narratives and internalized oppression can impact BIPOC individuals as a result of CBRI (Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022):

Consider a person of color who believes that race is a nonfactor in securing a job (or the denial of institutional racism) and believes that she and other people of color only need to realign their values to give priority to education and not hedonism in order to succeed. Here a dominant racial ideology is maintained by relying on U.S. values of meritocracy and individualism to explain group differences that, in essence, blame the victim for inequalities. Having never considered systemic forms of oppression, this individual may turn to self-criticism to understand her unemployment (Neville et al., 2013, p. 461).

Internalized oppression could mean significant repercussions for Black and BIPOC students who encounter the minimization and denial of race and racism in career education and in their careers. They may be more at risk for internalizing beliefs about equal opportunity or their own inferiority. These beliefs may harm them emotionally, socially, or financially as they move into postgraduate workspaces.

BIPOC Student Comfort

One value that came across in the work of the center was the importance of embracing growth and discomfort. This value was best exemplified in the comments made by Arthur, one of the center administrators, who identifies as White. In his interview, Arthur expressed concern that some BIPOC students may be increasingly unwilling to embrace discomfort in their career experiences. He challenged career educators to resist bringing in professional speakers on the

basis of identity, rather than on the basis of professional success and power. Describing a recent program, Arthur said:

The keynote speaker was this woman who was a lovely woman. She was an alum of our school of education. The best I could tell, any time someone has a gap in their resume, they're working as a consultant. I'm like, so you're unemployed... And you know, she had this nice conversation. And then two weeks later, we had our networking event that was open to everyone with our finance alums. And these are like the big heavy hitters. And because it was virtual, it was the big heavy hitters in venture capital and finance and biotech, and all of these areas ... who tend to be almost overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly male, but not exclusively. None of those students at the FLI networking event were at the event. That's where the power is... it might feel good to talk to that woman but she is currently unemployed in the field of education... You're never out of your comfort zone, but you're actually not building social capital.

His dismissal of students' desire to "feel good" speaking with an alumna who may share their identities speaks to his prioritization of the acquisition of social capital and traditional success over comfort. Arthur connected this unwillingness to move out of their comfort zone to the failure to gain access to powerful professional spaces.

This emphasis on BIPOC students changing to embrace discomfort, rather than focusing on changing racist spaces, may be understood through Bonilla-Silva's (2021) third frame of CBRI, cultural racism. Cultural racism suggests that minorities' unequal standing in society is connected to some aspect of their culture. In this case, Arthur's assertion that BIPOC students are increasingly unwilling or unable to embrace discomfort suggests that their lack of access and power may be a consequence of this unwillingness – a cultural barrier. In contrast, Carlos has

advocated within the organization for a reframing of this narrative, wanting to shift the conversation from focusing on BIPOC students' perceived cultural deficits to changing racist structures and cultural narratives inside the unit and in the companies the unit partners with.

Incentives to Focus Equity Priorities on Limited-Income, First-Generation White Students

Similar to this narrative is the concept that White FLI students may be easier to support within a CBRI framework than BIPOC students. Due to the legislative pushback on antiracism, which Sofia named as a barrier to her equity work with employers, and the historical and contemporary links between race and capitalism (Edwards, 2021), focusing on the needs of White FLI students may be easier than focusing on the needs of BIPOC students. Sofia suggested that talking about income feels “safer” than talking about racism in her work. Certainly, in the case of this unit, the significant grant dedicated to serving FLI students reinforced that priority.

Sarah expressed concerns about focusing too much on identity work in the office. She shared the view that identity work is not connected explicitly to career development and that some students do not want to have identity conversations. She described these conversations as “fluff” and “a sugary meal.” This conveys the sense that Sarah viewed identity conversations as optional material that most students would not appreciate. She expressed the worry that focusing too much on identity would reduce their student engagement numbers.

The concept of quantity over quality within Jones and Okun's (2001) list of characteristics of White supremacy culture may apply to this concern about losing numbers with too clear an emphasis on a topic that may be more relevant for BIPOC students. Sarah shared her assumption that international students may not care about identity aspects of career, or topics concerning “who you are matters.” She overlooked, perhaps, the students for whom identity conversations are an important first step in career development. She may be unaware of these

students, especially given Carlos' assertion that BIPOC students tend to seek out career educators by referral. This process may leave some White staff liaised to certain majors with limited contact with Black and BIPOC students who desire more support with discrimination or racism.

Jared described systemic racism as "a reality for many." He confirmed that discussion of systemic inequities and their connection to career is not a mainstay of the unit's curriculum. This implies that Jared does not consider systemic racism to be something that impacts everyone, or something that everyone should be knowledgeable about. The unit's decision not to highlight these inequities may reflect the centering of White students, FLI and non-FLI, in their services.

Importance of BIPOC Expertise and Digital Networks

CBRI has also been linked to reduced appreciation for the value of diversity (Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022), which may connect to the unit's racial equity issues in hiring, retention, and promotion of BIPOC staff, especially BIPOC women. In spite of these issues, both Jared and Jamal, as administrators, described the importance of hiring a diverse staff and drawing on diverse skills and knowledge. They did not address the issue of diverse leadership, or promoting diverse hires so that the organization is diverse throughout, and not only in entry-level roles.

One interesting finding was the importance of digital networks for staff who drove equity work in the unit. Marta suggested that the unit does not provide any education for staff on antiracism, for example, and that staff were left to seek out this education themselves. Maria shared that she draws on her lived experience as a BIPOC person in order to inform her diversity work. Carlos shared the same idea, saying that he draws on his intersectional identities to connect with BIPOC and FLI students. Jayden, representing a former student perspective,

expressed his desire to work with career educators with lived experiences as BIPOC people, ideally Black experiences due to his identities.

When asked about their own awareness of equity and career issues, Arthur, Sarah – who identified as White - and Chris – who identified as Asian-American - shared that they have learned some of their understanding of equity from friends and family. Chris and Arthur specifically described learning about racism while pursuing their graduate degrees. Jamal described learning about racism through his experiences being marginalized earlier in his career. In contrast, Maria and Carlos, who identify as BIPOC and are actively involved in equity work in the unit, both shared their learning about equity from digital and in-person networks beyond the university. They both have presented at national conferences and are connected to diverse networks beyond their unit. Carlos described the importance of his learning from the anti-deficit work of Harper (2010), Bates (2022), and other BIPOC writers who have expanded his thinking about equity and inclusive language. He has participated in equity webinars with the National Career Development Association and other organizations to continually grow his understanding of equity. Sofia also sought expertise outside of the unit, and she cited the work of Lewis (2021) on the Anti-Racism and Gender Equity Scorecard for employers. Sofia also took the initiative to reach out to the chief diversity officer at LPU to ask questions about how to advance equity in her work.

Chris suggested that there are “really key [equity] leaders” in the career unit, and specifically mentioned Maria’s work as an example. He said that these key DEIA figures in the unit are known to BIPOC and FLI students: “There’s a handful of us on this campus that are entrenched in DEI work. We all come at it from our different lenses...we actually all kind of work together.” Chris said that he interacted with a student who found it “really cool” that he and

other DEIA leaders on campus know each other. This campus network of equity-minded leaders - sometimes acting individually and sometimes collaborating - seemed important to collective action on equity on campus. ANT would regard this as an important network within a network. Chris said that “[the equity leaders on campus] have built a reputation among [students], as well as being really equity driven and really embracing and caring about DEIA efforts.”

BIPOC staff on campus and in the unit represented important racial equity knowledge-holders who have engaged in equity work in various ways. They were relied upon to be “translators” (Sarah) for the career unit on behalf of FLI and BIPOC students and represented a resource unit leaders could “leverage” (Jared). They also conducted equity assessment and created programs for BIPOC and international students whose needs may be overlooked by the wider unit. Carlos’ Black Boy Joy workshops and Maria’s reform of student programs were examples of these efforts. Yet, with limited representation in leadership, these staff members may not be fully able to shape in equity work and share their expertise. As with the Black Boy Joy workshops, unit leaders may not have been aware that these diverse student needs were being addressed by these equity knowledge-holders.

