Historically Underrepresented: Examining How DEI Policy and Practice Construct Representation in Higher Education

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Dedication

For my husband,
Alexander, *ne plus ultra*

and daughter,
Stella, *ad astra*

Abstract

This study examines the question *"What does diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mean?"* by investigating the origins, operations, and effects of DEI within higher education. Although DEI is now a ubiquitous term, its meaning is far from shared; stakeholders draw on divergent assumptions shaped by history, experience, and institutional context. Proponents and critics alike engage with DEI from multiple ideological positions, revealing the concept's inherent multiplicity and the contested terrain on which it operates. Using a constructivist approach, this project analyzes how DEI has been constructed over time, how it is enacted in practice, and how the groups at the center of DEI are formed and mobilized. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 DEI practitioners, the study explores how frontline workers navigate, interpret, and negotiate DEI within the neoliberal landscape of higher education.

The findings show that the contemporary ambiguity of DEI is inseparable from its historical construction. DEI, emerging from decades of advocacy, protest, litigation, and policy shifts, reflects an agonistic process in which diverse actors have struggled over its meaning and purpose. These contestations have shaped the vulnerabilities that DEI now faces in the current political climate. The study also demonstrates that DEI practitioners draw on multiple meanings of DEI in their day-to-day work. While this ambiguity allows them to continue their efforts—even within hostile or under-resourced environments—it also constrains more transformative racial equity approaches and contributes to ambivalence, emotional strain, and burnout.

Finally, the project reconceptualizes representation as mobilization, showing how DEI practitioners, especially those who are BIPOC, are often isolated, made responsible, and tasked with invisible labor under neoliberal institutional logics. Limited resources, symbolic expectations, and the framing of practitioners as rational individual actors reinforce tokenism and hinder collective capacity for meaningful change.

The study concludes by offering four recommendations: cultivating dialogic spaces for collective meaning making; recognizing and compensating DEI labor; shifting evaluation practices beyond compliance metrics toward reflexivity; and embracing uncertainty by treating DEI not as a fixed goal, but as an ongoing institutional inquiry.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a longstanding project in education, though it has not always been known by that name. One aspect that makes DEI an interesting phenomenon is its multiplicity of meaning. While it is a term that most of us have encountered in some capacity, it is unlikely that we all pull on the same heuristic levers when we conjure DEI in our minds. For a concept that is so ubiquitous, it lacks shared and collective meaning.

From the start, DEI has had proponents and opponents. Within each camp, folks either embrace DEI or take issue with it for different reasons. Amongst proponents of DEI, some support DEI as an imperfect form that somewhat continues the legacy of its predecessors like affirmative action or racial integration, while others simply appreciate the wide appeal of difference. Those opposed to DEI also vary in their reasons, some condemn DEI for not doing enough for the larger project of racial and social justice, while others think DEI gives an unfair advantage to a particular group of people.

Empirical research shows that terms like affirmative action, welfare, taxes, or education, tend to exist in the public discourse without direct connection to particular policies. Rather, people tend to develop strong opinions about a term, often having different policies and practices in mind when doing so. Through research on public opinion and affirmative action for example, Reyna et al. (2005) found that those who support and those who oppose affirmative action are in fact supporting and opposing very different policies and programs. I suspect a similar mechanism is at play regarding DEI. DEI policy and practice vary widely. As the discourse that eventually became DEI

evolved, so did practice and implementation. The ambiguity surrounding DEI, what it means, what it does, and what groups it is intended to serve, have contributed to characterizations of DEI that are at least partially independent from actual DEI policy and practice. This has made DEI a lightning rod for political contestation and primed the public to have strong opinions without necessarily sharing a concrete understanding of DEI or pulling on the same heuristic levers. This is perhaps most evident in the recent legislative attacks on DEI.

While DEI has been contested for as long as it has been around, one would be remiss to characterize the current anti-DEI legislation as par for the course. Since 2023 the country has seen an increase in legislation that is considered anti-DEI. But how can we be against something we don't fully agree on what it is in the first place? Conservative leaders have harnessed the ambiguity of DEI to move forward their own narratives of what DEI is and does and for whom. Legislation has been passed across states that prohibits diversity statements in hiring and admissions, defunds and dismantles DEI offices and programs, and limits certain topics from being taught as part of higher education curriculum. What these laws prohibit, if anything, show how multifaceted the meaning of DEI really is and how it takes various forms in practice.

It is with this in mind that this project explores the broad question: what does DEI mean? This project sets out to answer this question from three vantage points: origins, operations, and effects. In other words, this study focuses on (1) how DEI has been constructed over time (2) how DEI is constructed through practice, and (3) how groups at the center of DEI are constructed.

Research Purpose and Approach

The purpose of this study is three-fold. First, this study sets out to contribute to the understanding of DEI in higher education. In the present highly divided political climate, DEI has been depicted in ways that are simplistic, overgeneralized, and crude. This study aims to explore the construction of DEI with more nuance. It seeks to understand some of the subtlety, fine distinction, and at times delicate variation in meaning and expression of the concept of DEI, and the practice of DEI. Second, this study puts practitioners center stage. By interviewing practitioners and learning about their strategies for implementing DEI policies and practices, we can have an applied understanding of what DEI is and how ambiguity surrounding DEI is mobilized and operationalized. Practitioners are the "boots on the ground" of DEI policy, their knowledge, interpretation of challenges, opportunities for growth, as well as wins provide a grounded and rich depiction of DEI. By centering practitioners, this study aims to further expand the collaboration across research and practice in the field of public policy and provide insights that could be meaningful for practitioners, administrators, and their work. Third, this study takes on the concept of representation and stretches it. Representation is a widely used concept in DEI discourse. Often, representation is talked about as an output of DEI—a goal, or an item of measurement for evaluation. Instead, this study explores representation as a process, allowing for insights that are important for not only the way we think about representation within the DEI space, but the way we carry out and implement DEI policy. By applying a representation as mobilization (Disch, 2021) approach to DEI, we can explore groups as policy effects rather than

initiators of policy and begin to move past descriptive representation and towards a reimagining of representation as a process of making groups.

This project takes a constructivist approach to research by focusing on meaning, and the process of making meaning. A constructivist approach posits that knowledge is constructed by people rather than something to be discovered as an objective truth. It centers people and their experiences, as people create meaning through their interactions with the world. Therefore, the aim of this research is to learn from people, particularly people who practice DEI in higher education, and how they make meaning through their interactions as they do their work. Furthermore, a constructivist approach hinges on the belief that meaning is shaped by cultural, social, and historical context. Therefore, understanding a phenomenon like DEI requires looking closely at the context in which it occurs. This constructivist approach is grounded in interpretivist epistemology. The interpretivist epistemological stance asserts that knowledge about the social world is based on understanding people's meanings, experiences, and interpretations, not just on measuring observable facts. Together, this constructivist-interpretivist approach serves as a lens through which DEI can be explored from three distinct perspectives: origins, operations, and effects of DEI.

Research Questions

Question 1: How has DEI been constructed over time?

This question asks how DEI came to be what it is today through an agonistic (Goodman et al., 2017) lens that highlights political struggle and discursive competition. It examines the meaning of DEI from a historical perspective with a focus on DEI as a human and political activity. Here DEI is understood not only as a social construction,

but as a reconstruction of its predecessors over time. This question centers a relational understanding of present-day DEI and allows for an exploration of DEI as the present-day iteration of previous discourse and practice. This is a question of *origin*, that considers how DEI as we know it today is a result of struggle.

Question 2: What does DEI mean to practitioners and how do their interpretations reflect their work conditions and guide their practices at the frontlines of DEI implementation?

This question is focused on how DEI *operates* by looking at the way that practitioners implement DEI policy and how they practice DEI. It explores DEI as something that is made through the process of implementation and whose meaning is constructed by putting concepts and policies into practice. Through the lens of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980), this question analyzes practitioner discretion and institutional structure as a dynamic for meaning making. It considers how DEI works and what that says about the environment of higher education more broadly.

Question 3: In the DEI context, how do university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses? How do acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in social and political relations more broadly?

This is a question that asks what DEI has produced. It engages with the related concept of representation not as a goal of DEI, but as a process of DEI. Specifically, it asks how groups at the center of DEI are constructed. This question is focused on better understanding the meaning of DEI by understanding the *effects* of DEI.

Project Contributions

One important characteristic of this work is that the interviews with practitioners were conducted in late 2022 to mid-2023. The political landscape was beginning to show the first signs of change. However, this was still prior to the Trump administration's second term and the legislative and executive action that has been taken against DEI. This contributes to the significance of this work as it shows that contemporary challenges to DEI exist well beyond the punitive legislative actions most recently taken against DEI.

This research contributes to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of DEI in education by centering practitioner's voices. It illuminates the practitioners' experience navigating the complexities of not just DEI as a construct, but of doing DEI work in the larger structure of American higher education. This research contributes to scholarship by expanding the conversation of DEI beyond outcomes and focusing on processes, by looking at implementation as a form of meaning making through practitioner's discretionary acts within a rigid structure, and by turning over the concept of representation and exploring it from a new perspective. Practical impact of this research rests on the insights that call for institutions to reimagine DEI work in ways that are more reflective, relational, and transformative. By asking the broad question of what DEI means, this study seeks to open space for new understandings, ones that move beyond one-dimensional definitions of DEI and representation focused on legal compliance toward equity as a lived and shared experience.

Regarding contributions to the field of public policy, this study contributes to the richness of methodological approaches to the field by expanding the work done in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. It also contributes to the study of DEI in

organizational contexts. To our sister field of public management, this study has the potential to be in conversation about what representation means, and how it can operate in institutional environments.

Dissertation Chapters and Organization

What remains of the dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the methodology for this project as well as a detailed description of the research design. It engages with the philosophical underpinnings and assumptions of the constructivist-interpretivist approach before describing the research methods employed as part of the study. It closes with a brief discussion of positionality and reflexivity as well as ethical considerations and potential limitations.

Each substantive chapter is organized to engage with the broader question of the meaning of DEI from its distinct vantage point. Chapter 3 looks at the way that DEI has been socially constructed over time. The chapter highlights four time periods and how each of those brought with it a new interpretation to what would eventually become DEI as we know it today. Four moments in history are used as cases for observation of the emergence of new discourse: Brown v. Board of Education, the civil rights movement, Bakke v. Regents of California, and present day. It explores the implications of struggle over meaning making and the power of discourse in framing and institutionalizing (or deinstitutionalizing) DEI. The chapter applies an agonistic approach for demonstrating how discourse changes, and the role of struggle and contestation in meaning-making. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to provide a constitutive explanation of how present-day DEI came to be.

Chapter 4 engages with the in-depth interview data very closely to provide a picture of what DEI looks like in practice. The chapter centers the lived experience of DEI practitioners and frames them as frontline workers. The frame of street-level bureaucrats allows us to see how practitioners operate with both personal discretion and structural limitations. An exploration of their construction of DEI through practice— how they understand it and what it means for them to do the work— provides important insights for the complexities of doing DEI work at the frontlines. The chapter portrays a rich narrative that contextualizes the tensions at the center of DEI implementation and the ways in which DEI is constructed through practice.

Chapter 5 explores the concept of representation in the context of DEI. It interrogates the way that representation has been studied in the DEI context in higher education in the past and posits what it would look like to reconceptualize representation as mobilization as a tool for exploring the way that groups are constructed. In what is likely the most ambitious chapter in the project, Chapter 5 asks how university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses and how acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in relation to each other. This chapter borrows from Lisa Disch's (2021) concept of representation as mobilization and uses it as an analytical tool for exploring the ways in which groups at the center of DEI are constructed. This chapter asks the reader to think past present notions of representation as an *outcome* and instead engage with representation as a *process*.

Chapter 6 concludes the project. Chapter 6 provides an opportunity to debrief on the project by revisiting important insights and tackling broad questions of implications

for practice, contributions to scholarship, and future directions for research. The chapter closes out the project on a hopeful note, highlighting that struggle means resistance, and through struggle we can continue to participate in the greater project of social justice.

Chapter 2
Methodology and Research Design

At the center of this project is the construction and contestation of the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, in American higher education. Ultimately, this project seeks to understand the origins, operations, and effects of DEI. To address these aspects of DEI, three distinct questions are pursued in their respective empirical chapters. In their simplest form, the three questions ask (1) how has DEI been constructed over time? (2) how is DEI constructed through implementation? and (3) how are groups at the center of DEI constructed?

To pursue this research agenda, a constructivist approach guides the research design and chosen research method. What follows is a brief discussion of methodology, the underlying assumptions of a constructivist and interpretivist approach that shape the subsequent research design and choice of method. This is followed by a detailed description of research design and the method employed to address the research questions mentioned above. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the importance of reflexivity, researcher positionality, and some research limitations.

Methodology

The research questions, stated above, focus on the ways in which meaning is made, how groups are constructed, and, ultimately, what realities are perceived by DEI practitioners within the context of higher education. The study is situated within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is multiple, subjective, and co-constructed through human interaction. Unlike positivist approaches

that seek objective truths, this paradigm emphasizes understanding the meanings that individuals ascribe to their experiences within specific social contexts. The constructivist orientation asserts that knowledge emerges through interaction between the researcher and participants, while the interpretivist perspective focuses on interpreting the significance of participants' perspectives. This combined approach is particularly appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of DEI practitioners as they do their work and interpret and implement DEI policy. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how individuals construct meaning in their social environments. As Yanow (2015) reminds us, "We are meaning-making creatures. Our institutions, our policies, our language, our ceremonies are human creations, not objects independent of us. And so, a human (or social) science needs to be able to address what is meaningful to people in the social situation under study. It is this focus on meaning, and the implications of that focus, that the various interpretive methods share" (p. 9). In other words, the constructivist-interpretivist approach is a good fit for understanding what is meaningful for DEI practitioners and how they make meaning as they put policy into practice.

Ontologically Constructivist, Epistemologically Interpretivist

This project takes on a constructivist approach to ontology and an interpretive view of epistemology. A constructivist ontology holds that reality is not objective or fixed, but socially constructed through human interaction, interpretation, and meaning making. In other words, reality does not exist independently of people, to be discovered "out there." Rather, reality is created, maintained, and changed through people's shared understandings and experiences. Epistemologically, this study adopts an interpretivist

stance, holding that knowledge is socially constructed and can only be understood through the interpretation of participants' meanings. The researcher is therefore not a neutral observer but an active participant in co-constructing knowledge, with reflexivity playing a critical role in the research process. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) highlight, "...a constructivist-interpretive methodology… rests on the belief in the existence of (potentially) multiple, intersubjectively constructed 'truths' about social, political, cultural, and other human events; and on the belief that these understandings can only be accessed, or co-generated, through interactions between researcher and researched as they seek to interpret those events and make those interpretations legible to each other" (p. 4).

The research questions call for an interpretivist approach. Under an interpretivist research design, methods are adaptive, allowing the researcher to follow emerging themes and remain flexible and responsive to new developments as the research project progresses. It also allows for an iterative process, meaning data generation and analysis can evolve as understanding deepens. Furthermore, an interpretivist approach centers the participants and their experiences, knowledge, and understanding. It treats participants as co-creators of knowledge and experts of their own lived experiences. Finally, an interpretive approach is ideal for studying complex topics like DEI in higher education where complicated and nuanced concepts like identity, personal beliefs, culture, power, emotions, and relationships, are intertwined in meaningful ways.

DEI as Experience-Distant and Experience-Near

An important goal of this research project is to gain knowledge about what is meaningful to those often implementing— directly or indirectly—the policies of DEI in

their daily routines at their place of work. However, one of the challenges of this is the way that DEI, or inclusion, equity, diversity in any other formation or order, and adjacent concepts like justice, affirmative action, and representation, as a concept lies in a form of a "no-man's land" when it comes to the way that it is used and understood academically and in practice. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) refer to Geertz (1983) when describing the difference between experience-distant and experience-near concepts. The former refers to concepts that are used in scholarly spaces, but not necessarily common in the worlds studied often by social scientists, and the latter refers to concepts used by participants within their own spaces and contexts (p. 49). DEI is interestingly situated somewhere between the two, in the overlapping area of a Venn diagram of experience-distant and experience-near, where it is a concept used widely amongst scholars but also by practitioners—though not always, and not necessarily in the same way. Therefore, in the tradition of interpretive research, one of the broad aims of this project is to center the participants and their local knowledge that includes "...concepts and their situated definitions that have grown out of their own daily practices and interactions, reflecting their own lived experiences of the setting, events in it, interactions and so forth…" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 50).

Research Design

A (Good) Qualitative Study

What constitutes qualitative research is often disputed. "Qualitative" has been used to describe the type of data gathered, the chosen method of data collection, or the approach to data analysis (Small & McCrory Calarco, 2022). In this way, using qualitative as a qualifier of what research is being done is not always helpful. Therefore,

this project aims not to be a qualitative project, but a *good* qualitative project, where "…good qualitative research is characterized by congruence between the perspective (or paradigm) that informs the research questions and the research methods used" (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 731). In this pursuit, this constructivist-interpretivist project incorporates semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are a method that suit the questions posed in this project, as they allow for three important components critical for this study: (1) the prioritization of skepticism of shared meaning, (2) the placing of interviewee's sensemaking to be at the forefront of empirical investigation, and (3) the treatment of interviewee's understanding as a prerequisite for adequate explanation (Soss, 2015). As mentioned earlier, DEI and related concepts are used in a way that often have an assumed shared meaning but actually are used and articulated to mean different things across scholars and amongst practitioners. Through semi-structured interviews, there is room for skepticism of this shared meaning and more importantly, an opportunity to learn from the practitioners themselves what DEI and related concepts like representation mean to them and influence how they do their work. The semi-structured nature of the interview allows for the participants' expertise to also shape the questions being addressed, further placing the interviewee at the center of the research project, making their understanding of DEI a prerequisite for a good explanation.

Furthermore, semi-structured, in-depth interviews cater to a more fluid engagement between the interviewer and the interviewee. As Soss (2015) writes:

> For an interpretive research project, then, in-depth interviewing offers a dynamic method—one that offers flexibility in the interview itself and shifting standpoints

> over time. It is centered on discursive and dialectical conversations with interviewees. But more broadly, it is an evolving dialogue between fieldwork and framework, mediated by concrete activities of transcription, memo writing, purposive reading of literatures and the like. It entails simultaneous data collection and analysis but remains incomplete without more systematic analysis after exiting the field. (p. 17)

As Soss mentions, one important aspect of the semi-structured interview is that it can evolve as new lessons are learned in the field. This flexibility in structure allows for learning to happen between earlier and later interviews and for questions to evolve and adapt to fit the interview dynamic, including the expertise of the interviewee. This characteristic of semi-structured interviews allows for a richer understanding to emerge as part of the interview process that includes other activities like writing memorandums, debriefing, and transcription.

Research Setting and Context

The Covid-19 pandemic impacted the timeline and the setting of this research project. This research underwent several changes as it adapted in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Initial interviews with key informants helped shape the interview guide. These initial interviews were part of a very early iteration of what would eventually become this dissertation project. These initial interviews were carried out in the Fall of 2018 in person at Midwestern University and used to acquire language that is relevant to practitioners as well as gain perspective from practitioners on what they felt were evolving discourses in the DEI space at the time. Their responses contributed to the framing of the questions that ultimately became the interview guide. While this project was initially designed to be carried out in-person, the pivot to online Zoom interviews

happened when the Covid-19 pandemic led to changes in my own personal life, including relocating to another state. This relocation opened access to another institution, Southern University.

Midwestern and Southern University are large, public, research-focused institutions. They both serve a large portion of their respective state's undergraduate population and have world-renowned graduate programs in various disciplines that attract international students. They have both local and international relevance and appeal. For these reasons, they are often scrutinized for their decisions in terms of how they present themselves, how they respond to the broader political and social climate, and how they invest their money in the types of programming and campus climate they provide. Something that contributes to the complexity of these sites is that they are both in politically purple states. This means that the political landscape in each state is contested with conservative and liberal groups in constant tension. While Midwestern University is in a purple-blue state, and Southern University is in a purple-red state, their location and cultural environment make for rich data generation.

Multiple Sites and Perspectival Comparison

The decision to expand beyond Midwestern University where I had developed working relationships with a few key participants over time was made mainly because I gained access to few key participants at Southern University. By being physically near Southern University, I was invited and able to attend DEI related events that opened up opportunities for interviewing folks at that institution. As I spoke with folks at these events about my dissertation and my research questions, people began offering up both

their time as well as recommending others who I should speak with. I took this as an opportunity to grow the project.

The two-site design contributes to the robustness of observation and data generation of this project. Rather than contrasting one with the other and cataloging their differences, this study aims to compare both institutions to draw out—here borrowing language from Schaffer (2021) who is himself borrowing from Burke (1941)—the Midwesterness of Southern U, or the Southerness of Midwest U. In other words, the two sites allow for perspectival comparison. Unlike comparing juxtapositionally which requires "to place like kinds of things side by side to catalog their similarities and differences." Comparing perspectivally focuses on drawing "an analogy between different kinds of things as a way to establish an outside vantage point from which to view one kind of thing in terms of another" (Schaffer, 2021, p. 49). Schaffer reminds us, there is nothing fundamentally similar or dissimilar about any two things and "…we must be careful, then, not to reify or naturalize our categories: we come *up* with similarities, not *across* them" (p. 50). Thus, by spreading across two sites, this study compares across universities not as side by side, but in a way that each site serves as a lens to reinterpret or gain insight into the other. Perspectival comparison is particularly valuable for this interpretive study because it foregrounds how knowledge is situated, relational, and context specific.

Sampling Strategy and Participants

This study includes in-depth interviews with people considered to be what Weiss (1994) refers to as a *panel of knowledgeable informants,* people who have distinct roles and can speak to the subject matter from their own position within the institution. For the

purposes of this study, that allows for the inclusion of a fairly large portion of university employed professionals. DEI policies, though often the formal responsibility of certain practitioners, also apply to the work and actions of other employees as well. Furthermore, it is the case that DEI work is sometimes treated as an additional task and not entirely outlined (or paid) in the job description. Therefore, people working in specified DEI roles, but also faculty who often serve on hiring, tenure review, and graduate admissions committees, and staff who work on admissions and hiring committees, departmental DEI projects, and the like were included as part of the panel of knowledgeable informants. I consider these spaces- hiring, admission, and tenure review committees for example, to be touchpoints of DEI work. Meaning, while there are larger DEI efforts at an institutional level often within specific DEI offices, the experience of DEI felt most directly— and arguably meaningfully— is often in these spaces where decisions are made by folks who *practice* DEI and are not necessarily always professionals trained in DEI.

In total, 34 participants were interviewed from both institutions. This includes 20 participants from Midwestern University and 14 participants from Southern University. Four of the 20 participants at Midwestern University were interviewed in the Fall of 2018, their interviews were used to inform the question guide that was used for semi-structured interviews carried out with the remaining participants. The remaining 30 participants were interviewed between December 2022 and June 2023. Some participants provided additional follow-up interviews with those taking place in December of 2023. All participants were interviewed during their time working at their respective

institutions. Some participants have since retired or moved on to other roles and positions both within and beyond higher education.

Access

Access to participants varied by institution yet both relied on purposive sampling combined with some snowballing. As part of previous research, I had the opportunity to connect with several DEI practitioners at Midwestern University. For this project I reconnected with a few of them who agreed to also connect me to their colleagues or others who they felt would be a good fit for the questions posed as part of this research. Furthermore, through personal connections and student status at Midwestern University, I also had an advantage of having insider status, with an email address that was recognizable and easily verifiable to all who worked at the institution. This provided an electronic foot-in-the door opportunity with a few participants. This was incredibly helpful as most of the preparatory work and outreach as well as interviewing happened during and shortly following the Covid-19 global pandemic which required mostly electronic communication. However, this closeness also proved to be a challenge in some ways. As a student from an interdisciplinary department, many participants were either in close working relationships with others in the department or had at least had some existing working relationship with people in my department. This led some to have hesitancy over certain specifics when it came to discussing some examples from their personal experiences. Nevertheless, participants from Midwestern University were generous with their time, their networks, and most of all with their openness and willingness to discuss their experiences working within the DEI space.

Access to practitioners and potential interviewees at Southern University was less organic and required more focused planning and outreach. For example, to learn more about the DEI efforts at Southern University and in hopes of finding community and potential leads for interviews, I attended various events including the 50th anniversary of desegregation of Southern University. Many of the DEI events on campus were community-wide events and open to the public. One interesting characteristic of Southern University is that while being an internationally renowned institution, many of the students and staff are local to the state. As someone who is neither a student nor a local, in this regard, I was very much an outsider. However, I was able to be physically present on campus at Southern University. This provided me with opportunities, as mentioned earlier, to attend events and come face to face with potential participants or at least introduce myself to them by mentioning we both attended an event. Furthermore, through personal connections at Southern University I was able to slowly build relationships with some folks through email and video calls prior to scheduling interviews. Unlike Midwestern University, however, participants were less likely to offer other colleagues as leads for interviews. While this was not always the case, the experience of conducting interviews at Southern University was often about conducting interviews more as a one-off rather than as a cluster of connections that snowball. Here it is also important to note that at the time of data gathering (and to this day) fellow southern state, Florida, was undergoing extreme revisions to their policies regarding DEI in higher education, including defunding of DEI services as well as reconceptualizing what DEI work should or could be. This was something that influenced people's willingness to speak with me, some being more motivated and others perhaps more cautious. Much like participants at

Midwestern University, Southern University participants were candid and generous with their time. However, I was most taken with the way participants from Southern University spoke with some hesitancy, and an awareness that they often remarked on, that what they said had deep consequences for DEI both within and outside of their institution. There was a combination of candor and caution in the air at Southern University that was distinct and palpable.

Data Generation and Methods

This project is "...an investigation into the meanings that people give to particular forms of social action and the social worlds and cultural forms these actions help to constitute" (Fujii, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, the goal is to engage with the interviewee and, through the process of the interview, learn about what the participant deems meaningful (Fujii, 2018). For this reason, interviews were conducted as semi-structured. The interview process continued until insights from participants began to coalesce, and a point of saturation was reached. There was a list of questions, an interview guide, that was used for each interview as a starting point. This guide was the same for each participant. It included general questions around themes such as daily routines, perceived challenges and wins, as well as follow-ups on definitions of certain commonly used terms like DEI and representation. Beyond this list however, each interview followed the expertise and personal experience of each participant, resulting in rich and diverse data.

As four of the 34 interviews were conducted in person during the fall of 2018, what follows is a detailed account of the subsequent 30 (16 from Midwestern U and 14 from Southern U) interviews conducted in the time between December 2022 and June 2023. All interviews began by referencing previous communication that included an IRB

form. One of the advantages, perhaps, of the shift to remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic was a more robust and normalized exchange of online communication. This allowed me to communicate with participants thoroughly via email prior to our scheduled interview. Some participants asked to meet off-record first to have e-introductions via Zoom. Therefore, while it is unfair to represent a deep relationship with all participants, it is fair to say that electronic communication facilitated the flow of the interview once it took place as participants who preferred it were sent the question guide in advance, and all participants received a brief summary of the project as well as an IRB letter that outlined the general contours of the study prior to the scheduled interview. Time was taken to establish consent for the interview as well as the recording of the interview right at the start. All but two interviews were conducted over the video call service, Zoom. Zoom was beneficial in that it not only video recorded the interview but also produced a rudimentary transcript that was later used as the basis for the transcripts that were used in the data analysis. An additional advantage of the usability of Zoom was that it allowed for closed captioning of the call. This was particularly helpful as I took notes, I was able to keep up with conversation and read what we had just spoken about. It helped the flow of the interview and contributed to memorandum writing that aided in the reflection period following the interview itself. The document sharing feature in Zoom was also useful. Often participants shared documents with me on the spot, this diminished any lag in sending documents via email or being forgotten in the business of everyone's schedules. Many of these documents provided further context for the content of the interview at hand and some documents included references to potential folks to also interview. The remaining two interviews were conducted in person and recorded on two

different devices using the sound recording application, Voice. Beyond the recording of the interviews, notes were also taken. All notetaking was done using the application, Notability. Interviews varied in length, though most interviews lasted around an hour, with some going over, though rarely, by as much as 35 minutes.