Implications and Recommendations

In this section, I will explore the significance of this case study - and problematize the practice of equity without race in career education. I will also describe an original model which illustrates the interactions among human and non-human actors in career education spaces. This figure may serve to inform future work on the topic, contributing a stronger understanding of the mediating impacts of beliefs and assumptions about career, racial difference, and racism. I will discuss implications for future research, policy, and practice, including specific recommendations for practice in career education.

Implications of the Practice of Equity Without Race

This case study explored a complex case. The well-resourced career unit at an elite U.S. institution had strong leadership, and their team had undertaken a new equity mission, and worked toward this mission for nearly four years. Unit leaders had been given significant freedom and an expensive, central, new facility in which to pursue their work. The team's equity mission was enshrined in their unit's values, and grounded by significant data collected by the unit. The unit had a large staff team, and seven dedicated staff lines focused on equity. It was also the recipient of significant funding explicitly intended to bolster equitable attention to the needs of first-generation, limited-income students.

Philosophically, the career educators in the unit practice a popular form of career education – life design – which attends to wellness and holistic career planning. The unit also worked with a diverse and accomplished student population, and has significant support from the wider university. The unit had demonstrated the ability to close some equity gaps for first-generation, limited-income students. The equity work of the unit had been highlighted in a national article on successful equity practice in career services units. Employer partners celebrated the work of the unit, and unit events were well attended. BIPOC staff in the unit described some equity progress, and were given the freedom to pursue their equity interests and create original material. A dedicated equity program had been created and run for years.

Yet, in spite of this demonstrated success, resourcing, and attention to equity, significant gaps existed in the unit's practice of racial equity, including:

- Lack of explicit intention or language to address racism or to pursue racial equity
- Conflation of racial identity with personal preferences, such as hobbies
- Conflation of race and class discriminatory impacts

- Gaps in racial equity knowledge among administrators and staff and confusion about to define and assess equity and racial equity
- Unaddressed concerns about bias in hiring and lack of promotion and support of BIPOC staff, especially BIPOC women
- Staff perception that racial language such as the term “White supremacy” is taboo and would be considered profane if used
- Inconsistent support for defining and operationalizing equity and unit values
- The rendering of the impacts of racism without class disadvantage “not significant”
- Assessing equity success by focusing on program attendance and first post-graduate destination
- Lack of open spaces for students to discuss experiences of racial discrimination with unit employers
- Staff concerns about lack of adequate language and tools to address employer racism

This case study revealed strengths and limitations in the equity work of the unit, and given that the focus of the study was racial equity, the unit’s failure to directly address racism and racial equity was disappointing. At the same time, these findings may illuminate the ways in which racial equity can be neglected, avoided, and minimized, even while other forms of equity practice are progressing.

As discussed at the beginning of this dissertation, race and racism are contested in the U.S. today, and the positionality and challenges of the unit in this case study within a country, industry, and university unaligned on the topic of antiracism (Nadworny, 2023) represents a cautionary tale for career centers who wish to provide truly equitable career education. LPU’s career leaders chose to center first-generation, limited-income students in their equity mission,

and to avoid specific attention to the needs of BIPOC students who were not FLI, concluding that class advantages “transcend” (Jamal) race and that these non-FLI, BIPOC students would be fine. This centering of FLI students produced significant equity gains that should be celebrated. It also pleased administrators who sought to support FLI students, and who provided earmarked funding to do so. It de facto prioritized the needs of White FLI students above the needs of BIPOC, non-FLI students. As one participant shared, it allowed the unit to “play nicely in the sandbox” with their employer partners, some of whom want to avoid discussing or taking action on race.

In order to placate staff who care about directly addressing racism, unit leaders allowed staff freedom to create original programming and to pursue their interests. Carlos, for example, was able to create and run Black Boy Joy workshops without the knowledge of the leader of the unit. It was not clear whether Carlos intentionally conducted these workshops without the leader’s knowledge - since Carlos shared that he felt conversations about white supremacy would be taboo in the unit - or whether unit leaders may have failed to notice them.

Unit leaders collected and shared data that captured tangible progress on equity goals related to FLI students, essential to garner support from university administrators. By centering their career outcomes assessment around first post-graduate destination, they did not need to assess student wellbeing or experiences of racial discrimination, or, indeed, any career outcomes beyond obtaining a first position or education opportunity. This simple, measurable goal reduced the potential for scope creep or any more nuanced gathering of qualitative data beyond first destination. It also produced data wherein non-FLI, underrepresented students appeared to be successful relative to FLI students of all racial identities.

This approach to equity might be seen as a compromise that satisfies some parties, a color-blind way of taking action on one, arguably less contested form of oppression – leaving out no White students - and conducting a few other equity programs, nominally for “all students” (Carlos). Challenges to the color-blind approach were limited by staff concerns about promotability and unit leader’s focus on numerical metrics of success, such as attendance data, which reward appealing to student majorities. Terms such as “White supremacy” were regarded as taboo by BIPOC staff who might otherwise raise racial issues more directly. These BIPOC staff were perceived by many to be neglected in the promotion process, reducing their power to challenge or revise unit priorities. The unit had ostensible diversity in numbers on staff, but lacked BIPOC and BIPOC representation in leadership, relegating Black women staff to front desk and operations roles. Some White staff avoided identity work for fear of duplicating the work of BIPOC support offices on campus, and staying in the lane of career preparation. In total, this approach allows for equity progress in ways that garner support, commitment, and recognition from many of the unit’s stakeholders. It does not examine the nuances of equity or racism too closely, focusing instead on a target with more consensus.

This equity approach aligns with the Supreme Court’s 2023 decision on race-based admissions, which curtailed the consideration of race as a strategy toward equity. In her MPR News article on the decision, Nadworny (2023) quoted Dominique Baker, a professor of education policy, on the decision. Baker said:

Nothing is as good at helping to enroll a more racially equitable class than using race. Nothing comes close to it. There are other tools; other ideas. But if race is not taken into consideration, those different types of techniques and tools do not replicate what race-conscious admissions policies do” (Nadworny, 2023, para. 31).

Similarly, it can be argued that pursuing equity without direct and explicit attention to race is inadequate to address racial equity. As Neville et al. (2013), Yi et al. (2022) have argued, color-blind racial ideologies often perpetuate racism and racial inequities, even when well-intentioned. Given this, racial equity requires direct and dedicated attention to race and racial impacts.

Leaders in this case study did not undertake direct and dedicated attention to race and racial impacts. Thus, they neglected the clear opportunity to adequately address racial equity. This represents a troubling gap within their equity work, and other career units should address this gap if they wish to provide equitable career education. The rest of this chapter will include an original model which captures the findings of this study, and several recommendations for research, policies, and practices which may strengthen racial equity in career services spaces.

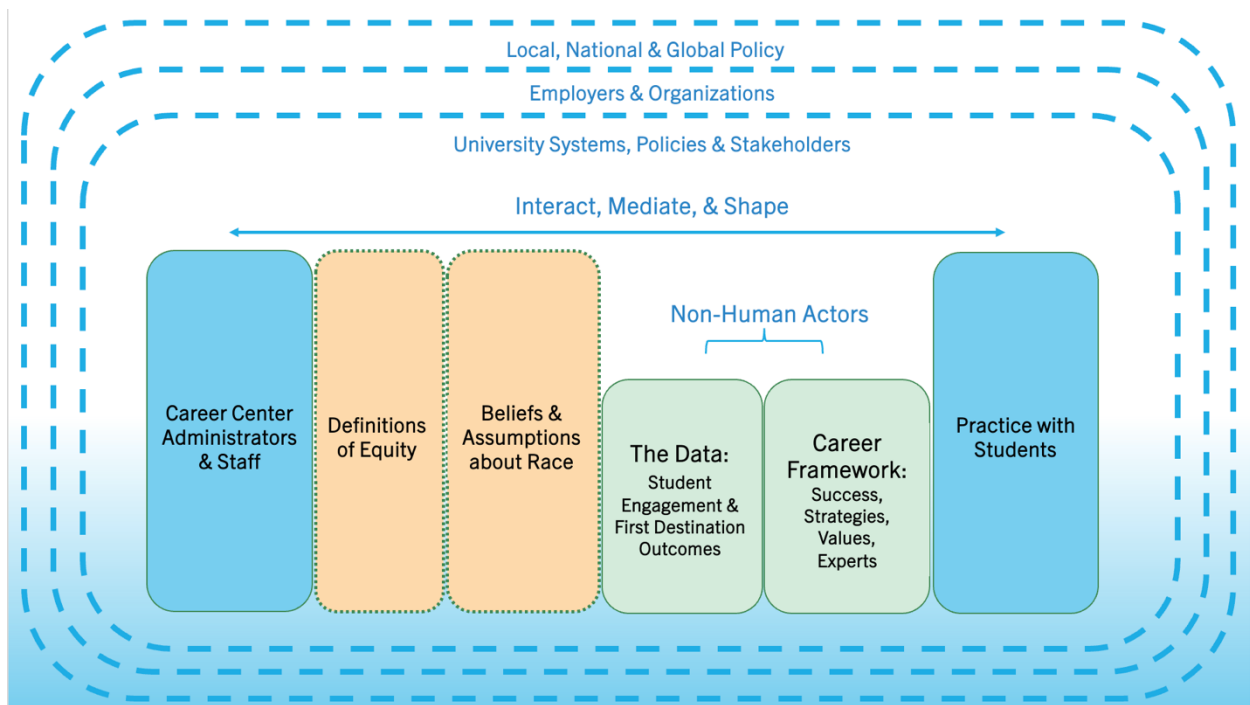
A Model for Racial Equity Practice in Career Education

The findings of this study underscore the importance of beliefs and assumptions about race, racism, equity, and work in career services spaces. In order to capture the interactions among human and non-human actors in career education spaces, and how they mediate beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in career services, I contribute here an original model. One of the career leaders I spoke with early on about hosting my study - who ultimately declined to do so - questioned my premise that beliefs and assumptions about race and work have anything to do with career practice. “I can believe one thing and do another,” he said. He is not wrong. As ANT suggests, it is quite possible to hold contradictory beliefs and to act in both consistent and inconsistent ways with those beliefs. Yet, my findings suggest that beliefs and assumptions – constantly mediated by a variety of political, social, structural, and non-human forces – drive, negotiate, and justify priorities and practices in career education spaces. This model is intended to provide a framework for understanding the ways in which these beliefs and assumptions shape

equity work in career education spaces. This framework emerged from the findings of this study, and confirms the suggestion that beliefs about work, race, and racism - held by administrators, staff, students, and the wider ecosystem in which these units operate - do shape the practice of career education.

Figure 3 and *Figure 4* below capture these complex dynamics, and serve as lenses through which to understand the conclusions presented in this chapter. This model suggests two ways to represent the nature of beliefs and assumptions about career and racial equity, and how they are shaped and mediated in career education practice. This study surfaced the fact that career practitioners' work with students is informed by their own conscious and unconscious beliefs and assumptions about equity, race, racism, and career. The findings suggested that non-human actors such as professional development networks, digital communities of practice, databases and other factors influence these beliefs and assumptions in various ways. Moreover, career education practice with students can interact, mediate, and shape practitioners' beliefs and assumptions, and all of these actors and non-human actors are influenced by the wider contexts within which they operate - the university, the region, the political landscape and other contextual elements. Of particular significance in this study was the role of data as a non-human actor, and the fact that interpretation of data is also mediated by beliefs and assumptions about race, class, racism, career, and equity. These dynamics allowed the career unit in this case study to undertake equity work while avoiding and minimizing the impacts of racism. Career center leaders who wish to adequately address racial equity must surface and address these dynamics in their units.

Figure 3. Mediation of Beliefs and Assumptions About Racial Equity in Career Education



In *Figure 3*, definitions of equity and beliefs and assumptions about race and career are represented with dotted outlines to indicate the mutable nature of these elements. The bi-directional arrows among the actors and concepts in the figure indicate that each of these elements interact, mediate, and shape each other on a continual basis. I include two non-human actors, the data and career philosophies driving the work, both of which were described by center staff participants in every interview. These non-human actors emerged as key factors in the work of the center.

The outer borders (also represented by dotted-lines) indicate the dynamic and unstable nature of organizational and political networks. These three borders represent the influences of macro-contexts on the practice of racial equity in career education units. The Supreme Court decision on affirmative action during the course of my study (Nadworny, 2023) had tangible impacts on participant beliefs and willingness to engage with the study. This was a clear example of the influence of national policy on the work of the center, even though that decision took place

outside of the “bounded” unit I conducted research within. This speaks to the relevance of my methodology – Bartlett and Vavrus’ (2017) assertion that case study bounds are in some ways artificial, and that educational practices do not happen in a political or historical vacuum.

Figure 4. Translation of Beliefs and Assumptions About Racial Equity in Career Education

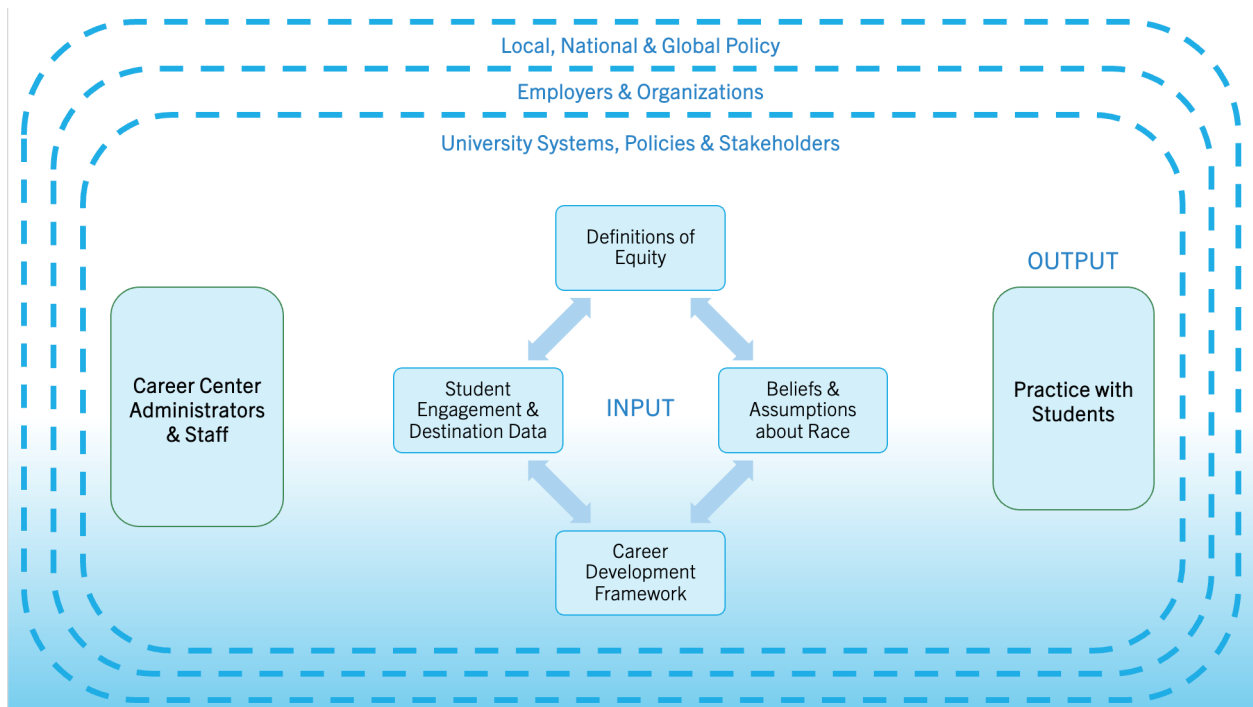


Figure 4 provides a second representation of the beliefs and assumptions about work and racial equity which shape the practice of career education. This illustration is presented in the form of a network. ANT describes the dynamic and complex nature of beliefs and assumptions among actors in a network (Landri, 2020; Latour, 1987). Hunter and Swan (2007) have raised the relevance of ANT in exploring the negotiation of equity progress in organizational spaces. I have drawn upon ANT to illustrate the nature of definitions, beliefs, assumptions, and frameworks in guiding career education practice, and how they undergo the process of translation (Hunter & Swan, 2007). *Figure 4* also includes macro-factors which contribute to the translation of beliefs and assumptions, including organizations, policies, national and global events, and other network

impacts. This model frames beliefs and assumptions about work, equity, and race as inputs, and practice with students as output. This is not to say that the relationship is one-directional. It is important to highlight, as in *Figure 3*, that the beliefs and assumptions of administrators and staff are informed by their practice with students. One example of this bi-directional process is Sarah's story about how an interaction with an international BIPOC student contributed to her belief that identity work is less important to students than technical career support. In this case, however, it could also be argued that Sarah's pre-existing belief about students' desire for technical work may have been upheld by this student interaction. This process warrants further study. In either case, the beliefs and assumptions of career educators, as described in this study, have measurable impact on these professionals' practice with students and graduates. I will elaborate on this concept in the implications described below.