As mentioned earlier, all interviews were conducted using the same question guide, which consisted of ten questions with their subsequent probes. These questions emerged from the research questions themselves but were also informed by earlier interviews on the same topic, also with DEI practitioners and university administrators. The question guide was adapted through the data generation process, and a few questions were excluded as more time was spent on the core questions of the study. The guide opened with questions regarding participant background and work experience as well as a description of their job responsibilities and closed with a question asking for any final comments or insights that they would like to have on record that were somehow missed up until that point. In the middle of the guide were questions that were geared towards better understanding not only the definition of DEI and representation in higher education, but also at the operationalization of these concepts in their everyday work. Other questions were aimed at better understanding what some of the challenges are in their work that relate to representation and DEI as well as some of the wins. All participants answered these questions. In addition, participants answered other questions that related to their specific experience or expertise. For example, while all participants discussed students, some did so through the lens of providing a service or program specific to their job—say tutoring services, while others discussed curriculum or classroom dynamics as instructors, and yet others did so from an administrative

perspective, where their focus on students was related to things like retention and campus climate.

Data Analysis Procedures

All interview recordings were transcribed. For the Zoom interviews, the Zoom transcript served as a rudimentary start to the second transcript. While this initial transcript was helpful, there were often some errors in the transcript that could hinder data analysis. Furthermore, because these transcripts are auto generated through Zoom, they also include participants' names. Therefore, a second transcript was made by using the first as a starting point and reading through it while watching the interview back and comparing the two. This resulted in a de-identified transcript that was truthful to the video recording.

For the two in-person interviews transcription was also a two-step process. The first step consisted of using Otter AI transcription software to do the first pass at transcribing the audio. The second step, like all the Zoom interviews, required listening to each interview and (re)transcribing or making edits to the AI-generated drafts. This two-step process was completed to ensure that the quality of the transcription was not compromised but also to de-identify the transcript, removing personal information that could identify the participant. The transcripts were then uploaded to MAXQDA. Like other qualitative data analyzing software, MAXQDA offers analyzing features that are built into the program, like categorizing themes, building word clouds and highlighting functionalities that facilitate inductive coding.

The data analysis process was conducted in stages. During the interview process itself a few themes began to emerge, these were included in the interview notes. A

completed first pass of all interview data was conducted in early 2024, this included a few follow-up interviews with two participants. These follow up interviews were conducted with folks who reached out to check in on my progress. In two separate instances these email conversations turned into Zoom calls for which I received consent to record and include as follow up data as part of the initial interview. The second phase of analysis was completed in mid to late 2024. This led to initial themes that were organized across the empirical chapters. This process took a substantial amount of time to sort through because many of the themes are as interrelated as the questions themselves. Defining DEI through implementation, for example—explored in depth in chapter 4, is often closely tied to the construction of groups at the center of DEI, which is the central question posed in chapter 5. Data analysis continued into the writing process of each chapter, which was carried out in the latter half of 2025. As chapters developed more concretely, thematic analysis continued through an iterative process. The writing process itself became a part of the analysis as I made choices in consolidating themes and highlighting specific tensions in the narrative. Throughout the writing process, I revisited transcripts as well as memorandums and interview notes. This helped in editing long participant quotes down to the core of the themes explored closely in each chapter.

Ethical Considerations

This is an IRB-approved project. All participants were sent an IRB form which outlined both the voluntary nature of their participation as well as a general summary of the study ahead of their participation. Verbal consent was granted at the beginning of each interview.

Regarding confidentiality, participants were informed that their names would not be used in the research nor would the name of their university. However, they were also informed that the anonymity of the pseudonyms for their respective institutions was limited given my own connections with both institutions. Other measures were taken to increase confidentiality. For example, often when discussing their experiences participants would refer to potentially identifiable characteristics, such as their country of origin. In one specific case a participant referred to having roots in a Latin American country, we had a brief discussion of how they would want to present that information in the narrative and together we agreed to use the larger umbrella term, "Latina." Another part of confidentiality involved removing participants' names from their interview transcripts as well as any other identifying information such as specifics relating to names of their workplace department, or colleagues. All participants were given initials that were generated at random. When participants identified with multiple pronouns, for example she/they, I made the tactical decision to use the more common pronoun, in this case, she, in order to further protect the identity of the participant in instances where other aspects of their identity (race/ethnicity, job description, or university) might make it easier to identify the participant. All research data are stored safely in accordance with IRB.

On Trustworthiness

The ethos of relational interviewing was paramount for deeper engagement with the ethics of research. Relational interviewing requires the researcher to "...see the humanity in herself instead of viewing her own role in purely instrumental terms as, say, a 'data collector' or 'project manager.' It means letting go of assumptions that the best

researchers are those who are devoid of feelings and biases" (Fujii, 2018, p. 91). To maintain this ethos throughout the project, I took notes during interviews that were somewhat focused on the content, but as the interview was recorded, I had the flexibility to take notes on my initial reactions and remarks on how certain aspects of the conversation evolved.

Reflexivity is also an important component of this ethos. The ongoing practice of reflexivity is understood as:

> ...careful consideration of how issues of positionality—such as the researcher's personal characteristics or theoretical vantage points—shape the research process. Such issues bear on the kinds of knowledge claims the researcher can advance. Reflexivity can also—and indeed should—involve developing an ethical sensibility that can attune the researcher to how her research design, practices, or strategies affect others. A reflexive disposition that includes a strong ethical sensibility will help to minimize harm to participants. (Fujii, 2018, p.1-2)

There were important and critical changes that occurred during the project. At a national level for example, there was a distinct increase of anti-DEI legislation. This contributed to a heaviness and severity to the topic and increased my sense of responsibility in delivering an authentic and insightful account of my findings. As a form of incorporating these feelings into the research, memorandums—some brief, and some not, were completed following each interview as a form of debriefing with myself. Memorandum writing continued as a process of summarizing, debriefing, and "checking-in" with myself throughout the analysis process as well. As part of the various passes at coding in MAXQDA, I used the memo writing feature in the software to further refine themes but also make notes and reflect on how or why some quotes were subsumed under broader

themes or excluded. In the months of writing the dissertation, I engaged in frequent conversations with my advisor where we discussed participant quotes, namely balancing participants' voices and experiences with my interpretation and how this contributed to the overall project of telling the story of DEI and how it is constructed in higher education. This experience of engaging in regular discussions with my advisor helped me to critically examine the influence of my positionality on data generation, analysis, and narrative.

A Note on Positionality and Reflexivity

The motivation for this project is deeply steeped in my own experience as a student and instructor. I have many years of experience in academia, for all this experience it is perhaps more important to remain aware of my own positionality. As Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2015) remind us: "If one asks how knowledge claims are generated, the role of the researcher—her own a priori knowledge, the filter of his own consciousness—in interpreting observational, conversational, and documentary evidence becomes paramount" (p. 1). The fact that I've been in and around institutions of higher education as long as I have is relevant to my observations and questions on how DEI has come to be contested. I recall when affirmative action was used widely and freely and have a sense for how it evolved to be used almost as a derogatory reference for someone "getting in" to selective colleges. I've been in higher education long enough to see that happen to diversity as well, where being called a "diversity hire" is considered an insult to someone's intelligence or ability. As a Texan, I have personally experienced being a part of the top ten percent of my high school class which granted me the option to attend

the University of Texas around the same time that Abigail Fisher was suing the university. These experiences shaped my interest in what would eventually become DEI.

As I have spent most of my adult life in higher education, I have had various experiences in different capacities including as an undergraduate and graduate student, as a graduate teaching assistant and researcher, and as an instructor to undergraduate and graduate students. I have worked for programs such as the Public Policy & International Affairs (PPIA) Program, which cater specifically to historically underrepresented students as an instructor and as part of the admissions committee. I have served on the hiring committee of administrators, including deans, and been privy to the logics and conversations that go into choosing candidates to lead departments. I have developed my own syllabi and curricula to include issues framed through a lens of racial and social justice. I have written numerous recommendation letters for students for internships and fellowships as well as in support of (many successful!) graduate school applications. I have mentored several students through the graduate school application process—having weekly meetings, providing feedback on statements, and giving general advice on how to look for the ever elusive "fit" when it comes to applying for schools. Thus, to say that I am invested and embedded in higher education, particularly higher education serving historically underrepresented students, would be an understatement. As part of this experience, there are also deeply negative instances. I have received hateful emails regarding my position as a "social justice" researcher as my biography on my institutional website states. My profile has also been covered by online conservative websites. At times these experiences rose to the point of making me concerned for my privacy and personal safety.

When comparing positivist and interpretivist interviewing, Fujii (2018) says that in the positivist tradition the ideal researcher is meant to be detached, free of personal values, emotions, and interests. In contrast, relational interviewing "recognizes the humanity of the researcher and all the vulnerabilities and proclivities that go along with being human" (p.9). As a Latina researcher with a long history in higher education, I have experienced many moments that have influenced how I feel and think about DEI. For example, I have both sought out opportunities to connect with other women of color in hopes of mentorship and have also been sought out as a mentor by students. I know how time consuming this experience is and how it can affect both positively and negatively the people involved in that dynamic. I have experienced the frustration of the struggle to articulate the effects of micro (and macro) aggressions on campus. I have felt ambivalent about my likeness being featured on advertising and fund-raising campaigns for both my undergraduate and graduate universities. I have challenged myself to push past internalizing imposter syndrome after years of studying and working at predominantly white institutions. I have also experienced the joy of finding common ground and community with like-minded folks. I have been challenged to think more intersectionally about the ways that DEI can be implemented in higher education. And I have experienced second-hand pride and joy in the resilience of many other people of color in academia continuing to participate across all aspects, from administration, to research, to instruction.

My experiences as a woman of color navigating higher education impact my interest and my commitment to this research topic, but they also impact the way that I do my work and the way that others respond to me. I suspect, as it has been my experience

in the past, that my (Spanish, grammatically female) name as well as my visible identity and position as a graduate student play a role in the way that interviewees respond to me and their level of comfort or openness in answering certain questions. As Fuji (2018) writes, "Positionality in the field is relational and context dependent, not fixed or absolute. How people in the field site view the researcher depends on the context and can shift over time. This means that no researcher is a 'true' insider or outsider from beginning to end. Many will occupy both categories at various points in time or shift from one to the other" (p. 19). This is true for my experience interviewing. There were times when shared experiences were exchanged, or a comment on the interviewee's part was delivered with confidence, to the effect of "you know what I'm saying" when discussing the experience of being a woman, a person of color, a woman of color. On other occasions, my role as a researcher was contrasted with the interviewee's role as a practitioner, when they explained how some research can mine people of color and be detrimental to the goals of their own work in DEI. At both sites, across interviews and often within the same interview, I found myself being brought in as an insider at times and being put at a distance, as an outsider.

The global COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a lockdown a month following my successful completion of my preliminary exams, after which I did not return to my home university in person, also impacted my living situation and subsequently my approach to this study. Moving to the American South played a large role in my ability to conduct this research project at two sites. As someone who grew up in the geographical south of the United States, it was an opportunity to explore the ways in which large research

universities in the region can contribute to the understanding of DEI practices and policies and the role they play regarding representation of BIPOC.

Limitations

A potential limitation of this study rests in the time when it was conducted. It captures a very specific moment where interviewees began to feel the potential legislative attacks on their work. It is likely that responses to similar questions might be different in the current legislative climate.

While the online format for interviews had some benefits, including being able to conduct a study across two sites simultaneously, it also came with some drawbacks. Namely, though they were video interviews, the rapport building aspect of the interview was limited by not being in person. Body language was limited to shoulders and up, and while I was able to still see some clues in the facial expressions, being in person would have further facilitated a more robust interaction with richer context.

Conducting a deep interpretivist analysis of over 30 semi-structured interviews is time intensive. This project required several phases of data analysis and a process of revisiting transcripts, memorandums, and interview notes that took considerable time. This process was repeated at various times throughout the project, as data was being generated, analyzed and during the writing process to ensure trustworthiness.

Finally, the limitations of this research design are congruent with the limitations that could be found in any constructivist and interpretivist project. This project is not generalizable. It does not seek to be. Instead, it aims to provide a thick description of the project and interview process for folks to consider the transferability of insights to their own context.

Chapter 3
An Agonistic View of the Construction of DEI

The complex of projects and policies that people in higher education refer to today as "DEI" has gone by various names over time and carried a variety of meanings. Efforts to promote "integration" became the foundation for projects of "affirmative action," which gave rise, in turn, to the pursuit of "diversity" and eventually to programs of "diversity, equity, and inclusion." To make sense of what DEI is, means, and does today, then, one must understand how it came to be—how actors and institutions constructed and reconstructed it over time. This chapter analyzes the dynamics of innovation and contestation that shaped the project's evolution and the various forms of its articulation and institutionalization over time.

To do so, this chapter draws on authoritative accounts of relevant events, evidence of policies and discourses, media coverage, and historical scholarship to analyze change and continuity over time. Each of the four cases analyzed here represents a significant discursive moment in the evolution of what we now refer to as DEI—a historically specific project with its own goals, strategies, and struggles that reflects the broader societal landscape on which it transpired. I aim to locate each discourse in its historical context, clarify how one discourse gave way to the next, and suggest reasons why the discourse that followed took the form that it did. Working across the cases, I develop a comparative analysis of similarities and differences, focused on a limited number of elements that are particularly important for understanding DEI as it exists (and is contested) today. Ultimately, this chapter sets out to explore the constitutive effects of each discourse on present day DEI. As Wendt (1999) writes, "Ideas or social structures

have constitutive effects when they create phenomena—properties, powers, dispositions, meanings, etc.—that are conceptually or logically dependent on those ideas or structures, that exist only 'in virtue' of them" (p. 88). In other words, to understand what DEI is, means, and does, we must understand how it came to be constructed in relation to previous projects and their defining discourses.

An Agonistic Perspective

Successful campaigns to pass anti-DEI legislation have risen dramatically in recent years. Fourteen state laws of this sort were passed in the two-year period of 2023-24, and fourteen more have been enacted across twelve states in 2025 (Smith, 2025). These laws stand in stark contrast to the political discourses and agendas that flourished following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The murder of George Floyd, at the time the latest in a long list of killings of Black folks at the hands of police, fueled a powerful discourse of anti-racism, specifically, but also worked, more generally, to promote discourses of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This contributed to heightened awareness of DEI, as institutions committed to doing the work (Thomason, 2020). This change in perception of DEI, from the investments made in 2020 (Benson Clayton, 2021) to the legislative and political attacks (Smith, 2025) seen in 2025 tempt the use of a pendulum metaphor, where the pendulum is now swinging in the opposite direction of what it was in 2020 (Rooks, 2025).

In this chapter, I challenge the idea that enthusiasm for social diversification and inclusion in higher education has simply ebbed and flowed over time—swinging naturally like a pendulum between periods of greater and lesser intensity and progress. In contrast, I pursue an agonistic perspective, developed by Goodman et al. (2017), that

foregrounds political struggle, discursive competition, and power. Through this agonistic perspective, we can better understand how contemporary DEI programs came to be and why they take the forms they do.

In a study of the historical evolution of criminal legal governance in the U.S., Goodman et al. (2017) identify three interrelated problems with the common pendulum metaphor, all of which can be applied to the case of DEI in higher education. First, they take issue with the idea of *rupture*, whereby rupture assumes that one regime is "replaced wholesale with another" (p. 7). In the DEI space we see discursive changes as well as different keywords used throughout the years. However, each concept or term influences the next iteration, meaning making in this sense is relational—not separate from the previous discourse. Second, they claim that the *mechanical* aspect of a pendulum swing implies that the "pendulum moves back and forth, driven by internal energy" (p. 7) which fails to acknowledge the struggle in pushing for change. Rather than internal energy, it is "people and organizations [that] make it move" (p. 7). Similarly, in education broadly and higher education in particular, we see constant struggle to lay claims to DEI and what it can and should look like in practice. This is through a process of conflict, struggle, and advocacy. Third, the singular pendulum contributes to *homogeneity*—the tendency to view a field (in this case, higher education) as a monolith—which glosses over variations across states, for example. DEI in higher education can be highly context specific as many universities are bound to their state funding large parts of their operation. State laws and constituencies can have an impact on how DEI looks like in practice across the country. Even more variation happens through the process of implementation, as each practitioner engages with DEI in their own work.

Instead, Goodman et al. (2017) propose an agonistic approach accompanied by its own metaphor: plate tectonics. “Like the rubbing of tectonic plates, individuals, groups, and organizations that struggle over punishment constantly bump up against the ideologies and practices of others; there is continual (though sometimes low-impact and low-visibility) friction as well as occasional explosive conflict over how to prevent and respond to crime and criminals” (p. 15). In the DEI space, we see that same constant friction over defining DEI, the problem that DEI is meant to address, as well as the alternatives set forth to ameliorate said problem.

As Goodman et al. 's (2017) analysis suggests, simply because one view of DEI takes up more space in the collective imaginary, it does not mean that advocates of other orientations simply go away once their preferred view of DEI falls out of favor, they keep struggling (p. 15). We can see this in the legislation and broader efforts to dismantle the DEI initiatives that followed the events of 2020. As the Chronicle of Higher Education (n.d.) characterizes these efforts, “Republican politicians in early 2023 launched an assault on colleges’ diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts to recruit and retain faculty and students of color. While college administrators say their so-called DEI efforts are an effective strategy to repair decades of exclusionary policies and practices that repelled communities of color from their campuses, Republican leaders say the practices violate free speech, break antidiscrimination laws, and are a misuse of public money.” This division is neither new nor a swinging pendulum; it is a constant struggle.

Through this agonistic view I present four moments in history that help to ground the changing discourse of DEI. Each of these events helps in understanding the present version of DEI currently under attack by shedding light on how and why the discourses

changed throughout these moments. These four moments, beginning with the Brown decision, to the more generalized civil rights movement, to the Bakke decision, and present day, highlight how throughout history, the problem never went away. Rather, the struggle for the definition and alternatives of the "problem" has remained and the underlying reality: the exclusion of Black, Indigenous, people of color and other marginalized identities in higher education has endured. I explore these four moments in history as cases, as snapshots that capture a specific struggle that exemplifies the complexities of the contestation for meaning-making, policy design, and implementation of DEI.

On Racial Integration: Brown v. Board of Education

The U.S. Supreme Court delivered its decision in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas on May 17, 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). It ruled against the "separate but equal" precedent that had been established by the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision in 1896 (National Archives). This decision has been celebrated for ending formal racial segregation in public schools. This change was profoundly important, but it did not produce a swift or decisive break with the preceding era of institutionalized racism in education, or in other areas of policy and governance such as housing and transportation. The Brown decision did not banish (*rupture*) the discriminatory practices of segregation in one swoop. Nor was it only the "old South" states (*homogeneity*) that challenged the implementation of desegregation. It was not sheer inertia from this ruling (*mechanical*) but a contested, long, road to the formal integration of public schools, many years later and with varying degrees of success.

Instrumental Limitations and Symbolic Functions of Brown v. Board

One useful approach for thinking about the effects of the Brown decision is through Edelman's (1985) frame of symbolic versus instrumental political acts. The first refers to political actions, language, or symbols that are intended to influence perception, evoke emotional responses, and provide reassurance or legitimacy without direct or immediate change to material conditions. Symbolic acts include something like the declaration of "war on poverty" that contains imagery that can provide hope that the government is taking fierce action to address poverty, even without necessarily enacting structural change. The second refers to actions taken to produce tangible, material changes and outcomes. This could be something like implementation of legislation, for example.

The Brown v. Board decision in 1954 served a much more symbolic function than an instrumental one. This could be attributed to several reasons, as Edelman reminds us, vagueness and remoteness serve a function in the symbolic lore of the state (1985). In the Brown decision, we see vague language. Even a year later, in 1955, what came to be known as Brown II, Justice Warren read the unanimous decision, "instructing the states to begin desegregation plans 'with all deliberate speed'" but not much else in terms of how to achieve integration (National Archives). The Supreme Court offers a remoteness as the highest court in the country, where very few people are privy to the inner workings. Structurally as well, it is removed from the application of law. This too contributes to the symbolic aspect of Brown v. Board.

Instrumental Limitations. There was limited concrete change immediately following the Brown decision. The lack of direction for implementation, even after

Brown II, contributed to the stagnation of desegregation. The structure of the American government allows for the highest court to dictate what should be implemented, but not how. That is left to the discretion of the states. When we think about material outcomes, there is literature (Carson, 2004; Rooks, 2025) that shows that very little changed in the daily lives of Black Americans following the Brown decision. Rather, this decision was widely met with resistance and delays, and many schools continued to be under-resourced and unequal. Integration would continue to be a challenge throughout the civil rights movement and beyond.

However, it is important to not lose sight of what it did achieve. Though the limitations of Brown are widely explored, the legal victory is still monumental. It paved the way for the struggle of implementation of desegregation. It made *de jure* segregation illegal. Emphasis on de jure, as we will see later how other tools of evasion and delay served as de facto segregation. It made clear that state-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th amendment and was therefore unconstitutional (National Archives). Through this, one important instrumental consequence of the Brown decision was that it established a precedent for challenging institutional discrimination across multiple sectors in the highest court. We will continue to see cases of discrimination in education make their way to the Supreme Court and challenge and reimagine racial equity.

Symbolic Functions. The Brown decision can be seen as having limited force, in important respects, because it lacked a plan or timeline for implementation. Nevertheless, the messages it conveyed, which were predicated on the notion of a shared American Creed of equality and liberty (Carson, 2004), stirred high emotions from both proponents

and opponents of integration. For many Black Americans and supporters of integration, the decision provided hope for further dismantling of Jim Crow era laws. Symbolically, this decision allowed the Supreme Court to position the United States in a different light in relation to its heinous history of slavery and systemic abuse of human beings based on race. It signaled to Americans and others that the United States federal government (and specifically the Supreme Court) was approaching a new dawn of progress. For segregationists, the Brown decision came to represent a threat to their way of life.

While de jure segregation was deemed unconstitutional, it did not end the discriminatory practices of segregation from previous decades; it mostly changed how they functioned. De facto segregation continued for many years after Brown. In the South there was the Southern Manifesto, a document written and signed in 1956 by a group of Southern U.S. lawmakers in opposition to the Brown decision (Rojo, 2023). Southern elected officials were motivated by their constituents to do as much as possible to delay or evade the implementation of desegregation of public schools. Some tactics used included school closures, the creation of private segregated "academies" (Rooks, 2025), and the unwillingness of local officials to step in or obstruct the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (Carson, 2004), allowing for the widespread use of harassment and physical harm as a tool for intimidation.

As Rooks (2025) points out, Southern states receive the most attention regarding pushback against integration, but the Northern states had more than their fair share of resistance. "Because racial segregation was not written into law in the North, most of its school districts, courts, and politicians claimed that the Brown decision did not apply to them. Whatever segregation did exist, lawyers and politicians argued, was a natural

byproduct of racist discrimination in housing rather than an issue within schools themselves. This de facto segregation, though damaging to the prospects of societal advancement for American citizens who were poor and of color, was legal, they said" (Rooks, 2025, p. 63). This logic contributed to the delay of integration. It is important to note how this logic differentiates between desegregation and integration. The first requires schools to be formally desegregated, meaning that children of all races should have the choice to attend a school. Integration, on the other hand, required active efforts to have schools with children of all races. In other words, integration was not the opposite of segregation— desegregation was. This distinction was at the center of the struggle for meaning making and interpretation of the Brown decision. Another strategy used in the North included what we've come to know as white flight, "Once-strong school systems in cities like Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago, Newark, and elsewhere wobbled as white families fled to the suburbs, leaving behind poorly staffed and funded institutions that, because the troubles were blamed on poor or nonexistent Black family structures, damaged and overpoliced the Black children left behind in them" (Rooks, 2025, p. 63). In 1968, the Kerner Commission identified white flight as a key impediment to integration. Anti-integration activism from white parents manifested in the form of protests and counter protests which also put a stop to implementation attempts like bussing children into predominantly Black schools in states like New York (Rooks, 2025).

The Brown decision was not a mere pendulum swing away from Jim Crow era segregation. It was the culmination of a long, hard-fought political struggle that included decades of cumulative legal victories alongside mass mobilization and strategic advocacy. In the years that followed Brown, long standing political conflicts continued,

though often in different forms. Desegregation in American life, to the extent that it occurred, was driven by the *ongoing* advocacy and persistence of Black communities and allied integration activists. That the Brown decision spurred the subsequent civil rights movement and its achievement may seem obvious to many in retrospect, but at the time of the decision, it was far from clear that it would provide a way forward for civil rights. As Carson (2004) writes,

> Although the Court's initial unwillingness to set firm timetables for school desegregation undercut Brown's immediate impact, African Americans expanded the limited scope of the decision by individual and collective challenges to the Jim Crow system. Small-scale protests escalated during the decade after 1954, becoming a sustained mass movement against all facets of segregation and discrimination in the North as well as the South. Civil rights protests and litigation prompted Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, both of which extended the Brown decision's egalitarian principles well beyond education. The historic mass struggle that followed Brown ultimately destroyed the legal foundations of the Jim Crow system, and their destruction prepared the way for a still more far-reaching expansion of prevailing American conceptions of civil rights and of the role of government in protecting those rights. (p. 26-27)

Sustained political struggle built on the foundation laid by the Brown decision was what turned it into something more impactful than it was or could be when it was initially delivered.

A Legacy for DEI: Framing of Harm

Something new happened as part of the Brown decision. As part of the justification for the decision was the inclusion of social science data, this went against legal tradition which relied mostly on precedent of established law (National Archives). In the landmark case, plaintiffs used social science research, including psychological

research by Mamie and Kenneth Clark, to highlight the ways in which segregation infiltrated the way young students made connections between skin tone and personal qualities. The test, colloquially known as the "doll test," carried out with Black children, included an array of questions such as which doll was "nice" and which doll most looked like them. Most of the children chose the white doll. The research, mostly completed a decade before Brown, underscored for many how segregation and representations of racial groups could powerfully affect children's perceptions of themselves (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019).

The social science findings were critical for the decision, as public education was framed as one of the most important functions of government and the foundation of good citizenship (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019). The psychological impact and feelings of inferiority that segregated schooling caused Black children was at the center of Chief Justice Warren's decision:

> Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system. (National Archives)

Chief Justice Warren's decision took a very different course than Justice Brown's decision in Plessy v. Ferguson. Believing this law went against the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, Homer Plessy boarded a white train car in the summer of 1892, soon after he was arrested for breaking Louisiana state law. After losing the case in

Louisiana, Plessy took his case to the Supreme Court. In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy and sustained the constitutionality of Louisiana's segregation law. In delivering the majority opinion Justice Henry Brown wrote: "We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff's argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it…"(National Archives).

Justice Brown's narrative is critical. In his own words, he is discursively shifting the racism of segregation from the realm of systems and policies, in this case The Separate Car Act, to the internalized construction of self, the Black mind. In this view, racism and the inequities of segregation do not exist as structural but personal, if at all. Moreover, the Plessy v. Ferguson decision further solidified the segregation of the two races in so long as the circumstances were "separate but equal" and continued to embolden state and local governments to build out Jim Crow laws. Warren, in 1954, also talked about the inferiority experienced by Black folks, however, in his opinion he discursively shifted the burden away from internalized or imagined sense of inferiority, and instead signaled that it was segregation of public schools that contributed to this psychological harm. In this regard, the Brown decision was pivotal. However, this focus on Black minds and experiences ignored the effects of segregation on white minds and experiences.

By framing harm as a sense of inferiority experienced by Black children, and how such was bad for the goals of education and more broadly civic participation, the Brown decision left two important harms unexamined: white supremacy and white privilege.

This is perhaps made clearer when University of Chicago Professor Margaret Beale Spencer replicated the doll test, but this time with Black and white children. Much like the Clarks before her, Beale Spencer found that Black children have bias towards whiteness, "but that their bias was far less than that of white children. Beale Spencer also found that white children, as a whole, responded with a high rate of 'white bias,' which means the white children tended to identify their own skin color 'with positive attributes and darker skin with negative attributes'" (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019, p.356). Perhaps more importantly, she found that children's thoughts on race did not change as they grew older, with very little change in children's responses from ages five to ten (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019). In other words, by focusing on the Black experience, and only the Black experience, the Brown decision failed to make clear that just as racial segregation in all aspects of American life contributed to a sense of inferiority in many Black children, on the opposite side of the same coin, that same segregation contributed to a sense of superiority in white children. While a different type of harm, internalized opinions of white superiority are a harm and a barrier to full racial integration, nonetheless. Furthermore, the Brown decision "failed to acknowledge how white perpetrators and even sympathetic whites had greatly benefitted from a longstanding system of structural racism" (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019, p. 354). In the seven-page Brown decision (National Archives), there is no mention of the material gains and benefits that white Americans had as a result of a longstanding system of structural racism. It is the intersection of feelings of white supremacy and white privilege that are specifically dangerous to the project of integration. As Onwuachi-Willig (2019) explains, it leaves folks in the dominant racial group "feeling deprived of the material benefits and privileges that their

ancestors had when Blacks were denied all privileges and rights by law. It also obscures from them how privilege accumulates over time and across generations" (p. 361).