Implications for Future Research

This study supports several implications for future research. The beliefs, assumptions, values, and practices of administrators and staff in career services offices have received limited attention in the scholarly literature (Carter et al., 2003; Fickling et al., 2018). Yet, because of the significant financial commitment (Paulsen & St. John, 2002) involved in completing an undergraduate degree, attention to the post-graduate professional wellbeing of students is critical. Worldwide, significant wealth gaps exist for BIPOC communities, due to the legacy of colonialism (Bryce, 1902). Black, Latine, and other graduates of color fall behind their White peers in employment, earnings, and wellbeing (de Brey et al., 2019; Gebremicael et al., 2019; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Yi et al., 2022). These inequities necessitate the prioritization of racial equity in higher education career services offices, and of intentional research to support these efforts.

Hunter and Swan (2007) have written about the challenges of enacting equity reform within historically inequitable institutions, through the lens of ANT. This study drew on CBRI and ANT to examine the beliefs and assumptions of staff, administrators, and a few students in a large and well-funded career unit within a prestigious, private university. ANT and CBRI – in combination - provided a useful lens that incorporated both a systems perspective and an antiracist perspective. Future research might replicate this methodology at different higher education institution types to explore beliefs and assumptions about racial equity in different structures and contexts. Similarly, it may be useful to explore this topic at a large public university or a small liberal arts college, which may take different approaches to career education. Regional differences in beliefs about race and work would also be useful to examine.

Of particular interest for future research may be Minority-Serving Institutions such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities. This would illuminate in more depth the ways in which power and equity are negotiated with different identities, “majorities,” and structures. LPU had a substantial population of Black and other BIPOC students and staff, which allowed for diversity in participant identities. Most studies on staff views on equity and social justice have primarily explored the perspectives of White staff and leaders (Arthur et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2003; Fickling, 2016; Fickling et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2008). It would be useful to explore more BIPOC perspectives and to examine the nuances among BIPOC staff and leaders with different intersectional identities. For instance, it may be useful to examine the beliefs and assumptions of black women career educators, which may differ from leaders who identify as former international students from the Middle East. This intersectional tension emerged in this study. One staff participant shared that the career services team received feedback from an international student who identified as a Turkish man that he did not feel that conversations

about identity and race were as important for his career as technical services such as resume building. That participant assumed that this was true for most BIPOC students - and shifted her own understanding of the importance of race in career education accordingly. In contrast, another participant, herself a BIPOC, former international student, shared that she received feedback from a group of black students which indicated that they would not attend career events unless spaces to have honest conversations about racial identity and discrimination were created by the career staff. These contrasting perspectives should be explored further in future research.

Of course, BIPOC practitioners who share intersectional identities also possess unique perspectives on equity and career. I specifically recommend exploration of the strategies BIPOC career educators use to navigate the need to “play nice” within racist institutions and with multiple stakeholders. Future research may also consider quantitative and mixed methods approaches to this topic to expand scholarly understanding.

Funding and university leadership support were important to the ways in which equity work was undertaken in this case. Future research might examine the role of institutional support for racial equity in career spaces. Institutional support for LPU’s career unit was observable from my outside DEIA administrator, which shaped his perception of the work of the unit. The ability to hire was another critical factor for the career unit’s equity mission, as well as the university’s prestigious reputation. This unit had a seven-person equity team and internal data analysts, which made significant attention to equity possible. In the absence of these elements, the pursuit of equitable outcomes may be more challenging.

Communication channels, technologies, and networks emerged as important non-human actors in this case study, especially in light of ANT. Research on the ways in which equity work is communicated within and outside a unit would contribute significant information to this topic.

More detailed exploration on the ways BIPOC and White career educators reconcile their beliefs about equity with the capitalism-informed practices in career services offers similar value. The career paths of BIPOC faculty have been examined in higher education (Allen & Stewart, 2022), but less work has been done on the upward mobility and experiences of BIPOC career educators. This emerged as an area of study that warrants demystification.

The influences of external policies and events related to equity on the work of career centers, as well as the role of racial ideologies such as CBRI represent promising future directions for research in this area. The influences of capitalism, competition, burnout, and other philosophical aspects of career no doubt shape the practice of career education. This study provided some initial information about the presence of those elements, and further research would add more depth to the literature.

Finally, literature about the “culture of nice” in education (Castagno, 2019) may connect to Bonilla-Silva’s (2021) abstract liberalism frame of CBRI. Definitions of equity connected to equality approaches, kindness, and serving all students may conflict with antiracism. Castagno (2019) raised this tension and my study reflected this premise. Future research might examine how culture, leaders, and practices reinforce the suppression of dissent, conversations, and language that are not perceived as nice. One of my participants suggested that the term “white supremacy” would not be received well by unit leaders, likening it to a curse word. Another participant described the importance of “playing nicely” (Chris) with employers in career education. These findings hold implications for the role of nice culture in career education.

Implications for Career Education Policy and Practice

Policy is a central focus of antiracism (Kendi, 2019). Kendi suggested that antiracist policies are the best path toward racial equity, and that intervention should also address another

important driver of racism, racist policymakers (2019, p. 20). At the same time, CBRI and ANT – along with the findings of my work - lend the understanding that racist policies and racist policymakers may not be obvious or even consistent in their messaging and impacts (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Yi et al., 2022). It is not so long in national and global history since racism was direct and explicit (Bryce, 1902). Racist policies and racist policymakers abounded, and the intent to create racial inequality was made explicit (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Bryce, 1902).

In contemporary career education spaces, racist policies and racist policymakers may not be so transparent. Instead, these ultra-modern forms of racism have adapted to negotiate the systems, networks, and constraints we now work within (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Hunter & Swan, 2007; Yi et al., 2022). Though the forms of racism have changed, inequities remain. In order to address them, our approach must evolve as well. The following policy implications may contribute to improved strategies for adaptive intervention on racial equity.

Identifying Racist Policies

The first important implication of this work is the finding that policies shaped by color-blind and racist ideologies can persist in career education spaces, even when significant attention is paid to equity in general. Racial equity work must involve a sharp attention to the nuances of contemporary racism and to policies which reproduce inequitable outcomes for BIPOC students and graduates. Equity also necessitates the formulation of an intentional set of policies to address equity which have been evaluated by a group of practitioners trained to assess the influence of racist ideologies, such as CBRI. Power-evasion and color-evasion often manifest in educational and corporate spaces (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Yi et al., 2022), and since career education sits at the intersection of education and work, special attention is warranted to these elements of CBRI. Similarly, familiarity with the four-frames of CBRI will equip career

education administrators and staff to spot and describe these frames as they manifest. Sofia raised the issue of insufficient language to identify, describe, and address racism, individual and structural. Bolstering these critical lenses among team members will allow them to apply their knowledge to evaluate policies more critically.

It was also concluded in this study that much of the expertise on equity has been obtained outside of the university context. University policies that incentivize, formalize, and reward the development and use of specific racial equity skills would ensure that more faculty and staff pursue those skills. This development can occur outside of the university context, and may be especially rich in digital spaces. National and global digital networks benefit from awareness of equity beyond a particular region and university. Given the complexity of issues of racial equity, the wider equity community should be drawn upon. Annual review and RPT policies should reward equity engagement in tangible and transparent ways. Each of these policy strategies will interrupt the continued impacts of racist policies.

Specific Attention to Racism in Equity Work

This study found that equity work without attention to race and racism is not only possible, but may in fact be easier to pursue in a university setting. Thus, policies ensuring that race and racism are not left out of equity goals are needed. Equity initiatives should consider racial impacts, even if it is not their primary focus, due to the tendency for race to be avoided in equity work. As McNair et al. (2020) suggested, resisting the urge to substitute poverty talk for race talk is imperative.

Similarly, policies which curb racial inequity in hiring should be considered, as this may be a byproduct of CBRI ideologies and the historical and contemporary links between capitalism and racism. Policies which require a consultant on racial equity to join searches, for instance,

may support more equitable hiring. A consultant on racial equity may also be useful for promotion and annual review conversations, to ensure transparency and promotion of BIPOC staff, especially BIPOC women. This study found that BIPOC women reported concerns about reaching leadership roles in career education spaces, and well as being adequately valued for their knowledge and contributions. Other staff noticed and validated these concerns. There is an opportunity to intervene with more supportive policies for BIPOC staff members and BIPOC women. Leadership in career education units should reflect the diversity of the staff and the candidate pool. It is not sufficient to have BIPOC staff and BIPOC women represented at the entry-level, in equity roles, or in operations roles only.

Another concerning finding in this study was the sentiment that one Black staff participant shared that he would not be allowed to freely discuss racial issues with other staff and administrators. He suggested that discussing racism directly and use of the term “White supremacy” would be taboo. He likened the use of this word to the use of profanity, within the culture of the center. Without direct conversations about race and racism, the pursuit of true equity is stifled, and so career units are encouraged to support direct and open conversation about race, racism, Whiteness, and White supremacy. These topics should not be considered taboo, or inappropriate for discussion. Terms such as White supremacy, which are highly relevant to the modern practice of racial equity should be named and defined by administrators in career units, lest their presence and impacts go unaddressed.

Jamal, the unit’s leader, told me that the unit prioritizes FLI status as an equity factor - as the impacts of being FLI are considered significant. In contrast, the unit does not consider BIPOC identity, without FLI status, to be a significant equity factor. This means that the discrimination experienced by Black students who had a college-graduated parent and average

income, for instance, would not meet the criteria for significance in their equity mission. Leaving out the impacts of racism in any equity work carries problematic implications. Career leaders who wish to strengthen or begin equity work should be concerned about the impacts of racism, which are significant (de Brey et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; McNair et al., 2020; Robinson, 1983; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Yi et al., 2022). Avoiding race in the practice of equity renders the work incomplete at best.

Specific Attention to the Needs and Outcomes of Black Students, Staff, and Graduates

Black students, staff, and graduates grapple not only with racism and other intersectional oppressive conditions, but they are the specific targets of antiblackness (Yi et al., 2022). The impacts of antiblackness manifest in various ways, sometimes different than impacts for other BIPOC populations. This difference is due to the historical construction of race as a tiered hierarchy, not a binary, where members of the African diaspora sit at the bottom below other BIPOC groups (Bryce, 1902). Non-Black people of color, even those included in the underrepresented minority category, may experience racism differently due to their historical proximity to Whiteness. In fact, there may be incentives for non-Black people of color to espouse CBRI and other racist ideologies. Thus, attention to antiblackness impacts and ideologies embedded in educational policies is imperative. My findings also underscore the need for disaggregating and carefully examining data with an eye toward intersectionality (McNair et al., 2020).

Maria found that Black students were less likely to attend some career events due to the lack of specific attention to anti-Black discrimination. Carter et al. (2003) found that among BIPOC groups, Black students were perceived to benefit least from career services, and perhaps to experience harm as a result of engagement with career educators. One of my participants, a

Black student, expressed his unwillingness to meet with a career educator who did not specifically identify as Black. Yi et al. (2022) found a potential connection between CBRI and reduced empathy for Black people and other BIPOC groups. Empathy is an important consideration in career education. Black student engagement may lag behind other communities without policies that reduce antiblackness in career education spaces.

Career education that is responsive to Black students would include open, supported spaces in which to discuss experiences of discrimination or bias - such as career course options tailored to the needs of Black students, and workshops that provide strategies for engaging with antiblack discrimination - such as Carlos' Black Boy Joy workshops. A career planning course that provides space for Black students to discuss how the tenets of life design may be impacted by race would address the centering of White students - and the minimization of race and racism - in many career education spaces. When career educators describe individual traits, such as interests, personality, and career aspirations - they should make explicit that racial identity and racialized experiences are not often chosen, and may have unconscious impacts on career for many students, White, BIPOC, and otherwise.

Notably, Black students who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities report more engagement in career development activities than Black students who attend non-Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Clayton et al., 2022). This finding underscores the conclusions of my study. Together, these data serve as strong indicators that the needs of Black students may not be adequately met by institutions who do not dedicate time and attention specifically to the needs of this community.

The racialized history of work and wealth in the U.S. and abroad, should be named. Global events such as European colonization and national events such as American slavery

carried explicit intentions to move wealth from BIPOC communities into White communities. Remnants of this system are still present, and should be named. Strategies for grappling with this history and its present manifestations should be developed and implemented by career center leaders. Yi et al. (2022) found that failing to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism often leads to diminished empathy for BIPOC people and has the potential to facilitate internalized feelings of inferiority for BIPOC people. In career education spaces, Black students may not be equipped to accurately interpret experiences of discrimination or the lack of representation of Black people in powerful companies as somehow natural or deserved. One participant in this study suggested that many of the Black students he works with have reduced expectations for their own success, and internalized beliefs about the inadequateness of Black and FLI communities. This awareness was not shared by two of the three administrators in the unit, who communicated feelings of satisfaction with and justification for the lack of attention to race in their equity work. It should be noted that one administrator, and all BIPOC staff participants, succinctly described the inadequacies of only addressing equity for FLI students. Each staff participant highlighted Black students in particular as a community that would suffer as a result of such a limited approach.

Illuminating Beliefs and Assumptions about Equity and Career

Though beliefs and assumptions about race and work varied considerably in the career unit examined in this study, there was limited awareness and discussion in the unit about these beliefs and assumptions. Unit leaders made attempts to translate diverse priorities into values, yet values alone did not surface the competing beliefs and priorities in operation. Employment policies should formalize communication across educational units about how values are defined and operationalized, so that leaders and staff are more aware of the work and narratives within

their spaces. Policy which requires specific articulation of a unit's philosophy of practice, and specifically defined values and beliefs should be implemented. Universities should have structurally supported spaces to explore beliefs and assumptions about education, equity, and work, because of the ways in which these beliefs and assumptions inform research and practice.

Units might create a committee staff with diverse lived experiences to gather feedback on an annual basis about how values are defined and operationalized. Feedback could also include an anonymous gathering of instances of violated values, and areas of tension in the work of the unit where values conflict with each other. These areas of tension could be discussed in an annual follow-up meeting to the data gathering. Meetings should be facilitated by someone with lived experience with gender, race, class, and other forms of oppression so that they are more aware of where bias might surface in discussion of values. The leadership team in the unit should compensate committee members for their time with small stipends, and should plan to dedicate at least one hour every six months to engaging with the committee and taking action on areas of recommended culture shift. This structured approach for defining, exploring the nuances of, and taking action on stated values would provide continual refining of equity work that is informed by all staff. Student employees should be included in this process if possible, since they are also impacted by the unit's cultural practices. Engagement with this values work should be included in administrator, staff, and student annual reviews, since culture and values are central to the practice of ethical and consistent career education.

Examining and Refining Policies Which Incentivize Burnout, Silos, and Competition

One cultural dynamic that emerged in this study was the structural pressure to achieve and demonstrate success through simple student metrics, such as first destination outcomes and student swipe-ins. These metrics, while informative, are limited in their ability to holistically

assess the efficacy of the center's work. In some cases, participants indicated that this pressure to demonstrate quantitative success in relatively shallow ways in order to obtain funding and promotion hampered deeper exploration of student needs. Policies which solely require and reward attempts to appeal to the majority of students at the expense of minority populations contribute to this pursuit of low-hanging fruit, easy wins, quick technical fixes, and avoidance of important conversation and reform. Offices may be incentivized to focus their efforts on White, FLI students, due to the structural and cultural factors described in this study, and to neglect the needs of BIPOC students due to the complexities and intersections of class and race.

The connections between racism and capitalism, exemplified in the work of James Bryce (1902) and in Jones and Okun's (2001) list of the characteristics of White supremacy culture: perfectionism, sense of urgency, quantity over quality, progress is bigger/more, and individualism, may be embedded in higher education structures and policies and may have outsized impacts on career offices. Policies which incentivize collaboration, deeper examination of values, goals, and data, nuanced success metrics, and sustainable, intentional solutions informed by qualitative and quantitative data better serve racial equity priorities.