The Brown decision, while it lagged in instrumental change, symbolized hope for some and a threat for others. It provided a legal precedent for challenging discrimination and was without a doubt monumental for expanding civil rights. For all the promise that Brown provided; by failing to examine more deeply the underlying assumptions of Black inferiority and white superiority, it did not challenge two harms that DEI would have to contend with seven decades later— white supremacy and white privilege.

On Affirmative Action: The Civil Rights Movement

Admittedly, talking about the Civil Rights Movement as a separate event from Brown is artificial. These two moments in history are very much related, with the Civil Rights Movement lasting approximately between 1954 and 1968, and the Brown decision often credited as the start (Sutton, 2001). Yet, it is analytically helpful. Racial segregation was not only limited to education. It permeated many aspects of American life. By zooming out from one specific Supreme Court decision, we can see a landscape of conflict that contextualizes the relevance of a new discourse that emerges during this time: affirmative action.

Affirmative action, as a relevant discourse in American higher education, is often considered to have come into being in 1965 (Ball, 2000; Wood, 2003) in the form of a one-two punch. On June 4, President Johnson gave his commencement address, "To Fulfill These Rights," at Howard University. Although Johnson did not utter the words, "affirmative action," in his speech, specifically a section under the subheading, "Freedom is Not Enough" Johnson put forth;

> You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is *not enough just to open the gates of opportunity*. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal *equity* but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and *equality as a result.* (Okechukwu, 2019, p. 29) [emphasis my own]

Johnson's address was significant as it marked the first moment when a United States president visibly and strongly supported affirmative action for Black Americans (Katznelson, 2005). The sentiment in this speech was highly symbolic, a shift in the American collective understanding of civil rights and liberties. Johnson followed this symbolic act a few months later with an instrumental act. On September 24, 1965, Johnson signed executive order 11246. Executive Order 11246 prohibited discrimination in hiring and employment practices on the part of U.S. government contractors based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Additionally, it is credited with proliferating the use of the term "affirmative action" (Wood, 2003; Kellough, 2006; Boykin & Palmer, 2016). Together, the symbolic and instrumental elements of Johnson's actions in 1965 solidified the idea of affirmative action. Though, and perhaps it is not surprising, it did not give the idea shape— meaning, affirmative action was neither prescriptive nor normative. It wasn't until the 1972 amendments to Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, that affirmative action implementation plans could be enforced with some consequence (Hill, 1985).

President Johnson's work to advance affirmative action discourse emerged under significant political pressure and in the context of the broader civil rights movement. The Brown decision was delivered in the mid 1950s, with little direction other than the infamous call for "all deliberate speed" of implementation. The irony, a decade later, of how little had changed and how slowly, was not lost on civil rights activists and supporters of integration. Civil rights activists pushed for change for various sectors of American life leading to reform such as the Civil Rights Act of 1957, signed by Eisenhower, The Civil Rights Act of 1964, 1965, 1968 (also known as the Fair Housing Act), as well as The Higher Education Act of 1965, all signed by Johnson. Other important reforms came from the Supreme Court, most notably, the decision of Brown v. Board of Education in 1954 and Brown II in 1955. The quest for racial integration paved the way for struggle for many more folks, including non-Black women and people with disabilities.

Because this was a highly productive time and a time of important reform, we might be tempted to rely on the pendulum metaphor once more. As a reminder, the Southern Manifesto, challenging integration and questioning the legality of the Brown decision, was signed (notably not by Johnson) by Southern officials a year prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1957 (Rojo, 2023). By the mid 60's, exhausted by the delays in integration, Black Power activists advocated for separatism instead of integration (Carson, 2004). Teenager Emmett Till was murdered the same year as Brown II was delivered in 1955 (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019). James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, civil rights workers campaigning to help Black Americans exercise their right to vote, were murdered in Mississippi in the summer of 1964 (Onwuachi-

Willig, 2019). It was the same summer that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed. The civil rights movement was without question a period of progress in the arena of civil rights and liberties. It was also a painful and tumultuous time in American history.

Returning to Goodman et al. (2017), the civil rights movement is best understood in an agonistic view; one of constant struggle. There was no displacement of segregationists with integrationists, or *rupture*, per Goodman et al. There was certainly no *mechanical* inertia but rather a contestation and effort on the part of activists, some who lost their lives. But it is as we return to affirmative action, where we see how little *homogeneity* there was in conceptualizing and ultimately implementing affirmative action in higher education.

It should also be remembered, as Ira Katznelson (2005) demonstrates through an exploration of New Deal and other policies of the 1930's and 40's, that practices of affirmative action (unaccompanied by the name) had a substantial history in the U.S. prior to the 1960's. Another example of unnamed affirmative action could be attributed to how the early American state took Native American land through dispossession and redistributed it (at low or no cost) to white male citizens. As Young and Meiser (2008) write, "This program of property redistribution was of continental proportions and can be legitimately viewed as one of the most radical and effective [race-targeted] entitlement programs in world history" (p. 41). Affirmative action, though not necessarily by name, has a long and contentious history in the United States. However, "... the language of affirmative action as well as explicit policies carrying that name only were launched in the mid-1960's" (Katznelson, 2005, p. xi).

Affirmative action during the time of the civil rights movement, and into the 1970's came to carry the spirit of that time, the same which is reflected in Johnson's speech at Howard. It came to represent a *remedy*. Specifically, affirmative action discourse was widely understood as an attempt to ameliorate, or more conservatively, mitigate inequality for racial minorities as well as take on the legacy of slavery (Gupton & Miksch, 2016). It also signaled a change towards proactive (affirmative) action rather than begrudging compliance. Though this was the general discourse, and it had the approval of the president and therefore strong symbolism, affirmative action discourse did not have much else.

The concept of affirmative action during this time was not yet fully established, well developed, or systematically assessed (Lipson, 2011). Consequently, the way in which institutions of higher education adopted and implemented affirmative action policies following the civil rights movement was not uniform. When it comes to higher education, it was left up to the colleges and universities to devise their own views of what affirmative action looks like in practice. Each institution was informed by their individual rationales and interpretations of the executive order and the idea of affirmative action; some gave more weight to the ideal of promoting racial diversity, while others focused more specifically in aiding the socially and economically disadvantaged (Douglass, 2007; Karabel, 2005; Skrentny, 2002; Welch & Gruhl, 1998). This resulted in various interpretations and approaches to affirmative action. For example, during the late 1960's and early 1970's, Black Americans, frustrated with delayed reform, pushed for "Black studies programs and courses, heritage rooms or houses, and Black professors and administrators" (Banks, 1993, p. 18) across universities. Other minority groups followed

the lead of Black Americans by making similar demands of universities, resulting in the establishment and growth of ethnic, women, and disability studies and departments (Banks, 1993). This time also saw the development of programs, curricula, and other materials that centered the histories and cultures of ethnic groups of color. Yet, "there was little demand for the infusion of ethnic content into the core or mainstream curriculum—that demand would not emerge until the 1980s and 1990s. Rather the demand was primarily for separate courses and programs" (Banks, 1993, p. 18 referencing Blassingame, 1971; Ford, 1973; Robinson, Foster, & Ogilvie, 1969). Regarding admissions, affirmative action was interpreted by some universities, including the University of California system, as racial quotas.

On Diversity: Regents of the University of California v. Bakke

While the 1960's and early 1970's ushered in affirmative action and broader conversations of equal access and opportunity, by the late 1970's and 1980's affirmative action was being challenged by claims of reverse discrimination (Oliha-Donaldson, 2021). Dissenters of affirmative action claimed that policies like racial quotas fostered "disunity" and provided "unfair privileges" to people of color (Omi & Winant, 1994; Oliha-Donaldson, 2021). Perhaps the most well-known dissenter of affirmative action from this time was Allan Bakke, whose grievances culminated in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* which reached the Supreme Court in October of 1977.

The facts of the case go as follows: Allan Bakke, a 35-year-old white male who had twice applied to the University of California Medical School at Davis and been denied both times argued that he had been denied admission based solely on race

(Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 1978). At the time, the University of California Medical School at Davis reserved 16 of the 100 seats of the incoming class for "qualified" racial minorities (Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 1978). The decision, delivered in the summer of 1978, was closely divided. Ultimately, inflexible quotas for racial minority students were deemed unconstitutional per the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and Allan Bakke was admitted to UC Davis Medical School (*instrumental*). At the same time, per Justice Powell's opinion, race was deemed a legitimate factor among factors for consideration as part of the university admission process (*symbolic*) (Ball, 2000).

By making racial quotas unviable, the *Bakke* decision set general parameters for institutional policies—it made clear one thing they could *not* do. The *Bakke* decision, however, fell far short of a how-to manual. In response to *Bakke*, universities amended or set new programs in place. Berrey (2011) paints a picture of how implementation evolved in the aftermath of *Bakke*.

> By the late 1980s, university administrators began to rely on the vague, adaptable rhetoric of diversity to characterize the changing demographics of the student body. Diversity discourse described group difference in more complex terms than a black-white or majority-minority binary. It also expressed administrator's evolving understanding of campus *inclusion* as something more complex than numerical representation—namely, their recognition that the administration also needed to foster a tolerant campus environment. (Berrey, 2011, p. 282 [emphasis my own])

University administrators built up institutional policies on a shaky foundation of vague diversity discourse. The concept of diversity was one that could be debated, interpreted, measured, and experienced in a myriad of ways. Working with general guidelines,

practitioners were left to implement diversity policy often in ways that individuals, or small groups could decide. Remember, diversity, and later diversity, equity, and inclusion, was less about what it could be and more about what it could *not* be. It could not be affirmative action. It could not be solely about race. Race could only be a *factor among factors* for consideration. Moore and Bell (2011) write that "the discursive legal framing of the race issues in the Bakke decision severely limited the potential force of affirmative action policies to affect racial change in higher education" (p. 603). As Berrey (2011) illustrates above, this also opened the door for other aspects of diversity, broadly defined, like campus inclusion.

While the *Bakke* decision focused on admissions practices, it also impacted the way that folks articulated race across universities. In the years following the *Bakke* decision, racial tensions continued. The ethnic studies programs that had blossomed under affirmative action initiatives "spawned derision and distrust, and were actively resisted by some" (Oliha- Donaldson, 2021, p. 20 referencing McLaughlin et al., 2015). The tensions between those making efforts to expand and diversify both the curriculum and departments in higher education and those who felt threatened by these initiatives were further exemplified by racist and sexist incidents on campuses across the country throughout the 1980's (Bernstein, 2016; Oliha-Donaldson, 2021). It was in the late 1980's and early 1990's that multiculturalism was used to rearticulate some of the affirmative action initiatives. Multiculturalism was considered critical for calming some of the tensions that gained traction particularly post-*Bakke*. As Oliha-Donaldson (2021) explains, "The hallmark of multiculturalism was the importance of acknowledging and absorbing all forms of difference to produce a more democratic society" (p. 20).

Multiculturalism at its best was about integration—integrating ethnic and gender studies as well as disability studies curriculum into the mainstream (Banks, 1993), expanding training on cultural differences (Banks, 1993), and emphasizing the value of understanding and peaceful coexistence (Cleckley, 1997, Oliha-Donaldson, 2021). However, multiculturalism came to garner opposition from both conservative folks who felt that a multicultural approach posed a threat to the sense of unity in the country (Oliha-Donaldson, 2021) and by some progressives who questioned multiculturalism's ability to challenge power structures (Andersen, 1999) and adequately address social justice issues (Wallace, 1994). By the mid to late 1990's the language of multiculturalism began to give way to more widespread use of diversity discourse, and while at times diversity was used interchangeably with multiculturalism, diversity was favored for "its simple avowal of difference" (Oliha-Donaldson, 2021 p. 21 referencing Ahonen et al., 2014). Diversity gained popularity and is considered to have "supplanted" multiculturalism (Rajasekar et al., 2022, p. 316) as the language of celebrating racial and ethnic difference in the country (Hartmann, 2015; Kivisto, 2012).

Diversity as a Factor Among Factors

Extensive literature points to the 1978 Powell opinion in the *Bakke* decision as the origin of diversity discourse (Baez, 2000; Wood, 2003; Yosso et al., 2004; Douglass, 2007; Antonio & Gonzales Clarke, 2011; Berrey, 2011; Chang & Ledesma, 2011; Lipson, 2011; Moore & Bell, 2011; Boykin & Palmer, 2016). Some go on to label it as Powell's "diversity rationale" (Antonio & Gonzales Clarke, 2011; Chang & Ledesma, 2011). In his opinion, Powell did consider race an important factor for consideration, among others, when evaluating applications for college admissions. It was his rationale

for the consideration of race that came to guide and influence diversity discourse. Paraphrasing Justice Frankfurter on the topic of academic freedom, Justice Powell wrote, "The atmosphere of 'speculation, experiment and creation'- so essential to the quality of higher education - is widely believed to be promoted by a *diverse* student body..." (Pasque et al., 2016, p. 10 [emphasis my own]), Thus, diversity— and not racial and ethnic representation per se— became a "…constitutionally permissible goal for an institution of higher education…" (Pasque et al., 2016, p. 10).

The diversity discourse that resulted from *Bakke*, one of public good and benefits for all, came to gain widespread use across American institutions, including higher education. Diversity as articulated by Justice Powell did two important things. First, it continued on the path set in Brown v. Board obscuring the larger systemic problem of white supremacy. In the same two years that Bakke applied to the UC Davis medical school, he had applied and been rejected from at least twelve other medical schools. This is important information because the message that Bakke took from these rejections was that it could not be him that was unqualified, but rather "that the only reason he was denied a spot to UC Davis Medical Center was because of students of color. By filing his lawsuit, despite his complete lack of success with other medical schools, Bakke revealed he had a settled expectation about what was supposed to come to him as a white male" (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019, p. 364). Bakke's challenge to affirmative action was steeped in a sense of white superiority, and the subsequent concept of diversity that emerged as a result did not challenge white supremacy but rather contributed to neutralizing and furthering it. Collins (2011) perhaps explains it best;

> …diversity rhetoric undermines affirmative action by discarding the idea of discrimination and systemic in-group bias while making all 'otherness' in organizations a marketable commodity. Diversity rhetoric in education, work, and other settings blurs the focus on race and ethnic-based discrimination and widens that focus to incorporate other forms of differences. This blurred and broadened focus leaves space for a non-racial vision of what diversity looks like in organizations. Boundaries of diversity have expanded past race, gender, and cultural differences to include differences in sexual orientation, religious beliefs, occupations, and white men. In this narrative diversity displaces and neutralizes the intent of affirmative action because it equates all social differences, which then should be treated equally. The problem of race is removed from the picture. (p. 519)

Collins (2011) is not alone in this interpretation. Baez (2000) writes, "Thus elaborations of ethnicity, gender, race, and sexuality that begin and end with difference fall into the trap of naturalizing difference, while failing to analyze how social differences, and the oppression that results from them, occur in the first place" (p.47). Second, with the pressure put on affirmative action by this case, the emerging diversity discourse was, for some, a strategic retreat from more incendiary language like affirmative action and to a lesser extent, multiculturalism. Because it became clear that affirmative action was under threat, diversity—as a troubling replacement as it might have been, allowed some of the affirmative action practices to continue without the name. Therefore, the common thread between the original goals of integration and this emerging concept of diversity, loosened. Amid this activity, something strange happened; diversity discourse came to garner support from both supporters and opponents of affirmative action. For some supporters of the civil rights era affirmative action, diversity discourse represented a remnant, but, alas, it was something that could be used to pursue the spirit of affirmative

action—racial equity. For opponents, diversity discourse was touted as a public good (Anderson, 2004), and because it spread far and wide beyond race, it represented benefits for all, including white Americans.

This embrace of diversity (albeit with some reluctance and criticism) from both opponents and proponents of affirmative action does not represent a coalescence around a concept. As the agonistic perspective proposes, the tensions between those for and against integration didn't go away, they did not come to agree on what diversity was. Rather, the contestation of meaning was now being fought on the basis of what diversity was and how it should be implemented. In agonistic terms, there was no *rupture* nor was this change *mechanical*, the conversation changed, but the struggle did not. Instead, the *Bakke* decision contributed to a wider spread of interpretations of diversity, on what the issue at hand was: was it racial equity or was it a more well-rounded higher education experience? The interpretation of diversity certainly did not lead to a *homogenous* program for implementation.

On DEI: Current Conflicts

Since *Bakke*, Supreme Court cases have continued to influence the meaning of DEI in higher education. Among them is the case of Grutter v. Bollinger et al. (2003). As part of this case, Barbara Grutter, a white female, argued that race was a predominant reason for her not being accepted to the University of Michigan Law School. However, the Supreme Court disagreed. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in the majority opinion that the University of Michigan's interests in "critical mass" was in fact constitutional, as race was merely a factor among other factors ensuring the diversity of the student body (Grutter v. Bollinger et al., 2003). Justice O'Connor's opinion also

stated that diversity was a "compelling interest" in the quality of education per the *Bakke* case. In contrast, the University of Michigan's undergraduate admissions criteria in question in the Gratz v. Bollinger (2003) case was found to be unconstitutional based on the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. The University of Michigan's undergraduate admissions policy based on admission points automatically attributed to race was deemed too similar to a quota and not narrowly tailored, this based on the *Bakke* case (Gratz v. Bollinger, 2003). These two cases, both at the University of Michigan and argued in the same year, demonstrate how varied diversity policies have been. While the *Grutter* case dealt with graduate admissions, and the *Gratz* case dealt with undergraduate admissions, at the same institution, two different policy approaches were implemented, and two opposing decisions were delivered.

Ten years later, in 2013, the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas* went to the Supreme Court, was then sent back to lower courts for a closer examination of how well the University's admissions policies applied strict scrutiny in their consideration of race (Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin et al., 2013). In 2016 the Supreme Court upheld the lower court's ruling in favor of the University of Texas (Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin et al., 2016). While this might have felt like a win for supporters of diversity with affirmative action spirit, *Fisher* further articulated the limitations that have plagued integration efforts since *Brown*. Like Bakke over 30 years earlier, Fisher felt entitled to access to a university that for her was considered a family tradition.

> Fisher failed to think about the structural advantages that had aided her all her life. She did so in part because our current discourse around race- much like Brown- does not encourage such thinking about past and present racial discrimination and its effects. In her newspaper interviews,

> Fisher lamented that she was unable to follow a family tradition of attending the University of Texas, but she did so without any apparent sense of how a tradition of law, backed by blatant racism and white supremacy, had kept Blacks from gaining admission to the University until 1950, when Heman Sweatt won his case before the U.S. Supreme Court to gain admission to the law school. (Onwuachi-Willig, 2019, p. 366)

As Onwuachi-Willig explains, even when there were "wins" in the Supreme Court for diversity initiatives (formerly affirmative action), white superiority and privilege continued to be sustained through diversity discourse.

As diversity came to be institutionalized further in higher education through research and practice, critiques of diversity followed. Baez (2000) explains how research aimed at evaluating the value of diversity as "difference" shifts the attention away from the causes of such different lived experience: "… recent case law, research studies, and institutional statements make difference the origin of knowledge, experience, and educational benefit. In this context, 'reliable empirical data' from studies on the educational value of diversity become evidence for the fact of difference, not a basis for exploring how difference takes place and how it is institutionalized in academic practices" (p. 47). Other authors (Boykin & Palmer, 2016; Moore & Bell, 2011; Embrick, 2011; Berrey, 2011) have echoed a concern for the discursive erasure of *why* differences exist. In their influential article Bell and Hartmann (2007) highlight how diversity discourse manages to both celebrate and ignore difference, and both include and exclude race: "Diversity talk is dominated by race, infused with racial knowledge or the lack thereof. At the discursive level, then, diversity talk simultaneously acknowledges racial (and other) differences while downplaying and disavowing related social problems. Race

is always both present and absent in the diversity discourse. This paradox is key to the historical distinctiveness, cultural power, and social problems of the current American way of talking about diversity" (p. 905). The paradox whereby race is both present and absent in diversity discourse contributes to the enigmatic nature of diversity that subverts efforts to rectify racial injustices. By conflating and confusing the underlying sociocultural roots and consequences of diversity, diversity discourse serves as a tool for centering whiteness, whereby BIPOC serve as "add-ons" to whiteness, furthering the understanding of diversity without oppression, and a diversity that frames BIPOC as ripe for cultural consumption (Bell & Hartmann, 2007).

In the broader context of these critiques, and in attempts to recalibrate diversity towards the initial goals of racial integration articulated in the *Brown* decision, equity and inclusion are integrated to the concept of diversity. It was in the early 2000's when diversity was increasingly used in conjunction with the concepts of "equity" and "inclusion" in higher education (Milem et al., 2005). This addition represented a shift in the evolution of DEI as we know it today (Oliha-Donaldson, 2021). Under DEI, diversity continued to be the discursive center. Ahmed (2012) for example, critiques how diversity talk creates a sense of progress or goodwill that displaces more direct discussions of racism, serving as a depoliticizing term. As Oliha-Donaldson (2021) explains,

> The first vision of equity and inclusion mobilized through the DEI framework is representational or categorical diversity. In fact, many institutions favor a definition of diversity as representation…In other institutions, diversity is more than representation; it is also an educational imperative, centering the values of intergroup mixing, exposure to 'diversity' in all its forms, and 'appreciation and respect for difference' and human rights….Sometimes comingled with these philosophies is the idea of 'diversity

> for equity' (Owen, 2009, p. 187), which is concerned with institutions reflecting changing demographic trends and remedying historical and contemporary identity-based injustices—if not in deed, then at least in word. (Adserias et al., 2017; Owen, 2009) (p. 22-23)

The present-day struggles of DEI mirror the challenges of its predecessors, where struggle over meaning-making plague a shared understanding of what it is meant to address. Similar ambiguities, operating under a presumption of shared understanding, affect equity-centered discourses. The term equity, for example, is often confused with equality, despite repeated efforts to distinguish the two (Henze, 2005). However, equity discourse employs difference not as an outcome, like diversity does, but as a process (Oakes et. al., 2000) for providing students with resources based on their background and with a consideration for power relations that underpin educational outcomes (Corson, 2002). Inclusion, often framed in opposition to exclusion, focuses on access and on creating a culture that fosters a feeling of belonging. Brix et al. (2022) articulate inclusion as giving diverse individuals access, where they can participate, feel welcome to bring their unique perspectives, and thereby help to form a shared culture in which difference is valued rather than suppressed. Beyond equity and inclusion, some have reconfigured DEI or added other components. For example, in STEM and medical fields, we've seen the emergence of JEDI, where justice is added to the mix, Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (Hammond et. al., 2021). This is just one example of the various additions and reconfigurations of DEI; each done in attempts to redefine and reassess what the goals of each institution are in relation to racial and social justice.

Most recently, two important cases were decided at the Supreme Court. One against Harvard University the other against the University of North Carolina. Both cases

on behalf of Students for Fair Admissions. While they are separate cases, they were argued (October 2022) and decided (June 2023) on the same day (*Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, 2023). In both cases, the Supreme Court sided with the plaintiff, the nonprofit organization, Students for Fair Admissions. The decisions on these cases effectively ended race-based affirmative action in higher education admissions, claiming that both universities were in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (*Students for Fair Admissions v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023; *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina*, 2023).

A key difference in these two cases, as opposed to the earlier legal attacks on affirmative action, is that SFFA claimed that they were representing Asian American students (and white students). Some have referred to this as a "bait-and-switch" strategy (Harpalani, 2024) where Asian Americans were used in earlier litigation, but when the cases reached the Supreme Court, they were moved to the periphery where they were not offered any type of redress in the Supreme Court decision. As Harpalani (2024) explains, "We are caught in a war on racial diversity and equity in education, often pitted against other groups of color such as Black, Latina and Latino, and Native Americans. While this is not a new phenomenon, it became much more visible with SFFA v. Harvard, and we should take that as a call to action. We have been weaponized to serve a conservative agenda and this weaponization is far from over" (p. 342). This is an important aspect of these two cases as it demonstrates how Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) are very much not a monolith and how across this broad categorization there are varied

experiences and perspectives. Moreover, it highlights the tensions that exist in the meaning-making process of present-day DEI. By pointing out Asian Americans are experiencing negative impacts of affirmative action-era policies, SFFA was able to use that as a form of assault on the entire project of policies aimed at taking action to increase racial integration in predominantly white institutions.

From an agonistic perspective, it is important to highlight that SFFA, the nonprofit organization that claims to be dedicated to dismantling race-based affirmative action in higher education, has been challenging race-based affirmative action programs for years (Students for Fair Admissions, n.d.). In fact, the leader of SFFA, Edward Blum, was involved in Abigail Fisher's lawsuit against the University of Texas (Watkins, 2017). Though Fisher was unsuccessful in her claims at the time, Blum and SFFA have continued to challenge affirmative action policies across the country, including ongoing litigation against the University of Texas (Students for Fair Admissions, n.d.). On their website, SFFA, have a quick intake form that allows anyone to contribute their experience of admission rejections or perceived injustices with the possibility of joining ongoing litigation or further expanding the cases the organization takes on. They also have a click-through donation option easily accessible on their landing page, where they can crowdsource some of their expenses. This demonstrates how SFFA is both forming and organizing litigation against affirmative action programs. This provides a prime example of the agonistic tensions that exist in present-day DEI. As a stakeholder, SFFA and their leader, Edward Blum, have been challenging race-conscious practices aimed at ameliorating racial injustices for years. Even when their partners have lost cases, their vision did not waver. In agonistic terms, there was no *rupture*—they did not go away in

times of increased interest in DEI or the related affirmative action, they simply reorganized. These two most recent cases in particular showcase how organization and activism on SFFA's part pushed for years (not *mechanical*) until both *Harvard* and *North Carolina* reached the Supreme Court, SFFA having sued Harvard (Hamid & Lu, 2022) and North Carolina (Admissions Case, n.d.) in 2014 and having lost in lower courts in both cases. Finally, it is important to note that in each case race-conscious policies existed but were implemented differently, there was no *homogenous* policy approach to this process.

In the present day we continue to see the struggle of meaning-making around what we've come to know as DEI. Its meaning continues to be constructed through an agonistic process, at times involving litigation at the highest court, others through federal policies and executive actions. Through each case we see one discourse and construction of meaning give way to another, from integration to affirmative action, from affirmative action to diversity, and from diversity to present day DEI. This process is not linear, as a construction DEI is very much made up by the struggles of its constructions past. As the agonistic perspective shows, the change we see from one discourse to the next happens not *because* of Supreme Court decisions, as decisions do not act, but rather deliver new parameters for proponents and opponents of a given discourse to further engage in struggle. However, it is important to acknowledge that as a site of meaning-making, the courts have rearticulated what constitutes racism. As Lopez and Burciaga (2014) explain, "racism has been turned on its head and rearticulated by the courts as a deviant form of 'reverse racism' under the guise of Equal Protection. The courts have not only endorsed such claims by white plaintiffs but have reprimanded the respective educational

institutions for trying to correct past injustices through different affirmative strategies. In effect, the same legal principles that were used by Brown to overturn years of legally sanctioned segregated schools are now being used by the courts to protect the often narrow interests of White plaintiffs." (p. 806). As DEI continues to evolve not just in meaning but in application, it is important to continue to question how it has come to be understood the way that it is. The long history of agonistic struggle that has led to present-day DEI helps to contextualize how it has come to be an enigmatic yet widespread discourse.

Breaking the DEI Pendulum

I have argued that rather than a pendulum, the changes in the DEI space are more accurately represented by tectonic plates in constant tension— an agonistic view (Goodman et al., 2017). Through distinct moments in history, I've shown how rather than rupture, mechanical movement, and homogeneity, in each case we've witnessed the co-existence of support and opposition for initiatives, both symbolic and instrumental, aimed at breaking systems of oppression. Here I go one step further. The pendulum metaphor is enticing, a device for understanding what appear to be extreme turns in public opinion like what we've seen happen between the increased interest in DEI post-George Floyd in 2020 and current anti-DEI legislation that began to gain momentum only three years later. The pendulum has also been used to explain the ebb and flow of motivation and exhaustion in implementing DEI initiatives. However, this metaphor obscures some processes that have an important role in shaping DEI while also overstating the nature of other processes in influencing change in meaning-making.