Recommendations for Practice

Map Non-Human Actors

One practice which may support a stronger understanding of career education spaces and their equity work is the mapping of non-human actors. ANT described the role of non-human actors in shaping beliefs about race and career, and in shaping the practice of equity (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Landri, 2020). Exploring the role of non-human actors such as data, platforms, and career ideologies in career education spaces will inform administrators and staff about the ways beliefs and assumptions are formed in their offices.

Develop, Measure, and Incentivize Equity Knowledge and Skills

Administrators and staff are all needed to disrupt discrimination and bias within career units. This study found that BIPOC staff and equity-team members were taking on more than their share of the equity work in the unit, including calling out instances of bias and discrimination. The study also identified skill gaps among staff and administrators which negatively impacted their equity work. Building the development of racial equity capacities into performance review would structurally incentivize the development of these skills among staff. Providing incentive to revise policies and conduct equity reviews would also strengthen racial equity practice. Equity capacities and comfort should also be assessed, in order to grow unit capacity to address racism and inequity in their work. Students and external DEIA practitioners can be surveyed to gather their perspectives on the equity capacities among the team.

Support, Empower, and Compensate BIPOC Staff for Their Diversity Expertise and Work

Career units should prioritize the support, empowerment, and compensation of BIPOC staff for their diversity expertise and work. BIPOC staff in the study spoke about their explorations into equity knowledge and tools beyond the university. Each cited thinkers and materials which fueled and informed their equity practice within the unit. BIPOC staff also spoke about drawing on their lived experiences of intersectional oppression and discrimination. These BIPOC equity leaders were described as champions for equity who were known across the campus. Moreover, other staff praised these staff members for taking on challenging equity projects, interrupting instances of bias and discrimination in the unit, and raising collective standards for equity. It would be wise for career education unit leaders to formally recognize the equity and racial equity expertise that BIPOC staff bring and demonstrate, and to compensate

any equity work beyond their job scope appropriately. White staff who engage in equity work should also be compensated appropriately.

Career unit leaders should consider creating an HR role structure which allows for budgeting for extra staff and student employee compensation for short-term equity projects, in addition to normal role responsibilities. Each of the BIPOC staff members in the unit voiced concerns about burning out, due to their heightened awareness of inequity, lack of promotion and support, additional equity work they were asked or volunteered to take on, and collaborative equity work outside of the unit. This emotional and administrative labor should not disproportionately impact BIPOC staff, lest it drive retention issues for those staff groups. If staff of any identity wish to take on equity projects, these should be built into their position description on a short- or long-term basis as needed. It should be noted that not all BIPOC staff wish to be responsible for equity progress in the unit and their agency should be supported.

Reduce Bias in Hiring and Promotion

Bias in hiring and promotion emerged as an equity issue, in spite of the unit's nominal focus on equity work. Some of this bias was described as unconscious – staff noted that administrators may not be aware of their biases. Career unit leaders, and their divisional supervisors, should invest in racial equity training to reduce bias in hiring and promotion. Implicit bias and societal narratives about gender, race, cultures, and other characteristics threaten to perpetuate inequities within organizations on the basis of identity. In LPU's unit, leaders were disproportionately White men, educators were disproportionately White women, and operations, events, and front desk staff were disproportionately Black and brown women. These trends reflect societal narratives about the strengths and roles of different demographic groups, as well as historically oppressive patterns. These patterns will likely continue to play out

without specific intervention. One staff member's suggestion that conversations about White supremacy and race are not encouraged or tolerated in the unit may contribute to the lack of awareness of racial narratives, beliefs, and biases.

All staff should contribute their suggestions to support inclusive hiring, due to the diversity of identities that may face implicit bias in hiring and promotion. Along those lines, equity experience and strengths held by candidates should be considered in hiring as relevant and critical capacities, along with education and years of experience in career education. Knowledge of equity issues is equally, if not more, rare and valuable than specific technical knowledge about resume building, interviewing, event planning, and networking. Technical knowledge can be more easily learned than many equity capacities, especially as they relate to racism.

Gather and Critically Examine Equity Data

Data sat at the center of the equity work in this case study. Administrators created a data-driven culture with explicit attention to outcomes and measurement. They also used data to tell the story of their work internally and to university leaders and made portions of it publicly available. Outside organizations praised their use of data, and their demonstrated closing of some equity gaps for FLI students. This use of data – a non-human actor in ANT - supported their equity mission in several important ways.

Unit leaders have additional opportunities to more critically examine their data. An outside DEIA leader at the university expressed interest in helping the unit to examine data with a sharper equity lens, to reevaluate their conclusions about the insignificant impacts of racial identity, and to explore intersectional barriers for students. Career leaders are encouraged to use data to support their work. They should also consider their own biases in interpreting data, and draw on equity leaders outside their own department. The interpretation of data is not a black and

white science, and there is much room for interpretation and nuance. Significance of identity factors in career may not be straightforward. A diverse team with significant equity knowledge, and a strong understanding of statistical analysis, should be formed to interpret equity data. Response rates, identity representation, random sampling, and margin for error should all be considered.

Identify the Influences of Color-Blind Ideologies, Abstract Liberalism, Individualism, and Capitalism in Career Philosophies

Due to racial capitalism (Edwards, 2021), and the structural history of racism around the world, color-blind ideologies, principles of individualism, and capitalist assumptions are likely embedded in career education units. Career leaders should create structured space to examine these influences, especially as they manifest in policies, programs, and services. All career leaders should pursue a foundational understanding of each of these concepts, as well as the history of race and work around the world. They and their staff teams should cultivate shared language to question these ideologies and to rework policies that replicate inequities. Redefining success, exploring the role of community, recognizing systemic racism along with the impacts of socio-economic class, exploring gender impacts, and other intersectional identities, and identifying Eurocentric values should all be part of equitable career education practice. The formation of a diverse and interdisciplinary team to raise these issues may also better serve the work of the unit.

Structure, Fund, and Facilitate Conversations About Race and Antiracism

Conversations about race and antiracism emerged as a neglected, and sometimes suppressed, aspect of the career education practice in this case. Black students requested these conversations, and staff expressed concern that these conversations would not be supported.

Career leaders have the opportunity to bring in trained coaches to conduct these conversations with staff and students. These coaches should be adequately informed about the team, the work, and its history, and compensated through short-term contracts. Division leaders should support drawing on outside coaching in order to strengthen racial awareness within career units. Black women may have the strongest intersectional awareness of racism, sexism, and antiblackness – due to their position in historical racial hierarchies (Bryce, 1902) - and may therefore be best equipped to do this coaching, if they are willing. Racially-informed coaches can also be drawn upon to facilitate student conversations about race and experiences of discrimination in internships and jobs.

As my findings indicated, language matters when it comes to equity. All career educators should have a working knowledge of equity terms such as racial capitalism, western individualism, systemic racism, power-evasion, white supremacy, antiblackness and other relevant language to identify and address racism. Training is useful in order to identify systemic racism. Neville et al. (2013) indicated that systemic racism is among the least understood forms of racism, and yet it has powerful impacts. Systemic racism within the university and within companies which partner with the unit should be discussed.

This case study raised the need for those conversations, especially for Black staff and students. Due to the nature of antiblackness, spaces to discuss this particular form of racism should be created. Facilitators should acknowledge the role of intersectionality, while also describing the specific forms of anti-Black rhetoric and practice. This may reduce issues of trust with Black students and staff, and address issues of power-evasion. Black students and graduates equipped with an understanding of systemic racism and antiblackness may be more resistant to internalized oppression and better prepared to manage racism at work (Yi et al., 2022).

Clearly Articulate Equity Values, and Definitions, and Goals

McNair et al. (2020) described the importance of clearly articulating equity goals, and defining values and terms. This clarity is critical to the success of racial equity efforts. Ambiguous language can create room for performative efforts at equity. ANT suggests that ambiguous language and vague goals serve to unite individual actors who may not have shared equity priorities (Hunter & Swan, 2007). Yet these elements may also inhibit the success of equity work. In this case study, administrators articulated equity goals and values, moving beyond performative efforts, but did not explore internal tensions and inconsistencies in these definitions. There is an opportunity to assess individual commitment to aspects of their equity work, and to surface and reconcile dissent. This would allow for a clearer articulation of the “why” behind equity work, and create room for BIPOC staff to contribute to the formation of values and goals in more supported ways. One tension that might be addressed in the clarification of language and goals is the concern among some staff about duplicating the work of equity and identity offices on campus. Leaders should consider, discuss, and answer the following questions with their staff teams:

- Why does identity matter in career education? Why does race matter?
- What are the impacts of racism on the careers of BIPOC students, and Black students specifically?
- What might be the consequences of conducting career development without attention to equity and racial equity?
- How has the history of colonialism impacted modern work around the world?
- How is racism different from ableism, sexism, and other forms of inequality?
- How is race different from personal characteristics such as interests and personality?

- What are color- and power-evasion and how do they differ?
- Why may a “culture of nice” approach be insufficient to address equity?
- Why might some Black and BIPOC students prefer to work with career educators who share their identities?
- Why might students have different definitions of success?

Addressing these questions will support transparency and cohesion in career education teams, especially as they undertake equity work. It will also create room for staff to share lived experiences, if they choose to, and encourage staff to explore important aspects of their motivations for the work. I recommend that leaders bring in trained facilitators to conduct these conversations, ideally facilitators with an understanding of career education and lived experience of intersectional oppression.

As a final note on recommendations, it is important that career leaders keep in mind the institutional structures they operate within. Inequitable policies and practices – especially around race – have deep histories within national and state governments, funding sources, departments of education, colleges and universities, and employer organizations. Structural change should be undertaken with careful planning and with attention to individual and structural resistance to equity, which sometimes targets the least empowered groups in an organization. The better prepared career leaders and staff teams are to use equity language and skills, the more effectively they can address resistance to equity efforts within and outside their organization as it emerges.

This case study provides a clear example of a career center with numerous strengths, resources, advantages, and equity efforts in place. Yet, even in this case, racial equity has been neglected, and conversations about race in the unit have been ignored. The findings of this case demonstrate how addressing racism and the impacts of colonialism can be minimized and

avoided with minimal consequences for the organization and its leaders. This can be so, even as many staff members and students within the organization harbor clear understandings of the limitations of the culture, the team, and its leaders. It was my goal to illuminate these and other contradictions through the use of ANT and CBRI as theoretical frameworks. My hope is that demystifying the ways that equity can be publicly undertaken while sidestepping racism, will highlight the inadequacy of this performative approach, and encourage more direct attention to a deep and pervasive form of inequity in career education.

Limitations

This case study fills a gap in the literature on beliefs and assumptions about racial equity among career practitioners in higher education. It continues the work of Arthur et al. (2009), Carter et al. (2003), Fickling (2016), Fickling et al. (2018), and McMahon et al. (2008), with a specific focus on racial equity and the inclusion of BIPOC participants. Using CBRI and ANT, I examined the ways in which human and non-human actors shape beliefs, assumptions, and practices of racial equity in career spaces, as well as the ways racial ideologies inform these beliefs, assumptions, and practices. A stronger awareness of this topic promises to strengthen future equity work in career units.

One limitation of this study lies in the selection of a single, well-funded career office, at a prestigious, Predominantly White institution. The career unit I studied had significant university support and investment, and was led by a well-known figure in the field. Many of the career leaders I spoke with at other centers reported much less support from their administrations. Fickling et al. (2018) wrote about the impacts of funding and time on equity work, and this was no doubt a relevant structural factor in my case study. It is important to remember that my study was designed to be qualitative and exploratory, and to surface beliefs and assumptions about the

topic and the environment. This was not intended to be a representative sample of all institution types. My conclusions are specific to this case study, though I believe that some dynamics in this unit are present in other career units. I hope that research in this area will continue, and that my study will represent an early foray into the topic of racial equity in career education spaces.

Conclusion

As I review the themes which emerged in this study, I am reminded of the need for clear intention and principles of equity for any career practitioners undertaking equity work – something like Sultana’s (2014) bigger theory of justice. This need for a clear vision and specific principles is critical for racial equity work, due to the complicated and contradictory nature of race, racism, antiblackness, color-blind ideologies, and the long history of social and structural inequity around the world (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Bryce, 1902; McNair et al., 2020; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022). Piecemeal actions will not suffice. The scale of the problem of racial inequity requires skillful and intentional reforms, grounded in critically-examined research and a shared commitment to equitable outcomes.

Beliefs and assumptions are tricky and dynamic - as CBRI (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Neville et al., 2013; Yi et al., 2022) and ANT suggest (Hunter & Swan, 2007; Landri, 2020; Latour, 1987). Institutional pressure to work efficiently and maintain the status quo is strong, as is the incentive to “play nicely in the sandbox” (Chris) with inequitable systems. Thus, I hope this work will illuminate a few useful paths through a challenging landscape, and highlight lessons learned by one institution’s team as they bravely navigated their own terrain. I encourage anyone undertaking racial equity work in career services to first gather tools, skills, and knowledge about the nature of the journey, and to prepare a set of clear principles, a shared lexicon, and a vision of what true success should look like at the end.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form and Demographics Form

Consent Form

Title of Research Study: Exploring Beliefs and Assumptions About Racial Equity in a Career Services Office [IRB STUDY 00019010]

Investigator Team Contact Information:

For questions about research appointments, the research study, research results, or other concerns, call the study team at:

Investigator Name: Michael Stebleton, PhD Investigator Departmental Affiliation:
Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development

College of Education & Human Development University of Minnesota Twin Cities

Phone Number: 612-625-2110

Email Address: steb0004@umn.edu

Student Investigator Name: Melanie Buford Phone Number: 513-315-1854

Email Address: bufor011@umn.edu

Key Information About This Research Study

The following is a short summary to help you decide whether or not to be a part of this research study.

More detailed information is listed later on in this form.

What is research?

The goal of research is to learn new things in order to help people in the future. Investigators learn things by following the same plan with a number of participants, so they do not usually make changes to the plan for individual research participants. You, as an individual, may or may not be helped by volunteering for a research study.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to take part in this research study because you are affiliated with the career center at your university.

What should I know about a research study?

- Someone will explain this research study to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide. Page 1 of 5

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore beliefs and assumptions about racial equity that shape the practice of career development in college and university career centers. This topic has received relatively little attention in formal research, and can help career centers to create more inclusive programming.

How long will the research last?

We expect that staff and students taking part in this research will be in 1-2 interviews of no more than 90 minutes each between May 2023 and October 2023.

What will I need to do to participate?

You will be asked to participate and engage in the interview with study investigators answering questions about your experiences with career services and your understanding of how equity is practiced in career centers.

More detailed information about the study procedures can be found under “What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?”

Is there any way that being in this study could be bad for me?

This is a minimal risk study with no foreseen risks to participation.

More detailed information about the risks of this study can be found under *“What are the risks of this study?”*

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)”

Will being in this study help me in any way?

There are no benefits to you or others from your taking part in this research, other than the opportunity to reflect on your experiences.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

There are no known alternatives, other than deciding not to participate in this research study.

Detailed Information About This Research Study

The following is more detailed information about this study in addition to the information listed above.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about 10-20 people will be interviewed during this study. All participants must be 18 years old or older to participate.

What happens if I say “*Yes, I want to be in this research*”?

If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to attend one-two 60-90 minute interviews taking place between May 2023 and October 2023. During the interviews you will be asked several open-ended questions related to your experiences with the career services office.

These interviews will be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. If you choose to participate there will not be an option to refuse the recording as it is the only way to capture

participant data. Data will be analyzed anonymously and staff and student names will not be included in the results of the study. The name of the university will not be included in the results of the study.

Please keep in mind that everything you agree to do in this study is voluntary, and you can decide to stop or refuse to participate at any time.

What happens if I say: “Yes”, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research study at any time and no one will be upset by your decision and nothing will be held against you. If you decide to leave the study, we ask that you contact Michael Stebleton, the Study Coordinator, at 612-625-2110 or steb0004@umn.edu.

Choosing not to be in this study or to stop being in this study will not result in any penalty to you or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. This means that your choice not to be in this study will not negatively affect your relationship with the University of Minnesota in any way and will not negatively affect your academic standing (for students) or your present or future employment (for staff) in any way.