As a heuristic, the pendulum metaphor is by design an oversimplification. A pendulum presents two sides, left or right, or forward and backwards, each one in distinct opposition to the other. Neither depict the plurality of struggle that exists in the DEI space over meaning-making. At each stage, DEI is contested, and it is made through the struggles of proponents and opponents of DEI, but also by those who are ambivalent, and who at times support DEI often despite its limitations as a vehicle for moving other ideas forward, like anti-racism.

This oversimplification is particularly dangerous when we think about the *mechanical* nature of a pendulum. That tends to obscure the struggle and labor of activists to move any issue to the forefront of American life. By the same logic, meaning, by assuming that there is something intrinsic about the movement of a metaphorical pendulum, then people will be waiting a long time to see that swing. DEI, or a subsequent discourse, will not move forward on its own. It requires action. Furthermore, there is no clean *rupture* between perceived extreme moments in history, like the juxtaposition of 2020's centering of DEI following the murder of George Floyd in Minnesota and the more recent organized legislative attacks on DEI only a few years later. This element of the agonistic perspective is critical for understanding the cultural and political context of the period when the interviews were conducted for this work, spanning the years of 2022-2024. While attacks on DEI were not yet in full swing, the political and social climate in the United States during these years was contentious at best. In 2021, Nikole Hannah-Jones endured a very public tenure review at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill where backlash to her popular 1619 project contributed to her being denied tenure. Pushback to that decision led to Hannah-Jones being granted tenure, though Hannah-

Jones would eventually choose to leave UNC for Howard University (Robertson, 2021). In the summer of 2022, the Supreme Court decided on Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization. That decision overturned Roe v. Wade, making women's rights to choose to continue or terminate pregnancy no longer protected under the Constitution (Berg & Woods, 2023). The true cost of the Covid-19 pandemic was beginning to reveal itself with disproportionate rates of mortality affecting Black, Latino, and Native American communities while anti-Asian hate was on the rise (Johnson, 2024). A 2024 survey conducted by Pew Research Center saw 29 percent of Americans say that racism was a big problem in the country, compared to 45 percent who had said so in 2021 (Pew Research Center, 2024). Reports of "DEI watch lists" where researchers engaged in DEI or DEI-adjacent work were being categorized by conservative outlets like Turning Point USA were becoming public (Johnson, 2024). Researchers who found themselves on said watchlists reported feelings of fear and stress as well as stagnation in their research and creativity (Johnson, 2024). As Goodman et al. (2017) explain, "the opposition is never vanquished- but it may be forced into abeyance and reinvention" (p. 16). Critics and proponents of DEI don't disintegrate and materialize based on the current events or policy practices of the time. They struggle in the foreground or the background, they rearrange, or they evolve— but they don't go away. Finally, DEI is understood in relation to concepts like diversity (for all), affirmative action, and integration. In the way that it evolved, tracing back to the *Brown* decision in 1954, there were plentiful symbolic acts used as reference for meaning making and much less instrumental ones. Each time, from *Brown's* "all deliberate speed" to Johnson's speech at Howard and affirmative action, to Justice Powell's "diversity" rationale, we've seen various interpretations feed into the

concept of DEI we have today. As the next chapter will explore in more detail, there are to this day, many ways in which people understand DEI. To treat DEI, the experience of meaning-making and implementation of DEI as a monolith, assuming *homogeneity*, would be not only misleading but profoundly dismissive of the history that led us to today.

A pendulum metaphor, beyond oversimplifying, also would imply a *return*. When a pendulum swings one way, it eventually returns. But as we've seen in each case, there is no return to a past discourse. As each case has shown, DEI came to be in relation to previous discourses, it is shaped by them. However, across approximately 70 years, we do not see a return to a previous discourse, rather, each discourse gives way to a new one, contributing to the contestation and complexity of DEI that we know today. This lack of return to previous discourses highlights the importance of understanding the constitutive effects of DEI itself, as we learn how DEI is constructed through previous discourses, we also gain insight into how DEI as a concept under struggle is defining the rules of engagement for the next iteration of discourse on the project of social and racial justice initiated in the mid 1950's with the *Brown* decision.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to provide a constitutive analysis of what DEI is, means, and does by demonstrating how it came to be constructed in relation to previous projects and their defining discourses. Each of the four projects including integration, affirmative action, diversity, and present day, represents a significant discursive moment in the evolution of what we now refer to as DEI. In each case, there are similarities and differences that contributed to the way that one discourse gave way to the next and

influenced the discourse that followed. In each case we see, from an agonistic perspective, how proponents and opponents of each discourse struggled to push forward interpretations that facilitated their agendas. The changes that we have seen in the evolution of DEI have not been *mechanical*— something that is inevitable because of some intrinsic energy—but rather the result of active struggle from various groups with complex political goals. While at various times different discourses took the foreground, activists for and against didn't disappear, they continued to struggle and fight, even if not on center stage. Rather than a *rupture* or a wholesale replacement of one perspective with another, there was a constant coexistence of conflicting, opposing, and complicated perspectives struggling for meaning making. In each case, particularities abounded, each contributing to the complexity of the discourse at hand, far from a *homogenous* discourse, each case demonstrated the contested construction of meaning-making of what eventually became DEI.

The nebulous understanding of DEI today is in many ways a consequence of how DEI was constructed. The agonistic perspective allows for an analysis of DEI that sheds light on the constant struggle by various stakeholders in making claims to DEI. Present-day DEI would not be what it is today if it had not been contested in the way that it was through advocacy, protest, litigation, and legislation.

Now, a brief discussion of how we understand DEI as historical. Specifically, within the DEI space, there is the frequent use of phrases like "being historically underrepresented," or "coming from a historically underrepresented group." We must think about what we mean when we say "historically." Yes, there is a long history of underrepresentation. But underrepresentation is not a matter of the past. It is a matter that

has been *sustained* throughout history. Efforts to frame segregation, white supremacy and white privilege as a matter left behind in 1950's America and that belonging to an underrepresented group means being a part of a group that *in the past* struggled for systematic access to higher education is a disservice to the labor of the many folks who have and continue to work for the advancement of racial justice. The exploration of these four cases in time instead have shown how white supremacy and racial injustice never went away; they have been present in each of these historically specific discourses leading to the present day.

The chapters that follow continue to build out DEI as a construction. Chapter four focuses on how DEI is made (in the constructivist sense) through implementation and practice. Chapter five incorporates the concept of representation as mobilization to shed light on the way that groups at the center of DEI are constructed and how they fare in relation to other groups. Both chapters rely on the complexities laid out in this chapter, where the constitutive effects of distinct discursive cases help to explain how DEI came to be.

Chapter 4
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Frontlines: Practitioners and the Complexities and Contradictions of DEI Work

This chapter addresses the meaning of DEI by analyzing DEI practitioners as street-level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) operate under conditions of limited resources, time, and institutional support as well as ambiguous goals, leading them to develop informal practices and routines to manage their workloads. By necessity, they exercise significant discretion, effectively becoming the real-world implementers and interpreters of policy. Their decisions and behaviors determine how policies are experienced by the public. It is within this framework that this chapter addresses the following questions: What does DEI mean to practitioners and how do their interpretations reflect their work conditions and guide their practices at the frontlines of DEI implementation?

DEI practitioners are tasked with translating DEI policies and commitments into actionable change. Yet many DEI practitioners operate in structurally ambiguous roles—lacking clear authority, adequate resources, or consistent institutional support. Their work is often shaped by conflicting expectations and politicized environments that demand both administrative compliance and social justice leadership. Drawing on Michael Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, this chapter demonstrates how fresh insights into DEI practitioners in higher education can be developed by analyzing them as frontline policy implementers: individuals who exercise discretion, interpret vague institutional mandates, and bear the burden of translating policy into practice. Yet, this discretion functions within institutions of higher education, and is therefore bounded by the structures and norms within academia and those that govern it. To better understand

DEI practitioners as frontline workers, we must think about the ways that their work is both dynamic yet structured (Rowe, 2025) as well as their motivations for doing this work. The conceptual lenses of "deeply meaningful work" and "public service motivation" help to explore the motivation practitioners feel in doing DEI work. Where the former refers to work that facilitates both self-actualization and self-transcendence (Oelberger, 2019), the latter refers to a person's perception and pursuit of implementation work to serve the public good and advance important social values as defined by the individual or related group (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). It is within this context that this chapter explores how DEI practitioners both embody and are constrained by their status as street-level bureaucrats—revealing the tensions, contradictions, and human cost embedded in the institutional pursuit of equity.

This chapter deals with practitioners, not exclusively professionals. Much like every square is a rectangle but not every rectangle is a square, all DEI professionals are DEI practitioners, but not all DEI practitioners are DEI professionals. The relevance of this is two-fold. First, at the center of the conceptualization of street-level bureaucrats is their position in the broader context of government or polity as it is experienced by everyday folks. They are the faces and the purveyors of experiences for clients, as Lipsky (1980) used the term, referring to those engaging with the given agency or institution. In this case, the "clients" of higher education are Black, Indigenous, people of color studying or working in academia. Their experiences in academia are shaped by people putting together syllabi, serving on hiring committees, evaluating their work for tenure, and for promotion. The folks doing these tasks are often academics putting DEI initiatives into practice. From this perspective, DEI practitioners are a more realistic

frame of reference for the way that higher education is experienced as an institutional entity. Second, practitioners are not a homogenous group. Though many share characteristics, namely a sense of purpose and meaningfulness of their job or their responsibilities related to DEI, they are not all sharing the same inside knowledge. DEI is expressly a field of study and practice that takes shape across disciplines and is expected to be carried out by both professionals specialized in DEI, and others who are not well versed in the subject. For example, hiring committees are comprised of professors who may have had brief training in DEI but are not explicitly DEI professionals. However, as part of their work as instructors and members of hiring committees and tenure review processes, they are expected to be inclusive and mindful of tenets of diversity, equity, and inclusion- even if they are after all astrophysicists, biologists, or historians by training. For the purposes of this study, all participants are practitioners. However, unless indicated specifically as "faculty" all employees at either institution, Midwest University and Southern University, are professionals under some form of DEI related job title or position. The experiences that each professional has in implementing DEI policies and practices are as varied as their own backgrounds and ties to their respective institutions.

My research suggests that DEI work functions in complex and contradictory ways. DEI work can be beneficial in some ways, including some practical uses that allow some of the work to continue even under hostile circumstances. But DEI work can also be harmful or disadvantageous, including to the individuals who practice it. What follows is a detailed analysis of evidence gathered through a series of in-depth interviews with DEI practitioners. First, a discussion of how practitioner discretion in meaning-making both serves and detracts from the goals of DEI work through ambiguity. Second, a

discussion of how institutional structures can be both productive and debilitating for practitioner discretion, primarily as inadequate structures intersect with those doing deeply meaningful work. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the complexities of the contradictory nature of DEI work in the current state and how framing DEI practitioners as street-level bureaucrats is helpful for DEI policy and practice moving forward.

The Double-Edged Sword of Ambiguity

Ambiguity, at its essence, is about openness of interpretation. It denotes an inexactness that allows for interlocutors to assume that they are engaged in a conversation about *something*- even if that something often means different things to each of them. Ambiguity, in its own nature of lacking precision, allows for plausible deniability. Plausible deniability can also be used as a strategy to circumvent, evade, or delay unwanted attention. Ambiguous terms are pliable, they can be hammered out and expanded, becoming suitable or relevant for different audiences. In the DEI space in particular, ambiguity can be both useful and detrimental to the goal of racial and social justice.

Multiple Meanings of DEI: an Empirical Fact

When posed with the question, who do you think benefits the most from your work? WA, quickly responded: *"My specific work, or DEI work? My work, probably the people of color at [department]."* Both the swift nature of the response and the distinction made are important for analysis. For WA, this question is a no-brainer. The distinction between his work and DEI work is obvious and clear to him—automatic. This is somewhat surprising, especially as his job title includes the words: diversity, equity,

and inclusion. The logical question then followed: And who do you think benefits the most from DEI work? To which WA responded with the same quick pace: "*White people."*

When asked to please expand, WA gives a glimpse into how he frames his work—anti-racism. A large part of how WA thinks about anti-racism work versus DEI work has to do with who is at the center. Or in frontline work terms: who is the client. *"I think DEI work is still very much in this place of explaining. It's still centering whiteness. White people's feelings, white people's thoughts, white people's understanding, white people's acceptance of us, right?"* Where DEI focuses on the experiences of white folks, anti-racism centers the experiences of BIPOC. WA continues by explaining how he goes about centering BIPOC experience as part of his work.

> "*I think anti-racism work is centering people of color, people of color's feelings about things, people of color's invitations to rooms and tables, people of color having power. And so, and I say that because a lot of the work we do, we center these people. We do events for people of color. We have speakers for people of color who are people of color, like we pay people of color for these things, and we don't just do these things behind the scenes or under the table. It's like we do them very much so out loud and on purpose, and I think that that's the difference. We write things centering our experiences, because we know that we have people of color, and we own our experiences while also making room and space for other people to talk and share their experiences too, when we know that has not been the case."*

In the statement above and related comments, WA signals three anchoring perspectives on DEI work that are echoed by several other practitioners in this study. First, where DEI is labeled as inaction—focused on explaining, anti-racism work is focused on taking action—creating events, bringing in people of color to speak with other

people of color to foster community. The sentiment of DEI work as status quo echoes what other scholars have found, DEI maintains current power structures rather than challenging them (Ahmed, 2012). When WA says, "White people's acceptance" of BIPOC, he is explicitly referring to the position of power held by white folks to guard or gatekeep BIPOC's entry or full participation in institutions of higher learning. Second, paying speakers of color to attend events and share their experiences and knowledge attaches tangible value to their labor but also formalizes their work—it makes it clear that their experience and insights are worthy of compensation rather than asking speakers to provide a service as an informal act of camaraderie. Third, WA makes the distinction between work done behind the scenes and work done out loud—in the open. This statement illuminates the institutional context that WA works within—it is an institutional context where anti-racism work is, at the very least, tolerated. Taking DEI work and reframing it with people of color at the center is an act of discretion on WA's part.

Discretion in defining what DEI work is and is not is an important component of how WA draws boundaries around his work. For example, WA actively does not incorporate other, broader definitions of diversity as part of his work: "*And now people are using the word diverse to talk about diversity of thought, which is a thing, right? I'm not saying it's not a thing. It's just a thing that's complicating another thing."* While he acknowledges that there are other definitions of diversity, for him, those definitions are of a separate nature to the goals of his work which is focused on dismantling racism in higher education.

In defining DEI, WA takes the conglomerate of concepts apart, and analyzes them one by one: *"And so it's like we're diverse, right? We're somewhat inclusive when you think about integration and all of these things that have happened years and years ago. So, it's like equity. Yes, that is partly the goal."* Diversity and inclusion are two parts of DEI that WA feels are not necessarily achieved, but addressed, as imperfect as they may be in practice, those are not part of DEI that he is interested in practicing. Rather, for WA, equity is more aligned with the work that he is doing. By taking DEI apart concept by concept, WA highlights how although the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion are often grouped together, they are not necessarily working in concert, with each concept having goals that may deviate from the others. When providing more detail, WA returns to the distinction between the inaction of DEI and the action of their work: "*I think that we are often not all talking about the same things, and I think that is also how to some [extent], I think white supremacy has been able to use DEI as a tool in that way it's like, 'Sure, we'll give you pieces. But we also ensure that those pieces are not ever able to connect in a way that you can actually truly have the change that you need.'"* WA's experience highlights the way that DEI has been neutralized, where the value of difference is celebrated, but the history of how differences came to be goes unexamined. This illustrates how DEI can sustain a certain stagnation rather than allowing for action toward a more critical approach like anti-racism. Furthermore, with the awareness of other definitions of DEI, WA discusses how that can be a function of white supremacy—where the goals of racial and social justice can become obscured because the focus is on being inclusive of difference while removing ways in which those differences of identity can be harnessed to produce change at an institutional level. This resonates with

Rajasekar et al. (2022) who point out that the concept of diversity can refer to differences in identities like gender, race, and class, but "...it can also signify differences between dog-owners and cat owners" (p. 317). In other words, diversity can be so inclusive that it is rendered meaningless. This shows how the meaning and goals of each concept in DEI can not only diverge from one another, they can be in direct opposition to each other.

When asked what DEI means to her, PT, like WA, also defined DEI concept by concept rather than as a collective. Unlike WA however, PT identifies her work with diversity. "*Well, diversity to me is kind of how I see the interdisciplinary work that I do. People from all walks of life, all educational backgrounds, all socioeconomic backgrounds. You name it—any sort of identity that we may hold. And I know those identities can shift as we age, or as we get older, or as we change jobs, et cetera. But to me that's what diversity is. It means that there is a cross section of people who come from all over, and [[...]] it's not a de facto word for people who are under-represented historically in society. I think it's used that way. I don't use it that way."* For PT, diversity is nuanced in the way that identities can evolve with things like a change in socioeconomic status based on a job. Unlike WA, PT embraces the inclusive and expansive nature of the concept of diversity. PT also acknowledges that diversity means different things, in particular, diversity can be used as a proxy for another similar concept: representation. She makes it clear that for her, diversity is not the same as representation.

PT continues with the definition of equity, which she aligns closely with her work. Equity manifests in forms both big and small, and both are important in PT's experience.

> *"Equity to me means barriers are lessened systematically. And attitudes! I think that's a huge part of my work. So that people have the opportunity to bring who they are fully in a collective effort, whatever that collective effort might be, and if they are part of, say, a workplace— to me, equity would mean they have no barriers to pursue areas of skill development, or professional development or growth within an organization than people who traditionally have been eased up that ladder without any questions or any scrutiny. Right? So how do we remove those? The scrutiny. The heightened criticism. Again, I'm kind of going toward those attitudinal barriers, because I think they're subtle, and they can't really be pointed out. But to me those are the most insidious forms of inequity. But then there's just the huge, large structural ones as well, like people with intellectual disabilities just aren't even thought of as people who go to college, right? That's again an attitude taught to us. Through my work I've learned to question that like, 'Why? Why do we do that?'"*

PT talks about equity in two distinct ways: as systematic and attitudinal. To tackle equity, changes must be at systems level. Part of equity is attitudes that we hold about diverse people. She also combines the two and talks about the way that our attitudes and expectations of diverse people are shaped by systems. Part of the challenge in pushing back against these learned attitudes is the subtle way that they manifest, making them difficult to capture and tackle head on. In her example of professional development, PT illustrates how attitudes play a role in limiting equity—where diversity is allowed to exist within institutions so long as it does not get in the way of business as usual. By comparing those who are not questioned in their trajectory up a metaphorical ladder with people with intellectual disabilities, she highlights the burden borne by folks who are not traditionally thought of as potential leaders. For PT, her job is to question— both for herself and to help others to question— the assumptions we hold about diverse people and consequently, how diverse folks are able to show up within our institutions.

PT concludes with inclusion, the concept that she is most ambivalent about and struggles with most because for her, it carries a sense of erasure, of adapting to the norm rather than challenging it. *"The last one is inclusion. It's a little tricky of a word for me. I have mixed feelings about it. Inclusion has a sense of conforming to the norm like, 'you're allowed into my space, but it's my space.' So, I use the word. But I do feel a little ambivalent about it, because it does have this kind of sense of like, 'this is our space. We're gonna let this non-traditional person in [and] represent that entire population.' It has a little bit of tokenism to it, and kind of patriarchy to it."* Out of all the concepts within DEI, inclusion is the one that PT identifies with the least. For her, inclusion does not challenge the existing systems, it forces diverse people to integrate into existing norms that ultimately can be harmful, leading to tokenism and marginalization within the organization, without a pathway to full participation. She then juxtaposes this version of inclusion with her ideal inclusion: *"So for me, what would inclusion mean if it didn't mean that? It would mean—again, people can bring their full selves. They don't have to be one thing or representative of one thing. All their complexities that make them [who they are] are accepted in a way that it's seen as a strength for the organization to not have everything the same, or forced to be kind of this mythic normality… [it] would mean that we embrace people to be their full selves and even the parts that may need growth or development, because all of us need to [be] given support rather than derision."* When speaking of representation in the context of DEI, PT describes it as an expectation that is placed on people—to represent certain aspects of their identities within the organization, but not their full selves. For it to be true inclusion, people would be appreciated for who they are, including the complexities of their identities and parts of their personhood that

require development. Ideal inclusion would require an environment that allows people to struggle to become better and grow with organizational support.

VP acknowledges that there are various meanings of diversity. When asked what it means to him in particular, he admits that it's difficult to define and how important it is to define one's terms; "*Yeah, that's a tough one, and it's a hard word, because when different people say diversity, they tend to mean different things. I always try to clarify what I mean, or what others mean when we start talking about diversity, because in different contexts those differences become really important."* He then goes on to differentiate between what he refers to as representational diversity and diversity of views and experiences, where representational diversity is more surface level, relying on outward signs of difference, like last name or skin color; *"Diversity could mean representational diversity. And this, I think, is the way higher education and [Midwest University] mostly think about diversity in terms of representing people with different identities, different experiences."* It is this type of diversity that he finds most prevalent in higher education in general, but also in his own work environment at Midwest University. However, this "representational diversity" alone does not necessarily achieve the goals of diversity; *"And then there's another aspect of diversity that is more than just representational diversity because sometimes representational diversity doesn't really achieve the goals of diversity. And that is just because somebody may look different, somebody may have a different background, somebody may have a different last name, somebody may have a different nationality, or ethnicity doesn't necessarily bring something different or diverse to the table."* VP's observation on what he terms "representational diversity" speaks to the limitations of an understanding of

representation that is not intersectional—where a person's race, ethnicity, or background alone does not inherently make them champions of diversity. It is interesting that what VP calls "representational diversity" shares a lot in common (including critiques) with descriptive representation (Pitkin, 1967). VP posits that it is important to also value what he refers to as "diversity of views and experiences." He provides an example of how he recommends that search committees look for this type of diversity in their applicants. He differentiates between commitment to diversity and diversity of views and experiences where the former is something intellectual and the latter is a kind of knowledge that is acquired through experience, it is an embodied knowledge that lends itself to innovation and change.

> *"Right so, then, there's this diversity of views and experiences—lived experience. For example, I was just having a conversation with a search committee. I spent a lot of time thinking about the kinds of faculty and staff that we're bringing to the college, and I want search committees to think beyond commitment to diversity. So, you know, oftentimes we have job candidates write a diversity statement, and they talk about their deep devotion and commitment to diversity. Commitment is great, and I think we want people that are really committed to inclusion. That commitment is different from lived experience because lived experience brings a different quality to that commitment. Because, you know, we can be as liberal as anybody in terms of our thinking about equity and inclusion. But it's not quite the same as lived experience and having come through a system of oppression and a system of neglect, lack of access, lack of opportunity, and that lived experience has an additional nature, additional quality of contribution to make. And so, another part of diversity is this sort of this deeper layer of diversity. That for us to really make progress and innovation, we need that diversity of lived experience, because otherwise we have folks that have had very similar*

> *experiences and may all be committed to equity and inclusion, but it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to help us make progress as a group."*

When speaking with search committee members, VP advises them on distinguishing between an applicant having commitment to diversity and having experience navigating systems of oppression. This is an act of discretion that shapes the way policy is put into practice. For him, lived experience is deeper than "representational diversity" because it is based on one's own ability to navigate existing oppressive systems, and it is precisely this experience that provides a different quality to the otherwise idealized commitment to diversity. Lived experience grounds commitment to diversity in something real rather than hypothetical.

VP then discusses social justice as a moderator of both "representational diversity" and "diversity of experience." For him, social justice is a thing apart from diversity— but it is something that provides a mission for diversity work. "*And then, finally, there's another component to this and that is one with respect to social justice. There's a social justice component to diversity that is really hard for us to have a conversation around, because quite frankly, not only are there historic injustices, there are current injustices. So, it's more than representational diversity. It's more than lived experience diversity. This is a different kind of mission around social justice, and not just to correct things in the present but to fix things for the future."* Social justice is something that goes beyond either definition of diversity and sets its sights on the future— on making sustainable change that can correct not only injustices from the past, but injustices that are experienced today. VP closes with the importance of continuing to ask what diversity means as a form of facilitating conversation and collaborative action;

> *"So, when we have, when we start having conversations around diversity or diversity is an issue that's brought up, it's really important to clarify- 'So what do we mean when we say diversity? Okay, I understand you're committed to diversity. What is that to you?' So, you asking the question is exactly the question we need to continue to ask because it's really different for different people. And even on the representational diversity side, somebody might be talking about racial and ethnic diversity. Some people might be talking about gender identity diversity, disability, veteran status, religion, you know there's all kinds of [identities] and each one of those has a different type of social justice agenda, not to mention the intersectionalities of those identities."*

VP, like many other participants, points out not only that there are multiple meanings of diversity. Specifically, VP highlights that depending on who you speak with, diversity can be deployed to move forward with a different social justice agendas. VP has a way forward for ensuring that folks engaged in DEI work are talking about the same thing: keep talking about it and keep asking clarifying questions. For VP, it is important to have space to have open conversations about what diversity means, including the intersectional nature of diversity. This, however, is a discretionary act that is made available to VP at Midwest University, where the institutional context allows for these conversations to be out in the open.

The same discretion may not be possible in other institutional contexts. When talking with JP, a DEI practitioner from Southern University, the question of defining DEI came up early on. For JP, the definition of DEI is less about what it *is* and more about what it *does*. *"It's not super prescriptive, necessarily… [the head of DEI] purposely defines diversity and inclusion very broadly so that when people say, 'oh,*

you're just helping those people' like 'No, we are doing stuff with all of these other folks.' A lot of people have disabilities that put them in under-represented categories…And so when you start talking about diversity and mention these other things, a lot of people know people who have ADHD, who have some kind of unseen or seen disability. And then they're like, 'oh, well, I really never thought of them as being part of diversity.'" A broad definition of DEI is used as a defense against those who may criticize the work that is intended to benefit "those people." When asked to clarify, JP confirmed that "those people" refers to people of color. There is an additive rather than intersectional nature to defining DEI like this. In the example that JP provides, disability is part of that broader—and as is implied—more palatable version of DEI. This is interesting in two specific ways: first, it assumes that people of color are separate from people with disabilities, that those two identities are somehow mutually exclusive, effectively rejecting this form of intersectionality. In that case, if "those people" are people of color, then people with disabilities are assumed to be white. Second, and this is perhaps the most important takeaway, JP illustrates the conditions and environment they work in. The fact that disability makes DEI more acceptable because those critical of DEI are likely to know people with disabilities and that the personal connection to a person with disabilities is what makes DEI palatable shows how resources are guarded. It also highlights the institutional context that limits JP's choice set in talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion. For JP, her strategy for talking about DEI is almost the directional opposite of VP at Midwestern University. Where VP opts for clarifying questions and transparent communication, JP makes use of her own choice set and discusses DEI in ways that help obscure some of the racial justice work done under DEI.

DEI means different things to different people. On the one hand, the multiplicity of meaning allows for ambiguity to emerge and with it, broader discretion for DEI practitioners to implement DEI policy within their organizational contexts. On the other hand, as WA pointed out, when DEI serves as a catch-all for so many different definitions, and ultimately operationalizations, it has the potential to undermine the goals of racial and social justice. Furthermore, DEI practitioners are aware that they operate in a context where DEI means different things to different people and have developed their own strategies or routines for doing this work at the frontlines. This second finding is explored more in-depth in the following sections.

Practical Uses of Ambiguity**: **"Call it What You Want"

Ambiguity around what DEI means can present opportunities for discretion at the frontlines. WA provides an example where he and his team make use of DEI language to shift the conversation to anti-racism work. He describes committee meetings regarding a particular plan of action developed for their department specifically; "*And so now what happens is like in meetings there's a lot of conversations around diversity work, which is fine, that's our title. However, the committee was specifically created to talk about the plan, and so we would have to remind folks often, 'like that's great like we don't want to minimize that [DEI] work, and also we have a very specific focus here, and so we have to stay on message. We have to stay on brand.'"* WA recognizes that while their office, tasked with leading the committee on the action plan, is a DEI office, the work that they intend to do is anti-racism work. As part of committee meetings, the conversation can go in the direction of DEI, and while that work might be important, it is not the focus that WA intends for the action plan. WA explains further, "*So, I go about using the language*

that they understand to still shift them to have the conversations that we are having. So it's saying like, 'stay on message, or stay on brand'— it sounds gross because I'm using language that actually is not the language of what we're doing, but it's like me doing that helps you stay here, stay in the conversation, right, as opposed to not, and also helps them. [DEI language] helps remind them that, like anti-racism work is a very specific thing and that diversity work does not mean anti-racism." WA deploys DEI language and phrases that he associates with DEI like "brand" and "message," which themselves carry a connotation of marketing, to shift the conversation towards anti-racism work. The assumption here is that folks in this committee have a familiarity with DEI language and that part of the value associated with DEI work is how it helps their specific department market itself to potential "customers," ostensibly students. While WA disagrees with that stance, he makes use of the familiarity of DEI language to then engage in conversations that are particular to the plan, which has an anti-racism rather than a DEI focus. The way that WA deploys DEI language is also pragmatic, it helps others in the committee draw distinctions that help define anti-racism work. WA then explains that he and his team have been having conversations about changing the name of their office to reflect the anti-racism work that they do. Part of those conversations was a discussion of the trade-offs involved; *"We're not doing DEI work. This [anti-racism work] is what we're doing, and we need to say what we're doing. But also recognizing—how much time will we have to spend explaining what we're doing if we change the name right now, as opposed to just doing the work? Because so many people wouldn't understand what we're doing."* WA takes a practical approach to the issue of labeling the work that is consistent with his use of DEI language in committee meetings. When dealing with limited time and resources,

WA is making the decision to deprioritize renaming this office and focusing instead on continuing to do the work of anti-racism. Managing the energy that could be invested in explaining and educating those who wouldn't understand or might even oppose the renaming of the office is a discretionary act. WA and his team make use of DEI and the multitude of meanings that it can convey to move their anti-racism work forward.

At Southern University, BR also finds practical uses for the ambiguity provided by vague language. She shares that she can't use direct language to describe her work without the potential for backlash; "*We can't say we want more black students. We can't say that. Because then someone would say, 'oh you're showing preferential treatment to a group of people, that's illegal.'"* Like WA, BR is making use of different discourse to do racial justice work. However, for BR, rather than utilizing DEI language to move folks towards more progressive anti-racism work, BR is using it defensively to avoid scrutiny from those who are entirely opposed to racial justice work. Instead, she uses the language of representation, where representation can capture race and other identities. "*But when we say the word under-represented— it can include the fact that we don't have many rural students here at Southern University. It can capture that. We know that people with disabilities are under-represented in academia, whether they're as students or faculty, so it could capture them. It can capture racial and ethnic under-representation et cetera, so it just feels like a safer word to use than what you really mean, sometimes you know?"* BR uses more general language that is inclusive of race as a form of safety—for herself but also for her work. The language of representation is less likely to be flagged by those who oppose DEI work. The decision that BR makes in referring to her work as representation is a discretionary act that considers her institutional context. For her, it is

not about progressing towards anti-racism language like it is for WA, rather, it is about continuing to do *some* work within an institutional environment that has limited choices for her work.

CE, a fellow Southern University DEI professional, expands on this with an analogy; *"I [[…]] recognize that we should be able to say those words. But I'm also pragmatic and I'm strategic. And so that's where it gets to the policy place— you know there are certainly times where—again more analogy, but you know the deck that's swimming like up on the surface. We're all calm. Everything's good. It's going. We're working really hard on, you know, down below, trying to get everything done."* While CE understands that she should be able to be explicit about DEI work, she refers to herself as strategic and pragmatic when making the choice to not use explicit DEI language. Here too is an example of discretion. As CE's metaphor implies, for her, it is important that the water remain calm at the surface, that the figurative floating deck remain still, while underwater, work continues so that her focus can remain on getting things done. For CE and BR, their institutional context leads them to make different decisions from WA, all the while all three continue committed to the goals of racial equity.

ND gives an example of how more recent scrutiny towards DEI initiatives have impacted her daily work at Southern University. In reference to a workshop that her office held annually, she mentions having to reframe the goal of the workshop and change the language completely. She first acknowledges that prior to more drastic legislative threats to DEI she was able to use some DEI language while also making it more palatable by including non-race related identities; "*For a long time here, prior to all of this, even when we first put together our materials, and we talked about 'to reach our*

diverse student body'— we always brought the qualifier in that it was including our many first generation, rural, low-income students." However, more recently even the general DEI language has been considered too inflammatory. "*That's since been radically changed. I forget what else—we also had under-represented in there, and that's certainly been taken out. We just don't ever get to be explicit. Well, within my context at Southern University, we don't ever get to be explicit about race. It's just sort of like— it's almost an unspoken rule that you can't talk about race issues in any public facing materials."* It is important here that ND refers to her choices being dictated by an unspoken rule. This gives more insight into her institutional context. The choice sets that ND feels are available to her are exactly that, they are *felt* not made explicit to her. This is akin to the type of power that Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power. When theorizing modern (disciplinary) power, Foucault contrasted it with the preceding sovereign power— power that relied on overt violence. Unlike its predecessor, disciplinary power is a form of power that operates through surveillance, normalization, and training to shape individuals' behavior and bodies within institutions like schools. Rather than using force, it works by encouraging people to internalize rules and monitor themselves. So, while ND hasn't experienced direct discouragement, there is something about her institutional context and routines that have led her to avoid using DEI language preemptively. She continues to describe the difference between the content of the training versus the advertising materials used to garner interest for the training. *"And so, when we're talking about inclusive teaching training [...]it's not that we weren't going to talk about it in the actual session, but there couldn't be any hints of that [in the advertising materials]. Because that's going to be a trigger, right? And so, what we're trying to do is avoid*

triggering people, so that we can actually do the work that needs to be done." While ND experiences self-censorship regarding DEI language, she also demonstrates that she is resisting— as Foucault (1977) explains about power, it is everywhere, and so too, is resistance. However, her resistance only shows up overtly in the safety of the workshop itself. While it isn't advertised as including DEI aspects, the teaching workshop does include components that focus on inclusive teaching.

AJ, a DEI practitioner with more than two decades of experience working in the American south, shares her perspective on DEI and her attitudes towards DEI language; *"I've been doing DEI for 20 years. It's just, I have a name now. You know? Now everybody calls it DEI. It's a name that was put in place for this [work]. But we've been doing this work for years. We've been doing it with access. We've been doing it with inclusion. We've been doing it with recruitment. We've been doing it in the classroom. We've been doing it by having different workshops. I just think that people wanted to have— which is not bad, it's great to finally have—a formal name that defines what you do right? Why not?"* For AJ, having a formal name for the work is a nice-to-have, it is not a need-to-have, as evidenced by her ability to work in DEI for as long as she has under different monikers. For AJ, DEI work is everywhere—and it has been known under various names throughout her time working in the DEI space. AJ makes an important point about DEI language by shining a light on who the intended audience of the language is: "*But it's really sometimes where the pendulum swings in politics that defines the names of things that we're going to be doing. Listen! If we have to change [the job] name, [to] undergraduate student engagement. It's not significant. It is great to have the name, but even without the name we can do the same things. But I think people need to*

have a name. I appreciate the name, and I appreciate that there is more definition. I think the name gave us a [common] thread to the movement and to the need that there is for this kind of work." Her attitude is relaxed when it comes to the possibility of renaming her office or her job title. She is secure in her ability to do the work independently from whatever it is called. However, she also points out that having a formal name for the work is important for collective practice. As she explains, it gives folks something to hold onto to create traction behind a movement. So, while politics and policy may intervene in the language available to practitioners to describe their work, it does not necessarily have to completely do away with their work. As a worker at the frontlines of DEI, AJ shows that through discretion, resistance can exist.

DEI practitioners from both institutions are able to separate their work from DEI language. This is important because it shows that practitioners have practical uses for the multiple meanings of DEI. In some respects, it allows for their work to continue—at the very least, some version of their work, even if they cannot do so explicitly. At the same time, ambiguity has important consequences for conversations about power. From a Foucauldian perspective, discourse is one of the main tools through which power operates, it doesn't just describe the world, it helps construct it. Therefore, shaping what is possible to think, say, or do. While practitioners protect their work through ambiguity, said ambiguity also has some negative consequences for collective practice.

Leveraging Ambiguity: (Il)legibility

In recent years there has been an increase in government intervention in higher education generally and in DEI policies and practices specifically. By the first and second quarter of 2023, when these interviews largely took place, a few states had begun to

introduce anti-DEI legislation. Mostly, however, there were rumblings and suspicions. Since 2023, at least 136 anti-DEI bills in 29 states and the U.S. Congress have been introduced. Of those 136 bills, roughly 20 percent have become law (The Chronicle of Higher Education). In the past few years DEI offices have been dismantled, DEI statements slashed from application packages, and DEI trainings have been banned. Beyond pieces of legislation, the government has also placed pressure on colleges and universities to comply via the limitation of government funding such as research grants and governmental contracts.

Beyond higher education, the political environment in the country has grown more divided along party lines. In April of 2023, Project 2025, a conservative policy initiative led by the Heritage Foundation, a right-leaning think tank in the United States was published. The over 900-page policy initiative calls for federal reform along deeply conservative ideological lines, including the dismantling of DEI practices in higher education and beyond. While President Trump has publicly denied a connection to Project 2025 and its affiliates (Narea, 2024), it is reported that less than a year into Trump's second term almost half of Project 2025 initiatives have been carried out (Wehle, 2025). It is in this topsy-turvy environment that DEI practitioners have become increasingly central to the work of institutions of higher education.

Some practitioners discussed how contextual factors influence the way that they may be able to not only talk about DEI, but also how they can protect it. JP for example, talked about her own strategies in highlighting the aspects of DEI work that are most compelling to legislators; *"It's a way to navigate. This is the way to navigate the system to allow you to keep doing the work that you need to do, by maybe highlighting processes*

for groups that people didn't think fell into that category." Here JP is specifically talking about expanding DEI to blur the focus on race which can lead to pushback and instead place more emphasis on other aspects of marginalization, like disability. *"Like I said, if you talk with folks who have disabilities—the seen and unseen, you know a lawmaker is not going to make a law that's going to affect [for example] his nephew that has Asperger's or autism, because now it's personal. But you know, if they can't see it, then 'it's not affecting me and mine, so therefore it's okay.' kind of thing. So, if you brought in [disability] to show, 'hey these are people who need this assistance. You're gonna deny them? Boy, that's gonna look really poor on your part that you're denying this whole group of people who have autism or ADHD, or whatever the thing is. And your constituents. You could be alienating a bunch of your base.' So, it is a way to kind of negotiate the areas now."* For JP, part of her strategy to continue doing DEI work is making it personal for those who may challenge her work. While those who oppose the goals of DEI might not see the value of racial justice, JP believes that they very well may see the value of quality experience and support for those who have disabilities. This pivot to highlight disability as part of DEI is not because racial equity isn't important to JP, on the contrary, pivoting is precisely about continuing DEI work that aids in bringing about racial equity.

Making use of ambiguity by highlighting aspects of difference across identities other than race is a strategy that was widely reported by practitioners at Southern University. BR described her approach to DEI like a dance: "*It feels like a tap dance, I guess, or like you're just being very strategic with everything because, you know, somewhere someone might try to pick it apart."* This description of a dance, rather than a

fight, shows that for some practitioners like JP and BR, their discretionary choices are intended to not be confrontational but rather, as CE described earlier, be hidden, under what appears to be placid water. Pondering on her own strategies regarding not only the language but the logic that she employs in discussing her work, CE shares why she chooses to engage more directly with certain aspects of DEI over others; *"It's probably easier for some people to digest too."* CE elaborated on her views on not just expanding DEI but bringing certain aspects of DEI to the forefront and leaving other aspects—like race, in the background; *"It's not one group or one sort of thing. It's like, who doesn't have what they need to be successful? And so, I think it allows you to have an even broader umbrella when you're thinking about what your services are for. So, we've seen we've had big pushes for like rural students, which makes a lot of sense for being in our state. But it's obviously easier to get some people, you know, third party stakeholders, on board with that more than other populations of students that we're talking about. So, I think it's a little bit, I think, personally, it's an easier term to digest for some people."* By some people, CE is referring to not only potential faculty and staff, or students, and their families who might feel negatively towards DEI, but state and federal legislators. By focusing on rural students, CE can continue both to comply with the laws in her state and serve BIPOC students from rural areas.

The way that some practitioners, including CE, JP, and BR protect their work from the scrutiny of state and federal legislators is through a form of illegibility. Where legibility refers to the way a state simplifies and organizes complex realities into forms that can be easily seen, understood, and controlled from above (Scott, 1998), illegibility refers to the informal, and locally grounded practices that resist standardization and

remain invisible or unintelligible to centralized state authorities. Illegibility, based on insider knowledge, is a resource to guard against government intervention. By strategically engaging with certain aspects of DEI and diminishing or being more ambiguous about racial equity, practitioners are making use of their discretion to make their work illegible to outsiders. ND, a fellow Southern University practitioner, provides a specific example of the way she and her team have navigated the pressures of state intervention in their work. ND explains that among the projects for her center is the goal of hiring a faculty fellow to focus on more inclusive and equitable teaching practices. At the same time as they're preparing to advertise the position, the state legislature was reviewing their budget. "*At the same time as we really got started and planning, the [state] legislature was going through their budget process and getting upset about words like diversity and inclusion, and things like that. We already couldn't use the word equity. So, we just found other ways around it. But sort of, we—there was somebody who was doing an equitable hiring practices session, and they changed it to ethical hiring practices. So, you know, you sort of just do the work anyways, but you have to figure out how to talk about it. But this time around, it got a lot more severe. They were talking about budget cuts. There were some pretty major budget cuts."* As a state institution, Southern University is very much reliant on the state legislature to fund many of its functions. As ND shows, she and others in her center have devised different strategies for reframing or renaming certain events and activities to continue their work without ringing alarms at the state level. When ND and her team went on to advertise the new position however, it caught the attention of other nearby universities; "*Their leadership went to our leadership and said, 'hey, how are you getting away with doing this?' So, it went full*

circle. Now we had, you know, the support of our leadership, it wasn't like we were going rogue. So, the results of all of that meant that we're still doing the work, but we've had to change what we're calling it." This experience was a reminder for ND of how triggering certain language could be for some people. "*But we had to put in quite a bit of work with our [leadership] to scrub all the language that might sound like it is connected to DEI. So, words like 'identity' or 'empowering students' were taken out. Our leadership is in favor of us doing this work, but they also know that in order to be able to do the work we have to do it in a way that won't draw unnecessary attention from legislatures, because [Southern University is prominent] and so they look at things like our calendar, or what's going on, or they hear about stuff. And there's just such a politicized trigger reaction to a lot of these things. And so, we just have to be careful. And the reason we're being careful is so that we can actually do the work, right?"* While ND has the support of her leadership, she was also instructed to not draw any unnecessary attention, this meant renaming much of what her work entails. The renaming of things like the faculty fellowship position is a way of leveraging ambiguity to make their work less legible to state legislators.

Ambiguity as a Barrier for Collective Practice

Some practitioners extend DEI to be as inclusive as possible as a form of protecting their work, including work that is focused on racial equity. Some achieve this by attempting to shift the attention away from race and towards other aspects of marginalization, like disability or being from a rural part of the country. Others switch works like "equitable" for "ethical". This is a choice made with the understanding that while not everyone may be on board with racial equity, more people will relate to being

from a rural area, or may have experience with disability, either directly or indirectly. While this shift of attention is pragmatic and, in many ways, offers practitioners the opportunity to continue to do their work, it also posits a challenge for structural change in the present and in the near future. As Schneider and Ingram (1993) have pointed out, policies are not just responses to needs or facts, they are shaped by political power and cultural perceptions of who is "deserving" or "undeserving" of support. By treating DEI as elastic, expanding to include not only different types of difference, but what could be constructed as more deserving types of difference—like disability or rural living—practitioners are through their own implementation and discourse, contributing to the social construction of BIPOC as undeserving. Here the double-edged sword is clear: while shifting attention away from racial equity can help to continue DEI work without as much pushback in the present, it also contributes to further marginalizing BIPOC in higher education moving forward.

This tension is best characterized by putting ND from Southern University and WA from Midwest University in conversation. ND shares that one of the drawbacks of leveraging ambiguity around DEI is that sometimes others interested in doing DEI work don't recognize the work that ND is doing as DEI work; *"Sometimes I'll get comments from people that say, 'oh, well, you should talk to so and so'—some faculty member—'they're **really** [participant emphasis] doing this kind of work'... and like we do have this expertise, but they don't recognize it from us because we're not stating it explicitly, I think."* While being careful with her language is a large part of what allows ND to do her work, it also obscures her work from others who are committed to being more open about the work that they want to do under DEI. WA for example, is more focused on moving

past current manifestations of DEI and moving towards anti-racism work; *"I say this all the time, I feel like people are just saying that 'Oh, we're fighting for diversity. We need diversity.' I'm like, we're diverse. We've been diverse for years, like we are past that. If that is what you still feel we are striving towards, then you're already behind the times, and I don't understand what we're doing."* WA voices what is also articulated in earlier chapters, which is the nested nature of DEI discourse. For example, to understand diversity, one cannot ignore earlier history of affirmative action, likewise, to move forward to anti-racism, one must move past diversity and DEI discourse. However, where WA is pushing forward, ND is looking for ways to stay put, and this applies both in the sense of not moving forward but also not being erased completely. By understanding ND and WA, we are able to better understand how institutional contexts shape the choice sets available to practitioners. Where ND is speaking cryptically out of fear of loss of funding or scrutiny from the government—she is often told indirectly that she's not doing "the work." WA on the other hand is focused on moving forward and past the neutralizing effects of diversity discourse— this is a choice that is made available to him based on the institutional context that he works within. For ND and WA, their choice sets for their discretionary use of not only discourse but resources for implementation are vastly different.

While the challenges that both ND and WA face are national, because they are at large state institutions, their local state governments continue to yield a fair amount of discretion over issues of DEI, this in turn also contributes to the way that practitioners can navigate these challenges. JP makes this point directly; *"And that really depends on, I think, on where you're located, of how that navigation happens. I was in California a*

couple of weeks ago, and you know they have a very liberal governor. None of this stuff is going on there." When JP says "this stuff" she means the challenges to DEI that she experiences in her state. While practitioners at Southern University are trying to hold onto some semblance of DEI work, other places, like California are challenged in a different way; with bringing awareness to other forms of marginalization, like caste. *"They're even working on [the idea that] you can't discriminate based on caste. That's a big new thing that's happening on the West coast. And I could just see people here be like 'what is caste? I don't even understand.' because we don't have a large community that had functioned in the caste system before they emigrated here to [the state]. So, they'd have no idea what that meant and how that was set up and [[...]] I think it's a very location-based kind of way to navigate how the political scene is working in the area that you are."* JP's example of caste entering the DEI discourse in California showcases how different her situation at Southern University is from her colleagues working on DEI in California. Not only is "this stuff" not relevant for Californians in the same way as it is for folks at Southern University, but they are moving toward incorporating critical thinking around caste and how it contributes to systemic oppression. This is something that JP can't fathom happening at Southern University. For JP this is a function of the dominant political leanings in a state, at the governmental level but also the people and their lived experiences. JP provides a full circle moment—when a polity fails to integrate folks with diverse lived experiences, their institutions also fail along those same fault lines in a perpetuation of systemic injustice.

Not all practitioners experience the duality of the national and local challenges the same way. For YB at Midwestern University, travelling to other states and attending

national conferences is a part of creating community around a common goal. *"The challenges are national, right? So, you know I'm [Midwest state] centric. [But] I've been able to travel, [[...]] go to conferences and get some perspective and have conversations with people [from other regions of the U.S.] to realize we're in the same sandbox. It's just like different ways of saying right, like just very, very, very small differences here and there. But a lot of the same challenges persist and are very similar throughout the country. It just looks different. It's for me, kind of less isolating, when you go somewhere else, and it's some of the same, but just different right? So that part, I found, kind of to be humbling."* YB can look past the various discourses and language around DEI and find commonalities with practitioners from across the country. For her, the differences are small, and while the challenges may manifest themselves in different ways in various contexts, at their core, the challenges are the same.

However, ND at Southern University, disagrees. ND gives the example of attending a professional conference where the theme was equity in education, "*And I can remember when [the call for proposals] came out, and I looked at it I said, 'Gosh! Are we gonna get in trouble for going to the conference with this theme?' And at the end of the day—probably not. Nobody is gonna notice."* ND's first thought was one of self-surveillance. This insight into her thought process—first being concerned about getting in trouble for attending a conference with the theme of equity in education quickly followed by her talking herself out of that concern demonstrates the constant mental load that DEI practitioners carry. When speaking specifically about the theme of the conference, ND shared, *"I think this speaks to maybe some of that, like almost cross-cultural conversation, because I think in areas where people are not facing constraints around*

these conversations—they don't even realize what some of us are facing..." Here, ND points out that for some folks, though they face similar challenges, the constraints under which they operate are different, so much so that she refers to them as having different *cultures*. The explicit use of equity in the call for proposals is something that ND can't imagine doing. The only way she considers attending the conference is by convincing herself that other people—presumably people against DEI in higher education—won't notice. She also considers the fact that the conference includes explicit language around equity as an indicator that colleagues in different state and institutional contexts aren't aware of the constraints that ND and her team face at Southern University. ND further explains her frustrations at attending national conferences;

> "*But also [colleagues in other states] may not see it as even an important conversation, because they're like, 'Well, listen, those states, we can just kind of ignore them and let's just do the work', or there's some sort of like lack of awareness of what some of the different conversations are that need to be had, because I need to be able to talk with people about, how do we navigate it within the sort of the space that I'm in? That's very different than when somebody says, 'Well, sometimes we get resistance too.' I don't know, like I can't even remember, because I can't even sometimes make sense of the things that people are talking about [when they're talking about the] challenges they're facing because they're so far away from the context that we're in where most of the challenges are even being able to do the work at all."*

ND's experience interacting with colleagues from other states exemplifies a broader challenge for collective practice. The way ND describes practitioners not sharing a common language and talking past each other showcases the way that higher education institutions are bound by local politics. State context influences choice sets for DEI work at the frontlines to the point where it remakes some of those boundaries around what

constitutes DEI work. Rather than finding common ground like YB, ND felt misunderstood and minimized by her colleagues from other states at this conference.

While challenges to collective practice around DEI are felt across institutions, they are also felt within institutions. In a conversation with LT, a tenure-track junior faculty member from Southern University, she expressed the frustration in the distance between the concept of DEI and actionable steps for implementation. She provides an example when this gap was most apparent to her while attending a DEI workshop. She explains that the facilitator had impressive materials including spreadsheets used to conceptualize DEI and how it is evolving; "*And then I thought, 'but how?' And I asked her that, I said, 'How can we, at the bottom of the totem pole, use any of this stuff that you're conceptualizing here? How does that trickle down to us? 'And a couple of people asked that too, and there was no real resolution to this question."* As a faculty member, LT wants to incorporate DEI into her daily routines of teaching and advising students, as well as her participation in various committees. However, she finds it difficult to translate the concept of DEI into practice. *"I mean, think about all the people in a bureaucracy that have to communicate and trickle, you know, like it's a cultural thing too. And part of the culture are maybe also staff, administrators, and then… anyway, a little fog. [This process] puts a little fog over things that makes people talk a little less openly about stuff."* LT describes the gap between the concept and the practice of DEI as a "fog." More specifically, she refers to the fog as part of the culture, here referring to the way the university functions as a bureaucracy. Where the expectation is that there is inside knowledge, that inside knowledge is often not collective even within institutions. As DEI is practiced across disciplines, by administrators and staff, the lack of explicit practice

does not always trickle down to faculty, some who for their part are interested in incorporating DEI into their practice as instructors and committee members. When asked what she thought was the main contributor to the "fog" LT took a moment to answer; "*Communication, that kind of is the key, right? Nobody's talking about it. Nobody actually gives things—you remember when I talked a minute ago about the DEI workshop, and I said, 'the obvious' and you said, 'What is the obvious?' And like, that's a good question, right? Like, I bet we don't even know or agree about that? [[...]] So communication, that's what I mean with fog. And the more pressure [that] comes from society and politics to kind of obscure some of these terms, the more foggy it gets and the less inclined we are to talk about it. There are, of course, some among us who will be like, who have said, you know, 'I don't care, I'm going to do it anyway.' And those are the —remarkably— only the people who are tenured."* LT makes two important points for understanding DEI work at the frontlines. First, she further corroborates the pressures that are exerted on DEI in higher education from the outside, namely state and national politics. This outside scrutiny pushes DEI professionals to obscure and make their programming illegible to those looking in. However, as seen here with LT, this strategy can also have negative effects for collective practice within the same institution where DEI professionals may understand that they are doing DEI work, even if it is by a different name, that does not necessarily, in LT's words, "trickle down" to faculty looking to implement DEI in their own frontline work. Second, LT refers to the ability to engage with DEI head-on being a sort of privilege possessed by those who have tenure. Tenure, in this scenario being something that safeguards one's employment. This functions as a form of self-surveillance as well. LT finds herself being careful: *"Because*

I just have no guidance, and in a state with concealed carry—I'm sort of, I would say I'm not encouraged to force the issue." For LT and others looking to do DEI work in hostile environments, concern and fear of losing more than a job are very real. This contributes to the mental load that DEI practitioners experience and influences the choice sets available to them.

Ambiguity and Ambivalence

Ambiguity presents both opportunities and drawbacks for DEI work. Navigating the challenges of DEI work, the state, and institutional contexts that shape the choice sets for practitioners has contributed to a sense of ambivalence towards DEI. Ambivalence towards DEI is both internal and external—where practitioners are coping with their own (internal) mixed feelings as well as wading through conflicting (external) attitudes from others.

ZV provides an excellent example of how sometimes doing the work can be filled with mixed feelings. He talks about how the lack of resources for funding DEI work is a challenge across the board. More importantly, he shares that by nature of limited resources, multiple departments resort to competing for that funding to do similar work in their respective departments. The fact that his ability to do his job is in part possible because other folks don't get funding to do theirs leaves ZV troubled; "*Those tensions are really stark. Because when I think about it, it gets me to the point where I'll ask myself, am I being complicit in a broken system? Am I perpetuating the things that we're seeking to fight?"* By working within the institution of academia, ZV's choices are limited and not set up to challenge the very structures that create these tensions.

AJ for her part describes the way she engages with students who demand more from her all the while navigating relationships with faculty who are resisting DEI entirely. When describing her job she has a main goal: creating programming conducive to student success. She sets out to achieve this goal with programming focused on mentorship, "*The focus is on diversity. That's gonna be changing a little bit [now] since we don't want anything to be so glaring like—DEI. Of course, I'm having students complain but I also have an administrative charge."* AJ explains that students want her to maintain DEI as an explicit focus. They complain about losing direct and transparent language and resources for diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, AJ's job is multifaceted and while she creates programming for students, she is also responsible for administrative duties like putting together climate surveys for the faculty and staff; *"One of the faculty members in the Climate Survey was really upset, really transparent. Said 'what the hell? Why do we waste so much time on diversity? We have to, you know, focus on [the field subject of the department]' and this and that. You are always gonna get your faculty members that are going to say that."* AJ exemplifies work at the frontlines of DEI. She must navigate both the expectations from students of increasing DEI focus in her work while also expectations from others to be rid of it all together. For some, she is not doing enough. For others, she is doing too much. This ambivalence presents a complicated landscape that AJ traverses each day.

At What Cost, to Whom?

While the tension between structure and individual discretion is observed in the definition of DEI work, it can also be observed when we consider wider implications of DEI work for practitioners. DEI work is not done in a vacuum. DEI practitioners work

within the structures of their respective institutions of higher education. The institutional structures present yet another layer of complexity for DEI work, where frontline practitioners do their work within the systems and structures that govern academia which present their own set of challenges. It is within this context that the question is posed: what is the cost of DEI work and who bears the cost?

DEI at the Frontlines: Doing Deeply Meaningful Work

Oftentimes practitioners spoke about their work and their relationship to their work akin to what Oelberger (2019) refers to as "deeply meaningful work." Deeply meaningful work pertains to work that facilitates both self-actualization and self-transcendence, where the first relates to work contributing to a sense of fulfillment and alignment between the self and one's work, and the latter refers to work that is valuable because social and cultural norms and systems deem it so (Oelberger, 2019, p. 561). This kind of work can be motivating, but also can contribute to less favorable outcomes, including overworking, isolation, and burnout. Doing deeply meaningful work in any field can lead to a blurring of boundaries between work and over work, and the professional and personal. However, doing deeply meaningful work at the frontlines and navigating the nuanced ambiguity surrounding DEI can lead to a compounded vulnerability to not only blurring the self and work but also deep exhaustion and burnout.

Across practitioners, many shared the ways that DEI work for them is deeply meaningful and personal. In contrast to work that is strictly research based, WA shares, *"I do this work from my heart. I think that my commitment is not doing a lot of research and reading other people's words. It's like, what do I think will make people feel good?"* This contrast that WA provides: the personal and oftentimes the messiness of emotion

versus the sanitized and depersonalized science shows that for WA, his work is a reflection of himself and his values rather than what other people may have to offer regarding DEI based on their research. He goes on to provide commentary on how sometimes a great limitation for research is the way that it can extract from minoritized communities and it can gloss over various aspects of the struggles that minoritized communities face. Rather, for WA, DEI work can take on a more common-sense approach, but also an approach that *"truly see[s] folks as humans, no matter what their role is or position in society. [This work is about] continuing to think about ways to open doors, and also thinking about ways that doors have been closed [[…]]"* This focus on seeing others as humans regardless of how society might categorize them shows WA's own personal values and approach to his work, which he defines as not only providing opportunities (opening doors) but also questioning and being critical of how opportunities have either not been provided or limited (doors have been closed).

In another interview, ZV, described how he came to do DEI work as "serendipitous" since he now works as part of a student support service program not too dissimilar to one he participated in as a student. He goes as far as characterizing his student experience with the director of the student support service program as life-changing, and credits both the director and the program for not only providing him with grace and an opportunity to change the course of his academic trajectory but also as partially responsible for the work that he now does;

> *"So there was a director who actually just was like, 'Oh, we're forcing you to [attend] study hall. You're coming in here. You're going to do this…'It was very direct, and it gave me guidance that I needed. And as a young college student, especially going from a large urban area to a small rural*

> *area without a car- I got into some trouble [[…]] long story short, I was [about to] flunk out of college. But because of the relationships I'd built with my true student support services, I was able to turn my life around. I was able to come back to that director. It was a lifeline that didn't judge me. It was a lifeline that just kind of recognized my unique experience and helped me get back. If I didn't have that lifeline, I wouldn't be where I'm at today, and I think about that luxury and that privilege of having some public support. Having an advisor, a director saying, 'hey, I care about you. Yeah, you messed up. Here's what you need to do to get back on track. And here's how we're going to help you' And so [that experience was] when I cleaned up my life."*

By framing his own experience as a testament to the effectiveness of student support services, ZV personifies his work. He makes use of figurative language like "lifeline" and "cleaning up his life" to demonstrate just how impactful the programming was for his own journey as a student. ZV frames his current position working in DEI as part of student services as valuable and intrinsic to his own story as well as his sense of purpose in providing others with the same help that he needed and fortunately received as a student.

Another practitioner, QB, also discussed how she came to work in DEI, and how her work is closely tied to her own experience but also to her own identity. *"When I moved to [Midwest state] almost 9 years ago, discrimination in the workplace for me became personal. So, I made a decision— how can I be more effective using my identities for the better? And that's how I came to [this job]. That's why I started to do this work. Because people were more enamored with where I was from and what I was doing here than my actual work…So it's like, if you're going to be obsessed with who I am and where I come from, and how I speak—then let's have that be an educational experience for all of us. And I want to do it right, like I don't just wanna be mad at you because you're*

being…[pause]... it's like, 'let me show you how this is not okay.'" For QB, DEI work was the answer to the question of how to integrate her identities and use them as part of her work to do good. In this case, the opportunity for self-actualization as well as self-transcendence is presented to QB by incorporating her identities as part of her work and leveraging her work to educate others. This manifests not only in the kind of work that QB does, but also in *how* she does her work—by not dwelling in anger, for example, but rather effecting change. QB also sees moral value in her work, as she explains that change as an outcome is independent from the value of her work. She connects her relationship with her work not in the ability to effect change directly (though that would be best), but more so with doing the "right" thing; *"I'm hopeful that there'll be some change in our lifetime. But at the same time, even if there is no change, I can sleep well at night knowing that I'm doing the right thing. I'm like, with all the shit that's going on in this country, it's like, we're on the right side of history. I don't want to go to bed at night thinking that I'm part of the group that's banning books, or something like that. I know that I'm doing the right thing, even if it's not popular, even if it's being criticized and even if it's gonna take a whole like half a century more to effect change, I know that I'm doing my part to make that happen."* By juxtaposing the imagery of peacefulness associated with being able to get a good night's rest with the chaos of banning books, QB firmly places the value of DEI work as *doing* good even in a challenging social and political landscape.

The sense of purpose that QB and her colleagues ZV and WA describe is very much reflective of the values of what public administration scholars refer to as public service motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990). Public service motivation is characterized by a

commitment to public interest, compassion, self-sacrifice, and a desire to shape policy for societal benefit. These qualities help explain why some people are drawn to public service, including work done at the frontlines of DEI. Deeper in the conversation, QB expressed an inability to separate herself from DEI work; *"I don't think I can afford to [not work in DEI] from a mental and spiritual and emotional perspective. But I also don't have, like, I said, I don't have the luxury to do that because of my identities, like I don't have that privilege of shutting it off. So, I'm exhausted."* This inability to separate the self from the work is both moral as QB described above, but also structural. For QB, DEI work is like a skin, not a sweater—a way of being, not one that can be discarded and changed as it is part of her mental, spiritual, and emotional self. QB highlights something that literature (Kreiner et al., 2009; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017) also shows; people who find their work deeply meaningful tend to participate in high-intensity work practices that can lead to adverse effects like exhaustion (Oelberger, 2019, p. 562).

Building on this idea of adverse effects of deeply meaningful work, TS, a young DEI professional shared her struggle with separating not just herself from her work, but her work outputs from her sense of self and sense of worth within her institution;

> *"I think one thing that I've learned over the past two years, which I wish I did, is to separate my identity from diversity [[…]] I've always been doing the work in some form. I've always been trying to help whoever comes after me. And so, it feels like DEI is a crucial part of me. DEI work in general is [a part of me]. And so, when I put forth something DEI related, it does feel like that thing— a product—is a part of me. It's very crucial to my identity. It's then— so, when that gets rejected or critiqued down to nothing, or it's ignored, it does feel like a personal and emotional blow. Because it feels like these people do not care about diversity. And then [they do] not care about me?"*

The struggle that TS feels is best expressed through the tension that she articulates by describing what she's learned as separate from what she's done. Though TS is aware of the importance of separating her sense of self from her work, she is unable to separate who she is from her work outputs and feels that the criticism or lack of regard that her work outcomes are a direct attack to who she is as a person. This demonstrates an additional layer of labor that BIPOC must do as part of their work in DEI. TS goes on to explain; "*Because I am diversity as a concept which is …really hard for me to figure out how to remove myself from that, because it is just so crucially important to me. I can't see myself ever working in a space that does not… that's not about race, like that is what I aim to do [[…]]"* TS identifies as diversity—what diversity means to her, she personifies. Furthermore, and this contributes to the tension that TS experiences, she is doing the work that she wants to be doing, DEI work is important to her to the point that she cannot imagine herself doing any other type of work. So, the puzzle she is working through is as follows, "[[...]] *figure out, how do I separate me? But, like we talked about earlier, when do you kind of worry about becoming like the people that you're trying to fix? [I] feel like that comes into play here somehow, which I can't quite articulate."* The people that TS refers to as "trying to fix" are those who do not value DEI or are apathetic towards it. Her worry that by separating herself from her work would lead her to be less—for lack of a better word—good at her job, hints at how much value her identity and her sense of self bring to the work of DEI. This intertwined relationship between her as a person and as a DEI practitioner demonstrates how there is extra labor for BIPOC doing DEI work. This type of overwork is often not visible to others but can add a heavy load to some DEI practitioners.

While TS is early in her career in DEI and has already found the need to separate herself from her work, UV has almost two decades of experience in higher education, and they too have come to a similar conclusion; *"It means that for those who have longevity, you have to learn to separate your passion and your worth from your position, and how effective you are from it. Yeah, you just have to do that. You have to remember that the institution will take everything that you have to give, and it will not reciprocate."* Here UV introduces more layers of nuance; first, they speak to longevity, the ability to continue to do the work as being in direct opposition to integrating your identity with your work. Second, they give the institution an almost human-like quality, as an organism that takes without giving back. For UV, keeping that front of mind is what helps them to separate themselves from their work enough to continue to do the work. Though, they are also not impervious to the challenges of deeply meaningful work; *"Because when you [have] someone like me, holding my identities and being in this position, and being doubly marginalized, both personally and professionally within the institution, so it's just so compounded, right? It is very easy to be at the table and be angry."* The anger that UV expresses is related to "sitting at the table" when it comes to making decisions and others not supporting DEI efforts structurally. This anger demonstrates an emotional connection to their work, despite their awareness that separating the self from the work is critical for continuing to do the work long term.

Deeply meaningful work can be and often is fulfilling work. However, there is a negative side to this type of work, and that involves work practices that lead people to over work. DEI practitioners at the frontlines are prime candidates for experiencing the tensions of deeply meaningful work, as evidenced by the way some practitioners speak

about their work. This also means that DEI practitioners are vulnerable to the potential manifestations of overwork, including imposter syndrome, burnout, and attrition.

Deeply Meaningful Work Within Inadequate Structures

Some of the challenges that DEI practitioners face lie at the intersection of imposter syndrome and burnout, which can contribute to attrition. High turnover rates in DEI work are especially challenging, as those engaging in overwork often go above and beyond their job description, and once they leave, there are often inadequate systems in place to continue to work in their absence. In a conversation with UV, as they discuss whether they would want to leave academia behind, they mention, "*Because it does matter, how long directors stay, and that is, I think, part of why the center became so neglected and so bad."* Returning to the longevity piece of DEI work, UV, listed a series of directors who were in their position before them and how that negatively impacted the center that they now direct. Then they went on, *"The other piece of that is—it's also intentional. The turnover isn't just at [center]. It's at the top."* When asked to provide an example, UV continues, *"The Vice President has shifted and changed several times in the last few years. The way those positions are handled is also very strange, right? Sometimes it's an appointed faculty member who doesn't know shit about diversity, equity, inclusion strategizing. Other times, it's someone who's too corporate and then doesn't get that student connection right."* As UV points out, high turnover does not simply happen at the center level, but also in higher administrative positions, and that matters for the general priorities that are put forth for DEI centers. More importantly, while a high turnover rate is a challenge unto itself, the way that positions that impact DEI centers are filled lack consistency, often shifting the approach to DEI work as well

as the quality of that work, as sometimes these positions are filled by people who may lack understanding of DEI strategizing or may bring too much of a corporate culture or framework that excludes the students and their experiences. As UV explains, this constant change and lack of structural support make DEI work often reliant on individuals rather than systems;

> *"So, the institution and the structure makes it so that the infrastructure, the basic day to day— and then— So like, how do we do the search processes? How do we do our evaluation process? The things that you would expect a department to have already in place are not there. And so, if they are not there for the larger organization, it's impossible for that to be there and be effective in the smaller units. Right? So, because that infrastructure hasn't been there at all—I have built it for my center. It still does not exist for the department. Right? That longevity or consistency that is needed for these programs is constantly put in jeopardy whenever somebody leaves and I believe that I've brought [the center] to this point—to build something that continues beyond one person or personality."*

UV is an example within their own center leadership of how much DEI work often falls on individuals, some who do work well beyond their job description without any compensation for the extra time or effort invested on the job. The survival and longevity of some DEI programing then rest on the ability of individuals to continue working at a rate that often exceeds what is sustainable. Hence, the precarity of some DEI work. What stands out in this comment especially is how UV points not only to the individuals whose work matters, but their personalities—their own approach and way of showing up in the world also matters for the quality—here meaning not only degree to which something is deemed good or bad, but also the distinguishing characteristics and attributes of DEI work. As UV explains; "*My fear is, you know, because I do a lot of these things like*

keynote [speeches] in my role, when I'm with students— and they love those because my next trajectory is, I would love to be a national speaker [[...]] like get the fuck out like do something totally different— but I'm afraid. More recently I started becoming aware that, like 'oh, shit! Those talks at the beginning and at the end of one of our programs for the incoming students are becoming too dependent on my story." UV is aware of how their own trajectory; their identities and own marginalization contribute to the quality of their work. For example, the speeches that they are able to deliver are very much an extension of who they are, and though a new director might fill in their position, they would not be able to do their work in the same way. Personality here can also extend to discretion; how someone manages the pressures of their work, what priorities they have and how they communicate them. These are all manifestations of bureaucratic discretion in implementation.

CE corroborates UV's fears regarding a lack of structural support for DEI work. First, she describes how people engaging in deeply meaningful work often go beyond their job description and move DEI work forward. However, when a person leaves, the progress often leaves with them as there is a lack of institutional support.

> *"But it is not necessarily being institutionalized, right? So, there are some amazing things that can happen when you have people that are really passionate, they see beyond the job description, and they are invested in that relationships get built. And then that person leaves. And then the new person that comes into that position, well, that's not one of their priorities…and so it just sort of seems like sometimes you can make some really great headway, and then it kind of just sort of evaporates because it was really reliant on that button person."*

The way that CE describes progress as evaporating corroborates UV's fears of the precarity of the work but also the heaviness of the work. Oftentimes DEI practitioners are not only doing their job, they are also building systems like UV within their own center, or they carry the responsibility of an entire department or center. The example CE provides—relationship building, further points to individuals rather than systems—where one person may grow their relationships and partnerships, but as soon as they're gone, so are those connections. Finally, like what UV pointed out, there is discretion for practitioners, which manifests in the priorities and interpretations of DEI and how they move DEI initiatives forward.

Another challenge that is related to the lack of institutional structure that contributes to high turnover is how DEI work is at times treated as additional work. BR goes into detail about the way that her department restructured their strategic plan to incorporate DEI principles. This restructuring included metrics referred to as key performance indicators. *"And how do we not, in the name of this plan, create a bunch of work for people? You may already not be compensated well enough for what you're doing, you know? So, like our original strategic plan, they put stuff in, and I'm like, where? Where is this information gonna come from? Like, how are you gonna look at every single syllabus and see if they have diverse readings? And so that's like the realistic piece, right?"* BR points out the gap between some well-intentioned steps towards accountability and the reality of implementing that work. While performance indicators are an important part of measurement and reporting, especially regarding fund allocation towards DEI programming, the work that they require, the data gathering itself, is not funded but rather added on to the existing work of people in the department. This is a

negative effect of not institutionalizing or dedicating a job position for DEI specific work. While on the one hand it is important to motivate the department in its entirety to engage with DEI, on the other hand, the reality is that few people will actually *do* the work.

> *"And so, if we say that we're going to measure our performance by how diverse our reading lists on our syllabus are, that's great, theoretically. But someone's got to look at those syllabi. And who's doing that, right? It might be lower paid admin[istrative] staff, doing it, adding more to their plate. Or it might be a person who already cares about DEI doing it, and it's just adding more to their plate, and they may already be pulling way more of their weight than other folks. So that's kind of the realistic piece—like realistically, what do people have the bandwidth to do? And how do we capture progress?"*

The case the BR describes above details the way that some departments have responded post-George Floyd, by adding DEI to existing documents like departmental strategic plans but not necessarily building out infrastructure for DEI work itself. Then the quality of DEI work comes down to individuals willing to do more work for the same pay. The breakdown in DEI work in this specific example is structural and somewhat insidious, as it requires buy in from all members of the department to either submit their reading lists or review them themselves and report back to someone who would then compile this information. So, while the intention may be genuine—to track and encourage wider reading amongst the students, the result ultimately tends to negatively affect some of the most vulnerable to overwork in the department; "*I don't think things are always distributed well. And I think if you do a good job and you do your work; you get more work. And if you don't answer your email and you don't turn things in on time, people stop asking you for things and relying on you for things, so."* This way of doing DEI

work, where everyone is encouraged to contribute to DEI initiatives dictated by a departmental document ultimately lacks an incentive for follow-through. As BR points out, administrators taking on this work may very well be doing it on their own accord, without additional compensation. Faculty, for their part, are expected to make progress towards tenure, which at large public institutions tends to have a heavy emphasis on publication and original research, and service—which is what DEI work is considered to be in this case—is not as integral to the tenure review process as research and teaching. By placing DEI work in a devalued position, it also devalues the people who do the work, by not compensating them for their time monetarily or otherwise.

The lack of institutional structural support can contribute to not only overwork, but also oversaturation—doing the same type of work over and over again by a limited number of individuals. As PT shares, "*If you tap the same person over and over, I think they become immune to innovation because they take and wear a hat, and then that hat becomes part of their—it sounds funny— that hat becomes like part of their entire skeletal structure, and they can't take it off like they're forced to be that one thing."* The imagery that PT uses contextualizes some of the harm that this kind of overwork and oversaturation of DEI work does to some, especially BIPOC, who often are asked to flatten their identities and become tokenized through this process. As PT describes it, these types of institutional practices can have the effect of pigeonholing and limiting individuals to certain (undervalued) work; *"[the expectation is] 'just be this one thing we want you to represent, don't mess with it' and I think that's an extremely damaging thing to do to any human. No one does that to me as a white woman. Why would I? Why would I do that to someone? It's sick."*

The racial element that PT speaks to as a white woman is further reinforced by what OC had to share from his experience as a Black professor and the kind of work he is expected to do as a Black man in academia. OC gives an example of how he has felt tokenized by the service he is asked to do in addition to his own responsibilities dictated by his job as a tenure-track professor.

> *"The damn Dean will send you an email saying, 'hey, come to this event.' And it has nothing to do with you, but they just want you around like to tokenize you. You can always be aware that they have like, 'Look at my Black guy here, here he is, right here.' You sit me at the table next to him, and I'm like 'I don't have anything to do with this.' It means I get asked to be on committees. They don't have anything to do with my research. It means that I get asked to do service that doesn't have anything to do with what I care about. It also means that I get objectified in this regard, like I get turned into, 'Well, he's a Black man. So therefore…' So, the individual interest that I have, and the values that I have can be pushed to the side, because people would just say, 'Well, you're a Black man. You should want to do this.' It becomes this odd- like 'you ought to do it this way.'"*

OC speaks to the way that leadership in particular take advantage of his time and leverage their position of power to force OC's hand in participating in performative DEI work—attending events and serving on committees unrelated to his own work, for example. All the while, OC's own priorities and research interests are ignored—reducing his personhood to his race. Moreover, as OC points out, leadership and others will frame his race as reason enough for him to engage in what they deem to be important service, while at the same time removing OC's autonomy in deciding how and if he chooses to engage deeply in DEI work. What OC is pushing back on is not doing DEI work, as he explains later, he engages in various forms of work that to him feel like authentic DEI

work, such as student mentorship. However, what OC is resisting is being told how he does DEI work and what kind of DEI work he does. In PT's words, OC is protesting having others fuse their interpretation of DEI work onto his skeletal structure.

Imposter syndrome, broadly speaking, refers to the feeling of inadequacy despite evidence to the contrary (Yang et. al., 2024). Imposter syndrome is a byproduct stemming from systemic racism, heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, classism and other hegemonic ideologies and systems of oppressions (Wright-Mair, Ramos & Passano, 2023). KN, for example, who is a highly accomplished woman of color with a doctorate degree, struggles with imposter syndrome and burnout. She shares how some of the rhetoric of achievement as a woman of color in particular has contributed to her feelings of burnout.

> *I feel like there's that imposter syndrome where you—for a minute I was driven by the rhetoric, the messages I received when I was younger: 'You'll have to do more to be just as good enough.' And then I found…some of this does not serve me now in some ways. I just became…I just overworked myself, and I got the same accolades that didn't make me feel any better, or you know that didn't help me. I felt actually more burnout because we're operating,* ***I'm*** *[participant emphasis] operating in competition with, let's say, like white men. And yeah, we have the same accolades. But the price I pay is going to be more than the price that he might pay.*

KN provides a compelling insight into the emotional labor of DEI work. Specifically, she highlights how messages of work ethic and dedication do not necessarily prove useful for people of color in academia and can instead lead to overworking and eventually, burnout. When she refers to the price that she pays for the same accolades as white men, she is specifically speaking to the challenges she's had to overcome as a woman of color and

the sacrifice and struggle that has come with that lived experience. It is important to point out that for KN, the messages she has received around accomplishment and academic excellence are longstanding, making references to her own journey in academia as a student, and now, as an administrator; "*I think that it has cost me, and maybe even others who are in the same position, to work that hard to create community and to like to be the people on the ground like, 'come on, y'all, we have to do this!'"* KN is not a stranger to a challenge. By giving a glimpse into her own lived experience as a woman of color, she gives more insight into how she works within DEI. Her own drive for achievement has also translated into her drive to succeed at her job in DEI. However, this rate of work is not sustainable for her. She concludes this part of the interview with a bittersweet sentiment; *"So, [pause] it just, it's great, and I'll look back [sometimes] and I'm like, 'Man, I did something there.' And that's okay, I don't have to keep it going, I'll revisit it later. But it's been a rewarding few years."* KN's experience exemplifies how deeply meaningful work can be incredibly rewarding but also complicated once the boundaries between the self and the work output are blurred.

When talking about the challenges of DEI in higher education, VP touched on a damaging discourse that forces people to assimilate into academic culture.; *"We often hear 'Well, I had to go through that. So, you have to go through that. [Or] This is the way we've always done tenure and promotion."* The idea that because someone has endured challenges, others who come after must also endure the same challenges severely limits the opportunity for progress and structural change. In the case of incoming BIPOC faculty, for example, they have conflicting messaging where they are praised and often actively recruited for not only their qualifications and talents but for their lived

experience and how that can bring a new or different perspective to teaching and research, and yet, they are also expected to endure challenges that have existed for generations prior. Furthermore, the discourse of "it has always been done this way" normalizes routines that are discriminatory and rooted in prejudice. Higher education has not always been a place for people with diverse backgrounds, it was an institution that at its inception was reserved for wealthy, white, males. VP then speaks specifically about BIPOC enduring these discourses. "*They have to give up their learned, their lived experience, and you know, everything they want to bring into the classroom. And they conform so they fit in, so that they're reviewed positively because we naturally want to be accepted. We naturally want people to think well of us, so we conform. And for some people conforming is really damaging and really hurtful. And they leave and other people stay, and they probably internalize the damage, and it takes a toll on their health and their relationships with others, right? Because they're not able to be themselves."* The damage of conforming to a structure that does not allow you to be yourself can lead many BIPOC to leave their jobs, or to internalize the toll and potentially deal with negative health outcomes like burnout.

For her part, when asked what the biggest challenge to her work was, TS said burnout. "*I feel like if I was talking to my successor, I would [warn them about] burnout mostly. Because even though I say to not attach yourself to your work, with a job like this it's so hard not to...it's really hard to not see yourself in your work, and so that makes burnout really easy to happen—which scares me."* TS characterizes her fear by comparing it to dropping a glass ball; "*It's like, if you drop the ball once, like the ball is shattered and the ball— it's gone, and you have to keep holding the ball, no matter what*

you don't get a break you have to keep going. The ball is made of glass. If you drop that ball and all, if the ball breaks, like the shards affect a lot of people, and so you mess up a lot if you drop the ball. And that's probably not true, that's what it feels like." The impact of burnout is not only for the individual, as TS shares, she is fearful of burnout not necessarily for herself, but for the consequences it has for others. This feeling that if she makes a mistake, it can be catastrophic is indicative of how much responsibility she takes on in her role, and how much is at stake for her.

Holding The Line

While many DEI practitioners face challenges to their work, it is important to also not underestimate the way that many of them manage to, in the face of often adverse circumstances, continue to do the work. For QB, for instance, the key to continuing her work in DEI is normalizing frustration at the slow pace of change in higher education but also utilizing that frustration to work in her favor; *"I use that frustration as fuel to be able to continue doing the work. With everything that's happened in the country in the last [few] years, I've experienced all of the emotions—like all of them. And whether it's pain, sorrow, frustration, whether it's excitement, whether it's hopelessness, like whatever feeling—I always find a way to channel that into action."* At the same time, QB shares, *"...sometimes, it takes me longer because sometimes those feelings are so overwhelming that I can't move,"* thus making a case for pace—reframing DEI work as work that while urgent and meaningful can also be work that is taken on a day-by-day basis.

Along a similar thought process, ZV makes the case for learning to pause some of the work rather than stop altogether. For ZV, the responsibility and moral obligation that

he feels compels him to continue, at times even at the cost of his own wellbeing; *"even if I'm burning out, and I'm struggling to get through, I am thinking 'Well, I have this cultural obligation to support the next generation of BIPOC students,' and that is important to me, and at such a personal level. And if I don't do it, who will?"* Here ZV is highlighting the negative effects of deeply meaningful work—he feels personally responsible for helping to ameliorate a situation that is both structural and longstanding. He admits, *"And there's times in which that mentality serves me, and there's times when that mentality hurts me. Because if I were to go, they would replace me in a second."* The 'they' that ZV refers to is his employer, the university. This coldness that ZV depicts is in direct contrast with the heartfelt connection that he has with his work. While there is very little room to question ZV's commitment to DEI work, for ZV, there is also very little room to question his institution's commitment to him doing that work. "*And so, I need to, we all need to be mindful of 'when is it a good time for me to be doing this work—and when is it a good time for me to step aside and maybe come back to it?'"* ZV arrives at the conclusion that it is up to him to be thoughtful about how and when to push his own work forward, and when it might be more productive for his own wellbeing to simply take a break, or as he puts it, step aside from the frontline.

When discussing what she's doing to combat burnout, KN responded, *"I'm not trying to break down doors right now. I am the door. Like, I've gotten to that level. I am the door. And once I tap into it, I can recuperate from this experience. Then I can, you know, maybe shift gears again. But right now, I'm the door. I'm the seat. I am the table."* KN provides an important insight for those of us who are people of color working not only in academia, but specifically on matters relating to DEI: know that you are the door.

Extending on the metaphor, KN is not referring to herself as a gatekeeper, but as a position of power. Oftentimes we use the metaphor of what happens behind closed doors, who has a seat at a table, all that imagery relates to power—the select few who get to, behind closed doors, shape the way things are done. By claiming her own power as the door, as the seat, as the table, KN makes a compelling statement, one that perhaps people of color don't hear often enough: you have power. You are a *place* of power. As opposed to space, which is abstract and devoid of meaning, place refers to the contestation of meaning making, identity, and belonging (Cresswell, 1996). Recognizing that academia is a space, but that she is part of what gives that space meaning is a reminder that existing in academia makes her a part of the politics of place-making.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to address what DEI means to practitioners and how their interpretation influences the way they work at the frontlines of DEI. Insights from this chapter highlight the complexities and at times contradictions of DEI work. First, amongst practitioners, there are multiple meanings of DEI. They use their frontline worker discretion to make practical use of the multiple meanings of DEI for their own operationalization and practice. However, although this ambiguity of meaning can be leveraged to continue to do DEI work even in hostile circumstances, it also contributes to the stagnation of more critical approaches to racial equity, and can limit collective practice within and across institutions, leading many to feel ambivalent about DEI work. Second, DEI practitioners engage in DEI both with high levels of public service motivation and treat their work as deeply meaningful. Here too, the contradictions of DEI work come to light. While this high level of dedication to doing good and feeling deeply

connected to one's work leads to continuing DEI work despite institutional challenges and inadequate structures, it also comes at a high cost for practitioners. This cost can manifest as tokenism, imposter syndrome, burnout and even attrition. Losing deeply motivated practitioners in inadequate structures is a double loss—the talent and skills of the individual are lost, and in their absence the existing structures fail to continue the work that was carried out by the practitioner.

By framing DEI practitioners as street-level bureaucrats we can have more clarity on both their discretion and their constraints in implementing DEI policy. As Soss and Moynihan (2014) remind us, a policy "... is not a tabula rasa that implementing actors can write on in any way they like. Policies define parameters for discretionary action; they structure decisions and frame choice sets" (p. 328). While discretion in implementation shapes policy, policy also shapes discretion. Institutional structures influence discretion as well, "...discretion is also, in part, the product of the organizational context, whether that be about expectations and norms or resources and constraints. These influence the ways in which street-level bureaucrats interpret both the situations they encounter and the course of action from which they are realistically able to choose" (Rowe, 2025, p. 10).

By understanding discretion and the ways that discretion influences DEI work, but also the ways that DEI policy and institutional norms and structures shape discretion, we may be able to implement more effective counter measures to the policy failures associated with DEI. For example, statistics show that BIPOC are underrepresented in academia. Through the lens of street-level bureaucracy it is possible to appreciate that continuing to increase BIPOC in higher education without also providing them with more structural room for their discretion will continue to fail at the intended goals of racial and

social justice. While interventions like unconscious bias training are important, they are not useful in expanding or systematically providing discretionary space for practitioners. Furthermore, programmatic failures are more likely to occur when DEI work is so dependent on the overwork of practitioners. Shifting attention to creating sustainable supportive structures for DEI practitioners may be more helpful than mandatory DEI trainings, as public service motivation of DEI work shows, it would be largely a training preaching to the choir as those who opt in to DEI work often find it to be deeply meaningful.

Furthermore, better understanding how ambiguity of language can be helpful but also stifle collective practice and progress is critical. As ND summarizes in her final comments; "*I think some effort needs to be put in to figure out how we have these conversations within a profession, sort of across these different contexts that we're in and sort of figure out—I don't know, it's almost like identifying what the conversations are [that] we should be having, and also sort of where we can make space for people to have differing viewpoints, while also respecting sort of that they're coming from you know, a reasonable position."* It is important to not only be aware of the multitude of meanings of DEI, but of how structures, and environments contribute to the way that DEI can be defined and talked about, if at all.

Finally, by being more aware of the cost of DEI work on the people who do their best to carry out the goals of DEI we may be able to better support their work. DEI practitioners need adequate structural support so that they can do their job in meaningful ways without the negative effects of overwork, imposter syndrome and burnout.

Structural support can manifest in a myriad of ways, but access to leadership and financial resources are important components of potential organizational interventions.

Chapter 5
Reimagining Representation

Few concepts have been more central to diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education than representation. Often, representation in the DEI space is posited as a state of being—namely underrepresented. Under this conceptualization of representation, DEI policy and practice is situated as a remedy to the underrepresentation of marginalized groups—including Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Groups are considered to be stable, homogeneous, clearly bounded things that share common characteristics and interests. However, what would happen if instead of taking groups for granted, we questioned how DEI policy and practice *constitute* groups?

In contrast to pluralist theories of democracy, which focus on the idea that groups form around shared interests, a mobilization approach to representation (Disch, 2021) instead focuses on groups and how often they are not initiators of public policy but rather constituency effects of acts of political representation. Acts of political representation include the likes of declarations by party leaders, policies enacted by the legislatures, appeals made by charismatic individuals, slogans, and objects—for example, knitted pink hats (Disch, 2021). This chapter incorporates representation as mobilization by framing DEI policy discourse and practice as an act of political representation. It poses the question: in the DEI context, how do university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses? How do acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in social and political relations more broadly?

As Hayward (2013) reminds us, “People reproduce identities, not just by telling and retelling the stories from which they were constructed, but also by institutionalizing those stories: by building them into norms, laws, and other institutions…that give social actors incentives to perform their identities well” (p. 2). Therefore, it is critical to understand how DEI policy and practice institutionalize identity groups, and how group realities are affected by the way they are represented. This chapter argues that by applying a constructivist lens to representation, we are able to recenter groups not as taken for granted objects but as constructions achieved through discursive and institutional maneuvers. What follows is a brief overview of how representation has been studied in regards to DEI in higher education through various lenses, how practitioners challenge and define representation, an introduction to representation as mobilization, including ways in which it could contribute to reimagining representation in the DEI space, and a discussion of how representation as mobilization gives access to understanding group formation not as an unexamined empirical reality, but a political achievement through the neoliberal reorganization of higher education.

Brief Overview of Representation in Higher Education

Representation has multiple meanings. While the scholarship of representation goes beyond what is explored in this section, this section engages with the concept of representation as it has been studied particularly in higher education settings. In the higher education DEI literature, the concept of representation is interpreted and deployed in a variety of ways. However, each of these avenues of research have two important things in common; they assume demographic groups to be pre-existing and that a form of substantive representation follows descriptive representation.

Representative Bureaucracy and Someone Who Looks Like Me

Representative bureaucracy is a concept from public administration research and literature. Broadly defined, bureaucratic representation is "...the idea that a governmental organization is better situated to serve its clients when its employee composition reflects that of its client population" (Grissom, Kern & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 185). Within the context of education and at a very basic level, representation here would be understood as having clients (students) being served (educated/guided) by bureaucrats (educators/administrators/staff) whose demographic identities match up—whereby service provision and delivery is enhanced and improved through this match. In other words, student populations stand to benefit from having services and instruction delivered by people who share demographic characteristics with them thus "produc[ing] policy outputs that benefit the individuals who are [descriptively] represented" (Meier, 1993, p. 393). As Grissom et al. (2015) explain, a "...diverse bureaucratic workforce is then essential for ensuring that diverse groups' interests are addressed in policy implementation. Applied to public schooling, this perspective suggests that meeting the needs of a diverse student population requires a diverse teacher and principal workforce" (p. 187).

Researchers have identified challenges that complicate representative bureaucracy. Included among these challenges is salience of identity, such as race, and how it may vary or differ across geographic regions (Grissom et al., 2009) but also within the local communities with changing racial contexts which influence how race is experienced and understood (Roch & Edwards, 2017). Recent work that incorporates the dynamics of bureaucratic representation specifically in the context of higher education

has highlighted the need to take a more intersectional approach to representation (Fay et al., 2021). Perhaps the most important criticism of representative bureaucracy is the way in which it centers male whiteness:

> Because whiteness and masculinity have traditionally and presumptively been seen as the standard, White and male bureaucrats have largely not been linked to outcomes for community members aligning with their identities. So, while the outcomes of women and clients of color are tied to bureaucrats matching their identities, outcomes for White male clients are rarely linked to White male bureaucrat's performance. Stated another way, we have studied the impact of active representation among women and people of color but have not explored this topic among identities that are not considered to be historically marginalized. (Portillo, Humphrey & Bearfield, 2022, p. 595).

By leaving the actions of white male bureaucrats largely unexamined, much of the scholarship adopts a "myth of neutrality" (Portillo, Bearfield & Humphrey, 2019) where they are presumed to be objective actors while their (BIPOC and women) counterparts are presented as actively representing their (race and gender) matched clients. This view of representation therefore leaves plenty to be examined.

To these challenges, I would add three more: representative bureaucracy takes demographic groups for granted, assumes that descriptive representation leads to substantive representation, and ultimately fails to challenge organizational structures. Representative bureaucracy as a concept rests on the assumption that demographic groups exist, and that groups have clear interests that they share. As Brubaker (2004) reminds us however, not all categories are groups. Just because the state or a survey uses an ethnic label (category) for example, it doesn't mean the people under that label think or act collectively (as a group). In his critique of the tendency to treat ethnic, racial, or

national groups as if they are bound, homogenous, and internally coherent entities, which he calls “groupism,” Brubaker warns how doing so overstates the unity within groups and ignores internal divisions. Furthermore, representative bureaucracy also makes an assumption about the pathway from descriptive representation to substantive representation. Pitkin (1967) famously explored multiple forms of representation, among them she defined descriptive and substantive forms. Where descriptive representation asks, “do they look like us and come from the same background?”, substantive representation posits, “do they act in our interest?” Pitkin is critical of the connection between descriptive and substantive representation. However, Mansbridge (1999) is more open and flexible about the relationship between these forms of representation. For Mansbridge, the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation is nuanced and must take historical and political context into account. On the question of whether we should engage in descriptive representation, Mansbridge (1999) notoriously gave a “contingent yes” and argued that in contexts of mistrust or historical exclusion, shared identity can build trust, improve communication, and enhance legitimacy. Finally, representative bureaucracy focuses on the composition of an organization, and not necessarily on the systems of the organization. This assumes that folks “representing” a certain group of people will make choices and act in their interest. However, this places the responsibility on that individual rather than the systems of the organization to serve a group. In other words, when placing a person of a certain group in the position to serve that group, their discretionary power is still limited by the choice sets available to them from the organizational structure itself which remains largely unchanged.

Often in conversations of representation and DEI folks will mention the importance of "someone who looks like me" without necessarily connecting it to representative bureaucracy. Scholarship on the topic often explores the social and psychological consequences of 'looks like me' forms of identity-based representation in educational settings. In higher education settings, for example, studies find that students who are matched with mentors from similar backgrounds tend to develop more positive perceptions of themselves and their academic capabilities (Santos & Reigadas, 2002; Syed, Azmitia & Cooper, 2011). Shared demographics and life experiences also appear to enhance students' trust in mentoring relationships and feelings that their mentors understand them (Ragins, 1997; Sosik & Godshalk, 2005; Mireles-Rios & Garcia, 2019). A first-hand account from Gist-Mackey (2021) exemplifies the ways in which representation can manifest through shared identity. An example Gist-Mackey provides is her teaching a class soon after bearing witness to an act of racism: cotton balls thrown in front of the Black Culture Center during Black History Month, during her time as a graduate student instructor at the University of Missouri:

> There were no Black students in that class. At the end of class, one Latinx student thanked me for talking about this issue. She said I was the only instructor who mentioned it in her classes and asked why this issue was not openly addressed in all classes. I did not have an answer for her. Her experience was disheartening, yet similar to my experience as a graduate student. *Not one professor that semester addressed the incident as part of my coursework; this silence spoke loudly to me.* [emphasis my own] (Gist-Mackey, 2021, p. 175)

This experience showcases how "somebody who looks like me" is often not about the outward appearance of a person, but the shared experience of visibility, or lack thereof.

Another way that "seeing oneself represented" is often explored in the literature is through the incorporation of curriculum that is inclusive of marginalized perspectives and culturally relevant for non-white students (Paton et. al., 2020). An example of this would be research conducted by BIPOC or research relating to issues at the center of many BIPOC experiences. While the "looks like me" conceptualization of representation may be difficult to fully capture, it has been an important way in which researchers, students, and practitioners have come to think about representation within higher education.

However, one of the main criticisms of this form of representation is that it places a large burden on individuals rather than institutions, often through invisible labor. This is a form of responsibilization, where under a neoliberal society individuals are made responsible for outcomes that would otherwise be the domain of the state or similar institution (Peters, 2016). By shifting accountability from a structural level to the individual level, this form of representation can become a hardship for those that are expected to "represent." The limitations cited for representative bureaucracy also apply to this manifestation of representation.

Taking Demographic Groups for Granted: Numerical Representation and Critical Mass

In institutional initiatives, evaluation studies, and public debates that surround BIPOC representation, aggregate numbers and questions of social composition have long played an outsized role. Reporting practices across universities serve as a prime example. Some institutions tend to report on their diversity as percentages—whereby that percentage is the non-white population of their student body or their faculty. Other

institutions are even less clear on their reporting, with statements simply referencing their diversity as a single percentage figure without defining what that figure entails.

Beyond the inconsistencies in reporting practices, this way of evaluating representation misses important nuances. Included among them is the missed opportunity to explore the role that BIPOC occupy within the institution and how that affects the way that BIPOC may influence the organization (Ray, 2019). It also fails to examine the ways in which BIPOC faculty may have expectations put on them to serve students in ways that do not necessarily closely tie to their own success—such as tenure (Diggs et al., 2009) and be expected to engage in work that is often referred to as "invisible labor" (Hamblin, Barker & Arghode, 2020).

Furthermore, this numerical framing of representation, with a hyperfocus on the composition of a given group shares similar pitfalls to those of representative bureaucracy. It takes demographic groups for granted. It also assumes that by increasing the number of a certain group, meaningful advocacy can take place. This has most often occurred through the concept of "critical mass." Critical mass, though not an exact number, as a concept within higher education poses the question: how much? How much "diversity" is necessary to create the conditions needed for meaningful interactions (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014) and participation among students, given the particular institutional context? What is often left out of that discussion is that the "how much" is often operationalized into an actual number like a percentage, or it remains vague, elusive, and unexamined. Thus, while the concept of critical mass itself was a response and an attempt to push back on the tokenization of BIPOC, in practice, it often does little more than assimilate into the existing metrics and numeric conceptualizations of

discussing and evaluating diversity and representation. Finally, by remaining focused on issues of counting and who counts, attention is then taken away from evaluating the structures of higher education, allowing for systems to remain status quo.

Representation in Practice: How Practitioners Define Representation

Practitioners have their own understandings of representation, and they incorporate it into their routines. HS, who as a faculty member also held a DEI administrative position, shares an experience of a time when she interviewed a job candidate and asked them about how they incorporate diversity into their work. *"So, one time I interviewed this candidate. And this candidate was an African American male. And [I] asked, 'what do you bring? What diverse aspects do you bring to your work? Into the classroom?' And the answer is, 'Well, I'm an African American male. When I show up, I bring diversity with me.' To me that gets—I mean, that suggests that representation is all it is. And that's not true, right?"* HS uses this experience to parse out the concept representation. The question that was posed to her was what representation meant to her—and her response starts with an experience that is rooted in a conversation about diversity. This highlights the way that representation and diversity, and the more intricate DEI, are talked about in relation to each other. In this case, HS separates diversity from representation where representation here is understood as descriptive representation—a body. In contrast, diversity is more than that. She goes on to explain; *"There are lots of folks that are diverse, that don't support diversity goals. So being from a diverse [group] and there are a lot of people that are from not diverse groups that are super champions for diversity goals. So, it's not just, you know what group you come from. You have to know what it means. You have to do the work, and you have to have plans to keep doing*

the work, right? It's more than what your background is. What do you know? What are you doing about it? And what are you going to do about it? So, yeah. So, I don't want to give the impression that just showing up is enough." In this statement HS rejects descriptive representation as sufficient for advancing diversity in higher education. HS contrasts descriptive representation—just showing up, with substantive representation—knowing what diversity means, doing the work of diversity, and having plans for sustainably continuing that work into the future. In her work as part of this hiring process that she singles out, HS demonstrates how representation for her is less about what (or who) it *is*, and more about what it *does*. Moreover, HS challenges an underlying assumption of representative bureaucracy—that people of a group will advocate or better serve people of the same group. For her, this is not necessarily the case, she explicitly separates being from a diverse group of people from supporting diversity goals. In her experience, representation is more than a person's background—as she rejects the job candidate's claim of "bringing diversity" with him exclusively because of his racial background.

NZ, a faculty member who often serves on hiring committees and volunteers as part of a committee focused on equity and inclusion, shares how difficult it can be to define representation in practice. She takes a different approach to talking about the real-life application of representation in higher education by focusing on the definition of representation based on measurement. NZ highlights how representation understood as a sample from a population, while it might appear like a straightforward measurement, is much more difficult to capture in practice.

> *"And what is the definition, if we're using a term like representation, which I feel like sort of from a technical perspective, is saying something about the composition of your student body versus some baseline or comparative composition. And in that case is it the [metro area]? Is it [the state]? Is it the general population? Or is it representation and policy spheres? Or is it compared to the private sector, to the public sector, the kinds of employers that students typically work for when they graduate or students in graduate school in general, or the composition between domestic and international students. Now you've got a global comparative set. And then you have to look across other types of dimensions of representation, whether it's class or gender identity, age, political leaning [[...]]"*

NZ poses a series of questions as part of her definition of representation. In her answer to what representation means to her, she openly shares the questions that she has as she navigates issues of representation as part of her work on committees. By doing so, NZ is problematizing some of the longstanding understandings of representation as numerical by simply asking: compared to what? If measurement and enumeration in particular is important to our understanding of representation in higher education, then what are the parameters for representation? By listing off the cuff with ease how many different parameters could apply for the "population" that one would seek to "sample," NZ demonstrates how artificial and arbitrary defining representation as a *thing*— a measure— can be. Ultimately, NZ concludes, *"I think representation is a tricky one for me to define, because it seems like a shifting and moving target."* When representation is defined as a measure, enumeration of people with certain identities or characteristics, it can be a moving target, because populations are fluid and treating any sample from a population can look very different based on what constitutes a population at any given time.

When thinking about representation more broadly, KN shares how for her, representation in higher education is more something to aspire to than a reality. After taking a moment to collect her thoughts, she begins to contextualize why she feels that way; "*Representation—honestly, representation at a PWI is more aspirational than it is reality. And I say this because if we were to think about representation as being a mirror to society, we would continue having a minority of minorities represented as people in our leadership or in our staff and our faculty make up, right?"* KN refers to thinking about representation as a mirror to society—here alluding to descriptive representation and how doing so is flawed. By thinking about representation as mirroring general society (here for the time being ignoring the technical challenges that NZ pointed out above) then minorities continue to be minorities in higher education, and as such descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantive representation or structural change. KN goes on to further contextualize what this means in practice by focusing on how this version of representation would be implemented in hiring practices. *"I think that representation in higher ed—what you would like, hire it to look like? By that I mean, like, if you know that African Americans make up 13% of the United States, then some departments are going to say, 'We tick the box. We have one out of 4 faculty members like, that's actually more— that's 25% of our faculty.' Like no, that's not representation."* KN goes beyond the critique raised by NZ about the technical aspects of measurement and demonstrates how descriptive representation fails—by becoming a box to tick, a requirement to be met, and flattening a person's personhood to a number, a percentage. *"That means like from top down, you want to have a presence of different perspectives and voices, and we're not stuck on that percentage. At a research institution, it's like— 'What's the representative sample?' Right?*

We're not looking for representation to be a representative sample." KN pushes back on representation as a measure by insisting that rather than thinking only laterally (for example, across departments) we think about representation vertically. This is important for power relations at the institution. Furthermore, she highlights a pitfall that often befalls research institutions—to a hammer everything is a nail. Meaning that at an institution where research is valued, measurement is not only important but can become the worldview and approach to framing and understanding other challenges like representation. But that is not necessarily the best approach to representation; "*We want representation—to me that there is equity in voices being heard from diverse backgrounds at whatever table that you're sitting at, or whatever presentation is being facilitated at whatever leadership meeting is happening."* KN took a longer route to get to what she defines as representation by first demonstrating what it is not: a measurement, a number, a percentage. For KN, representation must be substantive—with opportunities for advocacy across all sectors of higher education.

Rethinking Representation: Representation as Mobilization

Outside of higher education, representation is often studied in the context of democracy. Classic approaches to representation accept a model that posits that constituencies form around interests or things they want, and representatives are elected to respond to their demands (Disch, 2021). This line of reasoning assumes that groups and interests already exist "out there," waiting to be represented. In practice, however, research suggests that representation processes often flow in the opposite direction. Rather than representatives responding to constituents' preexisting demands, "most people form opinions and political preferences based on messages they receive from

sources they trust—candidates, political parties, nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups, opinion shapers in the mass media or on social media, celebrities, and more" (Disch, 2021, p. 1). This means that the messages delivered through institutions, including institutions of higher education, are relevant for understanding representation within the DEI space.

Disch (2021) takes a constructivist approach to rethinking representation. A constructivist approach to the politics of group representation rests on two key premises. First, representation does not merely reflect or respond to a group or constituency and its interests; it is an active force in defining such groups as well as their identities and interests. Second, group conflict is not just an expression of preexisting societal divisions that flows into political arenas; it is also a product of political actions and communications, which play an active role in forging societal divisions and turning them into a basis for group conflict (p.4). Therefore, a constructivist understanding of representation posits that constituencies and groups do not exist "out there" but are made (though not from scratch) through what Disch refers to as representative acts. Representative acts (or acts of political representation) constitute groups and interests. Under acts of political representation, Disch includes "the 'claims' and promises of political candidates, the policies enacted by legislatures, and the declarations of party leaders and other elite opinion shapers…appeals by unelected and 'self-appointed' representatives such as charismatic individuals, advocacy groups, political movements, and minor political parties. Slogans— 'we are the 99%,' 'Black Lives Matter,' '#MeToo'— have group-defining effects as well, as do cultural objects like knitted pink hats and red baseball caps" (p. 19). More importantly, for Disch acts of representation

"...can change the subject of politics in the fullest sense of the word: they change how people identify themselves by redefining what they care enough to fight for and whom they count as allies" (p. 19). Therefore, acts of political representation shape the way we understand not just groups, but how groups are positioned in relation to each other. "Constituency effects," in Disch's framework, refer to the impacts that representative acts have as forces shaping group identities, preferences, and conflict dynamics.

In this framework, mobilization does not assume that groups form around shared interest to demand laws and policies that serve them. Disch emphasizes that representation involves assembling and mobilizing social relations that may, at first, be fragmented or amorphous, not simply giving voice to existing ones. Constituencies emerge when actors—whether politicians, social movements, or institutions—actively engage and define them. "In mass democracies," Disch argues, "acts of political representation often do not take constituencies and their interests as a starting point; they begin by making constituencies and specifying their demands. Representatives of all kinds participate in forming group identities, crafting political demands, and defining cleavages that set one group against another. Think of this as a mobilization conception of political representation" (p. 1).

In this manner, Disch shifts responsibility for democratic "failings" such as individual or collective disengagement away from mass publics, directing attention instead to the "...institutions that motivate them to act, or to abstain from acting, by the manner in which those institutions stage, or fail to stage, conflict" (p.9). By using this framework to analyze DEI policies and practices—as well as their consequences— I argue that it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of how institutional actors and

projects construct the social groups they address, and the choice sets available to practitioners.

Applying Representation as Mobilization to DEI in Higher Education

How could representation in DEI be reimagined through a Dischian lens? While there may be many versions of what that could look like, there are a few key characteristics that stand out which could contribute to the reimagining of representation within the DEI space in higher education. Some of these characteristics include redefining representation not as an object or a result but as a process, understanding institutional practices on a spectrum between motivating or stifling representation, a willingness to accept uncertainty, and reflexivity as a form of evaluation.

First, representation would shift away from being a thing—an outcome, a number, a measure—and be understood as a process. This would require all of us to move past the most common way we understand representation in DEI at the moment which is underrepresentation. The idea of underrepresentation takes groups as pre-existing and focuses on proportionality, reflecting back or mirroring society in higher education. As KN reminds us earlier in this chapter, a mirroring of an inequitable society in higher education continues to be inequitable regardless of how precise that mirroring may be. Furthermore, simply having more Black, Indigenous and people of color in higher education, as HS points out above, does not necessarily lead to them advocating for or practicing in the interest of other BIPOC or advancing other DEI goals. In other words, descriptive representation does not necessarily lead to substantive representation. Therefore, rather than thinking about fixed groups that are underrepresented, the focus would be on the acts of representation themselves, the claims that bring groups into

being. The puzzle would evolve from ‘how can we get more BIPOC in higher education’ to a more critical view; ‘how are our institutions, policies, and practices organizing groups and who is included in shaping and creating those policies and practices?’

Recognizing that group identities are partially constructed through institutional policies and practices allows us to evaluate DEI as a process. FI, who participates actively as part of a committee focused on equity and inclusion, talked about an institutional practice that takes the key characteristics mentioned above into account. As part of their work every year the committee sets their priorities based on a process of departmental community feedback— allowing students, faculty, and staff alike to participate in creating the priorities for action each year. This institutional practice motivates people to act and for interests to emerge from the community. *“I would say [priorities] don't change dramatically. There might be, you know, a different thing that bubbles up as a different priority. You know these are all great goals, but if we have to narrow down our focus—this is where we want to focus over the next year or so, it might be that there's like some adjustments to some priorities, but I think some of that depends on advocacy, right?”* FI explains that while the broad goals of the committee— equity and inclusion— remain, each year through community advocacy priorities are created for action. This is an example of bottom-up engagement where DEI goals are a result of advocacy and engagement with the community rather than as a prescriptive top-down implementation process. This institutional practice of creating space for advocacy is critical for group formation. FI then gives a specific example of how student advocacy can create priorities for a given year.

> *"And so, you know, there's much to do. There's always work to do, and it could be in a given year we've got a vocal group of students who really want to push questions of issues around physical access, and to say, there are some of these [class]rooms that do not work well for students, and you know we don't have enough resources around students with visual impairment [[...]] They're bringing to the surface that the resources that we think we have aren't adequate, so that might make something a priority that we weren't aware of, until students brought it to our attention that the resources that we provide, that we have—don't actually fully address the problem, and here's why. So, I think that kind of tweaking is good, because it brings in this churning, groups of folks that are helping to pinpoint or to say that 'this is what your community looks like, these are the needs that we have'.*

This process of representation also makes visible what would otherwise be invisible if policy were only a top-down design. With this space for advocacy, groups can emerge, and their interests can be known. As an iterative process, this allows for priorities to be changing—and this change can be seen as a process functioning correctly rather than an end goal failure— often referred to as a "moving target." FI credits the students and especially the turnover of students as a form of keeping the institution accountable to the emerging and changing needs of their department—a metaphorical fresh set of eyes that keeps the institution from becoming complacent. *"I think the students play an important role in helping us to focus our attention. And yeah, I think if it was the same group of people that just hung around for a long time and didn't turn the way it does, then we might feel that we'd solved something, or we might think, 'oh, yeah, we've addressed that, and we had that conversation.'''*

Furthermore, the practice of feedback every year allows room for uncertainty. When groups are not taken for granted, it is important to leave room for what groups and relations form as constituency effects of representative acts. The flexibility needed to

adapt as identities or group interests emerge is essential for an understanding of representation as a process. The iterative review and reflection process of this feedback and advocacy process helps to evaluate how well representation is working. FI describes this process as a form of accountability that challenges complacency.

> *"But when we get new eyes on it all the time, that's what tells us, 'No, you didn't. You didn't fix this because I'm still experiencing this, or this is what's going on, and actually you've been looking over here for a while, but we need you to look over here, too.' I think it's useful to us to have those fresh eyes all the time, because otherwise you sort of get complacent thinking, 'I'm making great progress, and I can see I can point to my spreadsheet that says this year I did this and this but until we close that feedback loop and get the people we're working with to tell us whether it's working or not it is a lot of guess work. And so yeah, I would say the target is not fixed, but it's also not like, the defeatist way sort of moving all the time such that we feel like we can't make progress."*

For FI representation is not so much a moving target in the sense that a goal is constantly out of reach. For her, the target is not fixed—meaning the actionable priorities change, as they should given adequate institutional practices are in place to motivate the community to define what those priorities are. Therefore, the focus of representation shifts away from how many countable identities are in your department and instead shifts to an evaluation of institutions and institutional practices and their ability to motivate this deliberative process.

The feedback process that FI and her colleagues facilitate each year in their department exemplifies what a Dischian view of representation could be in the DEI space. This example is a rare one from the collection of interviews with participants. However, it demonstrates that this reimagining of representation is possible not only in

theory, but in practice. It provides a glimpse of a potential path forward even in the times of neoliberal governance in higher education.

Neoliberal Governance in Higher Education as Acts of Representation

Neoliberalism is an elusive concept and can easily be confused with other forms of liberalism, like laissez faire philosophy. While the two are related and converge on the valorization of free markets, they differ in important ways. While classic laissez faire posits minimal government intervention (Saunders, 2010) neoliberalism makes use of government as a conveyor of market logic. As Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011) succinctly explain, neoliberalism "is not a revival of the drive to limit state power so that markets can flourish independently. It is an effort to mobilize the state on behalf of the market and reconfigure the state as a quasi-market operation" (p. 20). Neoliberalism is not only the expansion of market logic to realms of social life outside of economics, rather it is "an organizing principle for all social and political relations" (p. 20). Under neoliberalism, rational economic behavior and the market are not seen as natural, like they are under laissez faire ideology. Instead, they are to be constructed, "organized by the law and political institutions, and requiring political intervention and orchestration" (Brown, 2003, p. 9-10). As a form of governance, neoliberalism calls for the active role of government and government institutions to protect and promote market logic by creating and expanding markets and creating and sustaining market relations and actors like workers and consumers (Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011, p. 21). Under neoliberal governance we see the expansion of responsibility placed on the individual to self-actualize and "invest" in themselves by taking on responsibility that would usually be relegated to social and governmental institutions. For example, investing in one's health

by optimizing a combination of self-care, diet, and exercise where, social or government services are alleviated from providing adequate access to healthcare or recreation, it becomes a good that can be purchased or pursued at market value. This process of responsibilization not only shifts risk to the individual and away from larger social institutions, it also obscures the social nature of problems, like in this example, access to healthy food, adequate healthcare, and recreation opportunities (Saunders, 2010). Moreover, this process of responsibilization also comes with moral undertones. Individuals "have a moral and political obligation to act as disciplined entrepreneurs. They must plan to meet their own needs, accept personal responsibility for their problems, and manage their daily affairs with prudence. The individual who does otherwise fails not just as an economic actor, but as a moral and civic being" (Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011, p. 22-23). In other words, under neoliberalism, government institutions—like public higher education—are organized and structured to propagate market logic and foster the responsibilization of individuals to become rational market actors and by extension, good citizens.

In higher education we can see the expansion of neoliberalism and the reorganization of education to function as a market-like operation. Saunders (2010) explains how education transformed vis-a-vis a broader neoliberal development in the United States;

> As neoliberal policies, practices, and ideas developed in the United States, a parallel process of neoliberal development occurred in U.S. public higher education. Throughout the past four decades, the economics, structure, and purpose of higher education, as well as the priorities and identities of faculty and students, have been altered to better align with neoliberal practices and ideology. These changes have not

> fundamentally transformed the economic and social role of higher education in the United States…Instead, these changes have substantially altered the conditions in which these roles can be actualized, creating a system of higher education that is better understood as an accentuation of the previous model of higher education, which has always served the interests of capital and the ruling class. (p. 42)

Saunders makes two important observations on public higher education under neoliberalism. First, he highlights how the transformation of higher education under neoliberalism has changed regarding the *conditions* under which (under neoliberal terminology) rational actors can achieve their goals. Second, he makes it clear that neoliberalism does not alter the economic or social role of higher education; higher education has always served the interests of an elite ruling class. Rather than challenging the inequities of higher education, neoliberalism further reinforces them, albeit through a different mechanism than sheer exclusion of folks. From its inception in the United States, the intended beneficiaries of higher education were white, affluent, men. The promotion and protection of market logic limits equity, as EL explains, by design. *"I was gonna say what drives me crazy about higher ed, and the whole business thing is they will use these business models like, 'well, look at what Google did, and blah blah blah' And I'm like, 'you are not using an example from Google, which women and people of color have said is hostile and sexist and racist.' I was like, 'the reason why Google used to get all the best places to work for is because everybody was a fucking tech bro!'"* EL is more than suspicious of applying a business model to higher education because of the consequences that we have seen for minoritized folks in those environments. EL highlights that the reason so many of these business models are possible is because they

center and empower the quintessential "tech bro," which tends to be white men. When other populations join these businesses, however, equity comes secondary to profit.

Framing neoliberal governance as an act of representation provides an analytical leverage that allows us to pay closer attention to the structures of academia and the forces at play beyond the walls of DEI offices. It provides an opportunity to look at the constituency effects of neoliberalism on DEI and allows us to ask what groups are constructed through the structures and practices of academia under a neoliberal agenda. In other words, what groups are formed *through* interfacing with academia? Ultimately, the reorganization of higher education under a neoliberal agenda shapes how groups can be constituted or represented. By using representation as mobilization as an analytical tool we gain a more nuanced understanding of DEI in higher education.

Institutions Under-resourced Under a Neoliberal Agenda

The reduction of government funding of higher education led institutions of higher education to prioritize revenue generation and become more reliant on private sources of funding (Saunders, 2010). As YB, a DEI professional with over a decade of experience explains, universities are tasked with sustaining themselves financially. This in turn, trickles down challenges for DEI work within the universities. "*Well, I mean institutions are run as businesses. 'You know, we do want to educate the public, but we also wanna sustain ourselves financially.' So, I definitely think that what we value in terms of what's financially supported—it's definitely one of the barriers."* YB credits the way that institutions of higher education are run as businesses as one of the barriers for doing DEI work. She makes the connection between what is valued and what receives financial support, with the inference here being that DEI work is not valued at least as far

as systematically being financially supported. *"I've been doing pipeline and pathway work for over 10 years, and fundraising and getting money for these things [is a challenge] and funders want to fund certain things. You know, schools are concerned with their bottom line, with getting bodies in the seats [[...]]"* YB hints at two ways that many colleges and universities fund their operations: private dollars and tuition. With private donations, often the funder directs the funds at their discretion. As far as bodies in seats, YB is telling us two distinct things: first, tuition funds are important for sustaining institutions of higher education, and second, that a neoliberal framing has infiltrated the purpose of higher education. As Saunders (2010) explains, "as the neoliberal hegemony increasingly shaped individuals' common sense, commodification, commercialization, and marketization, as well as the extension of market logic and the prioritization of economic outcomes, have come to redefine the purpose and role of social, cultural, and political institutions" (p. 42). When YB says that the bottom line is bodies in seats she is not just talking about funding structures, she is pointing out the priorities and motivations of institutions of higher education under a neoliberal agenda.

DEI professional, LW, talks about the importance of mindsets in the way that budgets are allotted across her university. She refers to a capitalistic mindset to talk about the logic used for the way that funds are distributed. Like YB, LW views lack of financial support as a barrier to DEI work. *"Mindset impacts budgets, too. You know we have a finite number of resources. And there's people who are making decisions about where the resources go. Usually it's very capitalistic: you put in more money in the areas that generate money and areas that are generating money aren't usually the spaces where the most marginalized students are. The programs and the services that serve the students*

who need us most don't generate revenue. We have to get over the fact that we just need to put in resources in places that don't generate revenue." LW is highlighting the disconnect between need and support. Under a model where revenue is prioritized, money does not tend to find its way to where it may be most needed. Instead, it is invested in areas where profit can be maximalized. For LW, the solution requires a collective letting go of this logic or mindset. Unfortunately, getting over this mindset would require dismantling the practices that neoliberalism has incentivized higher education institutions to formalize.

ZV provides an example of how underfunding and being under-resourced creates multiple challenges within DEI work. *"That's what stresses me out and I think that's what breaks DEI spaces is that underresourcement, under-resourced capabilities, rigid funding guidelines don't give the full autonomy for these directors to do what they need to do."* The first challenge is the way that funding guidelines, usually associated with private funds that come with stipulations, or with a popular mechanism of neoliberalism in public institutions, performance-based funding, limit practitioner discretion. Performance-based funding links state funding to outcomes like retention and graduation rates (Rosinger et al., 2022). *"And it also creates a situation where not only are we under-resourcing our students, not only are we under-resourcing the staff, but we also create this siloing and this competition between DEI programs. If this DEI program is getting this, then somebody else is not getting something else."* The second challenge is the way that this *underresourcement* leads to competition within DEI programs. Competition is another way in which market logic fuels dynamics in higher education. More importantly, beyond simply creating competition, under-resourcing *normalizes*

competition, making it seem like the natural outcome rather than a function of design. *"It creates these weird tensions, and I've seen that over and over in my career here since 2004. I think about how many [people] I've seen in particular DEI spaces; I see that continual turnover. You go and you try to create a relationship with someone, you help, you serve on their search committees—you do everything. And also, you have to kind of step away and just be like 'what's happening?' And then sometimes you see how those frustrations manifest into climate issues that are unsustainable for units that continue to perpetuate [those tensions]."* Ultimately, the lack of resources and the competition that it perpetuates contribute to tensions and fragmentation of DEI programs. ZV talks about relationships breaking down through this competition, where collaboration is broken and frustrations can peak and contribute to a negative work environment and attrition. This has important implications for representation as mobilization. Disch (2022) refers to groups as political achievements, whereby representative acts forge cleavages, not merely register them. By framing the under-resourcing of higher education by the government, and the under-resourcing of DEI within higher education in particular, as an act of representation, we see how DEI practitioners are fragmented by design. Their lack of collective sense is an achievement of neoliberalism.

QB speaks about the lack of institutional structure as a form of under-resourcing DEI work. *"So, either the community or their staff has demanded for someone to be in a DEI role. So, that's your way of appeasing folks. So, you hire someone."* QB refers to the performance of DEI work, where institutions hire DEI practitioners as a way of appeasing demands made by the university community rather than with the intention of implementing change. Furthermore, when those hires are not backed with structural

support or funds, the intention of performance rather than enacting change becomes clear. *"But without the institutional power, without the financial resources, without a team. So, it's like, you're setting them up to fail. You're also hiring them with no intention of actually going ahead with any of their recommendations. Again, it's just performative."* QB then touches on two important things: structure and policy. By hiring DEI practitioners without financial support for their work and isolating DEI from the epicenter of authority that can be found with the president, institutions structurally limit the possibility of effective DEI programming. By not having safeguards against burnout, for example, institutions are setting up their DEI practitioners to fail, and that failure is perceived as a personal one, not an institutional one. *"I think research has shown that DEI needs to have a direct line to the President. Like whatever industry you're in, like not housed within, like HR, like you need to be reporting directly to the [president]. So, not having that, again by design, you're setting people up to fail. And I think that the burnout is like, if you don't have institutional policies that prevent that, then you're also inadvertently setting people up to fail."* The failure that QB talks about is very much linked to a neoliberal framework whereby the logic is that because there is an assumed equal opportunity in the market, if someone fails, the failure is theirs and theirs alone because they simply did not work hard enough. Under neoliberalism, failure is not structural but personal, with the risk shifted away from institutions and governmental entities and instead landing on the shoulders of individuals (Saunders, 2010). Therefore, *underresourcement* in the way that QB presents it goes beyond financial resources and taps into structural resources of support and institutional intervention necessary for successful DEI work.

Invisible Labor: The Unrewarded (Virtuous!) Additional Hard Work

The lack of structural support for DEI often results in invisible labor. Particularly, for BIPOC practitioners, the amount of emotional and mental labor that comes with mentorship, for example, often goes unacknowledged while also being expected. Much of the work that is done goes unrewarded (specifically, not compensated) and is expected to be informal although doing much of this labor takes time and energy away from the activities that do "count" for practitioners like BIPOC faculty, who spend more time mentoring, or serving on committees and have less time to engage in tenure positive activities like writing, researching, and publishing. Under neoliberalism, individuals are often tasked with taking on responsibilities that would normally be considered a task for a governmental institution. In addition, individuals are "encouraged to help others, not by deciding how to organize their communities in a just manner, but by pursuing individual work as volunteers, charitable givers, and virtuous providers of services" (Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011, p. 22 quoting Crenson and Ginsberg, 2002). Invisible labor is necessary for maintaining the structural status quo. If the success of BIPOC students is tied to the labor of DEI practitioners, especially those from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds; then any problem can be constructed as an individual one rather than a social, or systemic problem.

Invisible labor is often internal. For BIPOC practitioners, especially in predominantly white institutions (PWI) there is an added layer of work associated with the way they present themselves. TS, a Black woman, talks about the exhaustion that comes with the minute decisions associated with showing up as a Black woman in a very white space. She gives an example of choosing earrings on any given day; *"If I told a*

white person that deciding whether or not [to wear] my hoops was a big thing for me, they [would be] like 'Oh, well, that's interesting. I never thought about it before.' They forget that's like one decision I make a day of so many decisions that all impact how I am viewed racially, and gender-wise. Hoops!" TS illustrates of how one of the challenges of invisible labor is exactly how *invisible* it is. While no one in particular is policing TS's choices when it comes to which accessories she chooses to wear to work, she has come to police herself after many years of navigating white spaces, particularly higher education. Another challenge of invisible labor is that often, it is not one large task that is undertaken by an individual, but rather a series of small tasks that when spoken out loud, often seem inconsequential, like choosing earrings. However, it is not the size of the undertaking that is exhausting, but the constant, never-ending nature of it. TS speaks on this as she continues; *"There's so many things that especially women of color have to do each day, and so many tiny decisions that really add up and make it exhausting. How we talk, how we dress, our tone, finishing emails, how I have to add some of the question marks to make myself not hostile. And then, when a white woman messes up, somehow it becomes my fault. So many tiny things just make it so exhausting. It's really hard to describe to someone else."* The constant stream of small decisions is exhausting and difficult to articulate the full brunt of the labor that this type of self-surveillance takes on a person because from afar it might seem self-inflicted, a personal choice. However, when we look closer, the neoliberal undertone to this type of invisible labor is the way that BIPOC are constructed. This process of self-surveillance is learned. As Toft et al. (2023) explain "market logic is incorporated into state institutions that shape its subjects through experiences of interacting with the state…It is argued that this shaping of the

subject, or governmentality, not only applies to how people interface with government services, but also is incorporated into the ways people conduct their daily lives in an analog of the market" (p. 100). This expansion of market logic and the way it reorganizes social institutions comes at a cost. For TS, part of doing her job is her learning how to show up at her institution. In this way, "neoliberalism's power may be in how successfully it teaches people to govern themselves" (p. 100).

Another aspect of invisible labor is that it is often unrewarded. Specifically, there tends to be little to no structure in the academy that formally rewards this type of labor. OC, a Black faculty member, talks about the invisible labor of being "one of one." This labor does not only benefit students of color who may identify with OC, but as he explains, all students come to expect a certain amount of labor from him as a Black man. "*There's a lot of extra labor that goes into being one of— if you're just one of the only women in the department—one of the only women of color in the department. If you're one of the only Black people, like that— there's a lot of extra work because students will reach out to you. Students of color will reach out to you. And white students will reach out to you because they expect [to] get a different and deeper level of emotional connection from you. They expect a different level of understanding from you. It means sometimes you'll be taken advantage of by students, by faculty."* Beyond teaching his own area of expertise, OC is also expected to have other skills associated with the emotional labor that has come to be expected of him. He states that often he feels taken advantage of because the additional service that is associated with emotional labor often has nowhere to go—it isn't accounted for. *"We do a lot of extra service. Service that is unaccounted for. You can't put it anywhere. You can't describe it in any kind of annual*

review. It's just a number of emails. You know the thing that I was doing with Black students for a little while, still doing that—and no one cares that I do it, right? The students care." The lack of formal process for reporting some of his own initiatives that he has done to advance DEI in his department render much of his work invisible. Here it is important to highlight how similar to TS, who talked about the smallness of each choice she made, here too we see how OC struggles to articulate some of the work that he does. He describes it as a few emails, emails which no doubt convey meaningful feedback and appreciation, however, it is the lack of place to describe that feedback in an annual review that renders them small. The DEI work that OC does is not small, but the institutional structures and systemic inability to formalize this type of feedback constructs is as negligible, invisible.

Invisible labor is additional labor. Invisible labor is additional in at least two distinct ways; first, in addition to their job description, and second in addition to the emotional labor already necessary to exist as a minoritized person in a predominantly white space. While BIPOC professionals do their job, the labor that is often expected of them because of their minoritized status or lived experience is done in addition to this work. VP explains how the pressure that is associated with invisible labor is often overwhelming and in tension with what is expected of that individual as a professional.

> *"Another reason why professionals of color or indigenous professionals often exit early— It's because of all the expectations that are put on them. Because they are of a different lived experience. So oftentimes what happens… you may be the new teacher of color in the school, and all the other students of color see you and they're like, 'Finally, someone who knows us who looks like us!' and the demands on that teacher then become overwhelming because all of the students need their support. And they're a new professional*

> *trying to do good on a new job and learn all the ropes and try to collaborate and try to follow the rules, and, like the demands, are overwhelming. The demands are overwhelming. And it's really too sad that the vast majority of this work continues to rest on people of color because the demands are overwhelming, and we burn out."*

The cost of representing, here understood in the way that "someone who looks like me" could be subsumed under a form of representative bureaucracy, is paid by the individual doing the work. Here again we see neoliberalism at play, where individuals are tasked with responsibilities that ought to be taken on by the state's institutions. Where there should be a systemic solution, there is instead an overworked minoritized person doing additional work that is unrewarded. This leads to overwhelm, overwork, and ultimately can lead to burnout and attrition. Invisible labor is additional not only to the work associated with a job description, but it is additional to the emotional work already being done by minoritized folks. As many participants have articulated and as TS does here, being a person of color in academia already requires emotional labor for oneself. Being asked to do service, or to mentor students at a higher rate than other faculty, for example, is in itself additional labor, this is made more complex by the emotional labor already required to simply exist as a non-white person in a very white place.

> *"I know that when we have people with specific identities in a room or in a department, they get asked for service at a much higher rate than other people [[...]] They aren't really given the resources to survive in that environment because they were already facing all the challenges—challenges of racism and sexism and everything else, and then an additional burden of wanting to help the next generation, but also kind of just being stuck, not being given any leeway to do so, or even sometimes people viewing that work as less important, and having to detract from your tenure portfolio."*

When on top of that layered work, that work is rendered invisible or structurally is not rewarded, it can contribute to feeling overwhelmed like VP describes above. Especially when folks aren't given the resources needed to navigate a space, it becomes harder to provide resources for others like them to do something they are often struggling with themselves. Yet, the expectation remains that the individual will solve a problem that is in fact systemic and much larger than any individual could hope to take on as their problem to solve.

The Neoliberal Construction of DEI and Underrepresented Groups

Institutions of higher education are expected to market themselves. Whether it is in the quest for enrollment as part of performance-based funding or for tuition revenue, under neoliberalism, universities are in competition with each other to recruit and retain students. This competition for would-be students and their tuition dollars happens at the same time as potential students are playing the part of consumers— rational thinking actors. Again, under neoliberalism, with a reduction of state funding, universities increase their reliance on tuition revenue, making it more expensive for potential students. Additionally, as risk and responsibility is transferred from institutions to individuals, potential students are further incentivized to think about education as an investment in their future. When education is an expense that many spend a large portion of their lives paying off, and when institutions compete for these would-be students, following trends becomes vital for selling potential students on the "experience" of higher education. It is against this backdrop that DEI undergoes a neoliberal makeover and is flattened to a

selling point, or potential interest—an amenity—that could draw in students and their tuition dollars.

AJ taps into a dynamic of competition that she observes in higher education. More importantly, for AJ, this dynamic of competition across colleges and universities diverts attention away from structural issues towards the perception of assets, like DEI. *"I feel like we're just recycling the same old stuff, and I think that deviates from paying attention to some of the other structural things, and how we could be using resources as well. This part of it is a business. You have to stay viable, you know, as other businesses are performing. So, we're always looking at what other schools are doing, how they're doing it. You know, who's funding them? Keeping up with the Joneses is kind of the nature of higher education."* AJ refers to institutions of higher education as businesses. She uses the refrain "keeping up with the Joneses" to explain the way that policies, practices, and discourses travel from one university to the next. This process is similar to what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) famously referred to as institutional isomorphism, or the way that institutions become more similar to each other over time. The three mechanisms of isomorphism include coercive (pressure from laws, regulation, funding stipulations), mimetic (copying others deemed successful especially in times of uncertainty), and normative (norms and standards shared through training and education). Institutional isomorphism also allows us to see colleges and universities as part of an organizational field, whereby they influence one another (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This is important because while much of the conversation around DEI is grounded in specific contexts, especially geographically given the structure of state funding of public universities, isomorphism allows us to gain insight into how institutions situate

themselves in relation to other institutions. In other words, no institution of higher learning is an island. Institutions influence and are influenced by other institutions beyond state lines.

This 'keeping up' that AJ refers to can also be understood as chasing a trend. YB explains how DEI is often repackaged to remain relevant—or in AJ's words, viable. *"The temperature changes on things, right? Like, I call it a trend. Right now, the trend is this. And you might get, you know, a dean or Provost to say, 'okay, we're going to focus on this.' And then 4 years later, it's something else that is essentially the same thing, but it's called something different. So, I think, you know, we have this kind of trendy way of doing the work to try to keep it relevant."* Here it is important to point out that doing DEI work based on whatever is trendy at any given time and renaming it to keep it relevant makes its value not innate, but rather dependent on whatever value it can attribute to the overall sale of an institution. In other words, the value of DEI work is based on the way that it can be commodified and sold as an asset or an amenity in the broader "college experience" sold to rational economic actors.

TS describes the interest in DEI as an ebb and flow and characterizes it as one of the biggest challenges to her work. "*But then very close second, my other biggest challenge to my work I would say it's also just really hard watching interest in DEI—even saying that just sounds so messed up—we're watching that like ebb and flow like it's a trend. That is so heartbreaking."* The process of marketization is bound to a market, and market demands change. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020 there was an increase in DEI-focused activity, for example. By the time that these interviews were conducted in 2023, the trend had already started to change. This leaves DEI

professionals at the mercy of whatever "trend" is prevalent at that time. The "trendiness" of DEI work, or viability, or relevance also has real implications for access to resources, institutional support, and funds. From a representation as mobilization perspective, we know that people form opinions and preferences based on messages they receive from sources they trust, like social institutions. When the message that TS receives is that the value of DEI is not intrinsic but tied to the whims of the market, it is perhaps not surprising that she describes that experience as heartbreaking.

TS goes on to share how this trendiness of DEI and the marketization also contributes to her experience as a Black woman doing DEI work. She shares her experience attending an event following the murder of George Floyd. *"I would see these white girls there, and part of me would be like, 'okay, people are gonna care like it's gonna get better.' But I knew it's because there's quarantine, people are bored at home and as soon as things go back to normal no one cares again. And then that's what happens. Like my life was literally a Tik Tok trend."* TS is providing an important snapshot of recent events where a hyper trend-driven social media platform, a global pandemic, and a murder of a Black man at the hands of police converge to create a moment that is heavily documented, shared, and discussed. Until it isn't.

> *"And so, it feels dehumanizing, being [reduced] down to like a micro interest that just comes and goes whenever there's another sensationalized killing of someone who is just like me. And it seems like, you know we weren't alive for the civil rights era when people were being hung in the streets, but I feel like it's like being lynched twice, almost. Because you get murdered and everyone sees it, and that's a lynching. And then the second lynching would be everyone else watching, people care about it for a day, and then never again. And so, everyone else is realizing that my life only*

> *matters when it's trendy, and then not at all the second it stops being trendy."*

TS describes the experience of watching the interest in DEI and DEI related issues come and go, particularly as it is facilitated by social media, as dehumanizing. She compares the way that society witness the public killings of Black folks through violent state action to the public lynchings seen at the time of the civil rights movement. The increased interest and visibility of these killings gave TS momentary hope. However, witnessing the wane of public interest in the murder of Black folks feels to her like a second lynching, where someone's personhood is killed again through the public's quick disregard. TS's experience demonstrates how devastating and far-reaching a neoliberal view of DEI can be.

Tokenism: The Oxymoron of Hyper and Invisibility of BIPOC

Treating DEI work as an amenity sends a message about BIPOC bodies and experiences. When all is said and done, the way that DEI is sold as an asset and consumed as an experience leaves many BIPOC in a strange predicament where representation is both hyper visible (BIPOC bodies on advertisement materials, for example) and yet also steeped in invisibility (you can be seen but not heard). UV highlights this oxymoron from their own perspective. *"They're very selective about what they want to know and not know. Right? 'Give us your brownness. Give us your passion, but don't be aggressive. Don't talk about your poverty at all. We don't want to hear that because we only want you to look good in the role.'"* UV references the way that they show up is shaped by the expectations placed on them by the university. Rather than embracing authentic presentation of self, UV talks about navigating the restrictions on

their personhood based on social norms and rules of the university. While some of the social norms of higher education diminish certain aspects of their personhood, they are expected to perform other aspects of their experience. Yet, UV pushes against this by stating that their experience matters for the way that they can lead their center and do their work. "*But it matters. Let me localize this a bit, like it matters that they hired a first gen kid who is poor. That directly shapes how I can lead, right? That's what they don't want to deal with, they just want you to be brown and look the part, but like they don't want to go beyond. So, like, 'give us enough attitude to where you're the spicy Latino but don't give us too much attitude to where you're aggressive, or we're intimidated by you.'*" UV refers to the way that being a first-generation college graduate and growing up in poverty informs their approach to leadership and their work ethic, especially as someone working to provide services for other BIPOC in higher education. However, the challenging aspects of their lived experience are not welcome in the way that they show up in their work. Rather, they are expected to perform a form of Latinidad that is not based on their lived experience but instead is put on *to be experienced* or consumed by others without the thorniness of how they came to possess their life knowledge. The expectations that UV describes put a premium on their brownness— making it hyper visible as a "spicy Latino" and denies and silences, and seeks to render invisible their struggles, their attitude.

EL shares a similar opinion to UV, for her, one of the challenges to DEI work is specifically the expectations put on BIPOC. *"I would say, the problem is, you don't want students of color as they are. You want students of color who are just like the white students, in which they wouldn't be marginalized and underserved, if that were the case."*

EL makes a distinction between being a student of color and being a white student. The distinction between the two is about how marginalization and being under-served influences the way that people show up in their environments. The experience of being marginalized and underserved, as BIPOC have been historically in higher education, means that often BIPOC students face challenges that their white counterparts do not. What EL is calling out in her observation is the way that higher education wants to increase the visibility of BIPOC without necessarily addressing the challenges that can come with being a BIPOC student in higher education. Colleges and universities want *bodies* of color, not necessarily *people* and experiences and the associated challenges that those experiences (or lack thereof) can manifest. From a market perspective, serving a homogenous student body is more efficient and cost effective than serving a diverse student body (Saunders, 2010). Serving students who have been marginalized and underserved in their previous institutions requires the provision of additional resources to ensure equitable outcomes for students. This way of serving students however conflicts with the maximization of revenue.

Perhaps one of the most complex aspects of tokenism is how it permeates the structures of the academy, and how it can be perpetuated even by folks who would denounce tokenism. JM, a faculty member who is active in DEI related work, provides an example of this phenomenon. He shares how his participation in an equity committee was expected even if his own research interests or training didn't necessarily suit the needs of the committee as well as other colleagues in his department. *"I think that even now, with the equity salary [conversation] at the committee—I was wondering why I was on this committee, because I don't really, you know [short pause] obviously, it's related to*

everybody. But I think [other] colleagues are in a better position than me to be on that [particular] committee." The focus of this specific committee was on salaries, which is not a focus on JM's own research agenda, while it is very much in the wheelhouse of some of his colleagues. *"So even when I'm on the committee, I think my colleagues are very polite, but you know they will kindly suggest. '[JM] can you look at some statistics to find out about the patterns of salary equity in the school?' So, there are some assumptions, obviously—about me doing statistics, right? So, you know [shrugs shoulders] which is fine. I understand why people think that way. But I'm not entirely pleased, right?"* As a faculty member of color, specifically of Asian descent, JM, appears somewhat resigned to the stereotype of Asian folks being particularly inclined to do and succeed at mathematics. Even in the space of equity work—this committee focused on equitable salaries in particular—tokenism not only happens but harms BIPOC. As JM points out, *"We have the Human Resource Department, don't ask me to do all the statistics for the committee. So, you know I'm happy to do [work] but there are some of those dimensions which I feel less comfortable with. Yeah, as I mentioned, I'm now formally on two committees in addition to [a search committee]. I think two of them [are equity focused]."* As a junior faculty member, JM is expected to do service for his tenure package, however, his service is heavily burdened not by equity work that he is personally well-positioned to contribute to but work that is imposed on him based on stereotypes and tokenism. As Flores Niemann (2016) points out, "The weight of the needs of the university structure relative to any matters related to race is placed on the few visible faculty of color in the context, leading to their assignment to tasks and roles that the dominant group perceives require engagement by faculty of color. Tokenism is

thus a function of the needs of the organization and dominants' expectations and perceptions of the appropriateness of faculty of color to fulfill these needs and related roles, coupled with dominants' power to impose their will along these expectations. As a result, because the university structure consistently includes only a few faculty of color, the social structure creates and maintains tokenism" (p. 456). Again, because tokenism is a structural problem in higher education, even spaces that are intended to be working to alleviate inequities can and do reinforce them.

Another aspect of the complexity of tokenism is that it both harms and at times benefits (albeit a few) BIPOC. As part of a larger conversation about how they have always worked in DEI including during their time as a student, UV shared, "*I will say, I had been resistant to the idea of what some folks talk about like being 'gay for pay,' or like 'paid to be brown.' I was very resistant to the idea, because I would hear, 'you would make a great Multicultural Director! You'd make a great Chief Diversity Officer blah blah!'"* UV talks about a resistance to the idea that their identities were being commodified because the messages that they received from their institution were positive, often acknowledging how great they would be at a DEI-focused leadership position. This potential of a leadership position and validation of their abilities and skills made it so UV didn't question whether they were being tokenized. *"But never was it like, 'you'd make a great Student Affairs Vice President!' or like, 'a great Vice President' or