If you choose to leave the study, we will not ask you for any new information but we will keep and use any information you’ve provided up to the point of your decision to withdraw from the study.

What are the risks of being in this study? Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? (Detailed Risks)

Privacy and confidentiality risks: There is some risk of a data breach involving the information we have about you. We comply with the University's security standards to secure your information and minimize risks, but there is always a possibility of a data breach.

There may also be some things that make you uncomfortable. Keep in mind that you can refuse any part of the study that makes you uncomfortable. Some things that might make you uncomfortable during this study include questions that may trigger a personal or particular reaction.

Will it cost me anything to participate in this research study?

There will be no cost to you for any of the study activities.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete confidentiality.

Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the committee that provides ethical and regulatory oversight of research, and other representatives of this institution, including those that have responsibilities for monitoring or ensuring compliance.

Data or Information Collected

If you choose to participate, we will keep your information confidential as provided by law. The following describes the type of information the study will create, use or share, who may use it or share it, and the purposes for which it may be used or shared.

This information may include research records, such as surveys or interviews.

This information may be used by or shared with:

- Researchers and their staff taking part in this study here and at other universities
- Review boards and others responsible for watching the conduct of research (such as monitors)

This information may be used or shared to:

- Complete and publish the results of the study described in this form
- Study the results of this research,
- Check if this study was done correctly
- Comply with non-research obligations (if we think you or someone else could be harmed).

If identifiers are removed from your identifiable private information or identifiable data that are collected during this research, that information or those data could be used for future research studies or distributed to another investigator for future research studies without your additional informed consent.

Your permission for the use or sharing of your information will not expire, but you may cancel it at any time. You can do this by notifying the Study Coordinator, Michael Stebleton, in writing. If

you cancel your permission, no new information will be collected about you, but information that has already been collected may still be used and shared with others.

If the results of the study are published, information that identifies you would not be used.

Your permission is documented by your signature at the end of this form. If you decide that we cannot use or share your information, you will not be able to participate in this study.

Will anyone besides the study team be at my consent meeting?

You may be asked by the study team for your permission for an auditor to observe your consent meeting. Observing the consent meeting is one way that the University of Minnesota makes sure that your rights as a research participant are protected. The auditor is there to observe the consent meeting, which will be carried out by the people on the study team. The auditor will not document any personal (e.g., name, date of birth) or confidential information about you. The auditor will not observe your consent meeting without your permission ahead of time.

Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns, or feedback about my experience?

To reach the research team: Please see the “Investigator Contact Information” section at the beginning of this form. To reach someone outside of the research team: call 612-624-1006 (department’s main line). This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB within the Human Research Protections Program (HRPP). To share feedback privately with the HRPP about your research experience, call the Research Participants’ Advocate Line at 612-625-1650 (Toll Free: 1-888-224-8636) or go to z.umn.edu/participants. You are encouraged to contact the HRPP if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You are having difficulty reaching the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- You want to get information or provide feedback about this research.

Will I have a chance to provide feedback after the study is over?

The HRPP may ask you to complete a survey that asks about your experience as a research participant. You do not have to complete the survey if you do not want to. If you do choose to complete the survey, your responses will be anonymous.

If you are not asked to complete a survey, but you would like to share feedback, please contact the study team or the HRPP. See the “Investigator Contact Information” of this form for study team contact information and “Whom do I contact if I have questions, concerns or feedback about my experience?” of this form for HRPP contact information.

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research. You will be provided a copy of this signed document.

Your signature below also confirms that you are 18 years old or older and therefore eligible to participate in the study.

_____ Signature of Participant

Date

_____ Printed Name of Participant

_____ Signature of Person
Obtaining Consent Date

_____ Printed Name of Person Obtaining
Consent

Version Date: April 24, 2023

TEMPLATE VERSION DATE: 03/28/2023

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Read each bolded question and place fill in the information you wish to share and/or place an “X” by the item that best describes you.

Name: _____

Pronouns:

___ She/Her/Hers

___ He/Him/His

___ They/Them/Theirs

Other: _____

Please provide a preferred pseudonym: _____

STAFF, PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECTION BELOW:

Job title/Position: _____

How many years have you worked in your current position? _____

How many years have you worked in higher education? _____

STUDENTS, PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECTION BELOW:

How long have you known about the imagine career center? _____

Approximately when was your first visit to the center? _____

Are you currently employed by the center?

___ **Yes**

___ **No**

What type of degree are you currently working on? (BA, BS, MA, PhD etc.) _____

STAFF AND STUDENTS, PLEASE COMPLETE THE SECTION BELOW:

Age: _____

Race/ Ethnicity (check all that apply how YOU chose self-identity) :

___ American Indian or Alaskan Native

___ Asian

___ Black or African American

___ Latine

___ Chicanx

___ Hispanic

___ Middle Eastern/North African (MENA)

___ Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

___ White

____ Multiracial (please list): _____

If the choices above do not represent or fully represent your racial/ethnic identity please fill in your own descriptor:

Current Gender Identity:

____ Woman

____ Man

____ Transgender Woman/ Trans Feminine

____ Transgender Man/ Trans Masculine

____ Non-Binary/ Genderqueer/ Gender Fluid

____ Two Spirit

Prefer to self describe: _____

____ Prefer not to say

If you are currently pursuing a degree, list the type (MA, BA, certificate, etc.) and concentration here:

Often there are other identities we hold that influence our experiences (such as ethnicity, LGBTQ+, social class, religion/faith/spirituality, etc.).

Is/are there other identit(ies) you wish to tell us about?

Appendix B: Interview Question Protocol

Guiding Research Question:

- 1) What beliefs and assumptions about racial equity shape the practice of career development in a university career center?
 - a) How do career services professionals define equity and racial equity?
 - b) What stories, narratives, assumptions, and experiences inform career services professionals' beliefs about contemporary careers?
 - c) What contextual factors support action toward racial equity in a career services unit?

Interview Questions:

Career Center Staff Interview Questions

- Please introduce yourself and if you are comfortable, share how you personally identify? You may share as little or as much about your identities as you would like to.
- What's it like to work here?
- Have there been moments in your work here that felt particularly rewarding for you? If so, would you share the story of one of these moments?

Stories

- Would you describe the origins of this career center? Is there a story your team shares about how the center was created or has evolved?
- Can you tell me about a time when you worked with a student at the center? What was that like?
- Imagine you are meeting with a student, and they ask you "What does a career trajectory typically look like in 2023?" How would you describe the typical story of a career?

- Would you give me an example of the kind of advice you give students when you meet with them?
- Do you draw on lessons from your own career experiences as you advise students? Would you give an example of a time you did this?
- Do you share stories about other students and graduates you've known as you advise students? Would you share a recent example of when this happened?

Action and Supports for Equity

- Do issues of racial equity show up in the work you do? If so, would you give an example of when this might happen?
- Has your office taken action to measure racial inequity in your work? If so, would you share an example?
- Do you believe that your institution supports action on racial equity? If so, would you share an example of what this looks like?
- What strategies would you recommend for advancing racial equity in career services?
- Do you have any more comments you would like to make regarding any of the topics we have discussed?

Follow-up if Needed on Definitions

- When I say the term racial equity, what comes to mind for you?

Career Center Student Interview Questions

- Please introduce yourself and if you are comfortable, share how you personally identify? You may share as little or as much about your identities as you would like to.

Visiting the Center

- What's it like to visit this center?

- Would you describe when you first found out about the career center?
- Would you say you spend a lot of time at the center?
- Do you think all students benefit from visiting the career center? Why or why not?
- Do you think some students benefit more than others?

Stories and Practices

- Would you describe the most important lesson you've learned about your career so far?
- What tools, activities, or services have felt most useful to you? Would you tell a story about your experience with one of those?
- What tools, activities, or services have felt least useful to you? Would you tell a story about your experience with one of those?
- Do you have any more comments you would like to make regarding any of the topics we have discussed?

Appendix C: Document Review and Observation Templates

Document Review Template

Name of Document:
Description of Document:
Purpose of Document:
Who Uses This Document:
Summary of Contents:
Notes:

Observation Template

Event:
Location (In-Person or Virtual):
Date/Time:
General Notes:
Analysis Notes:
Reflexivity Notes: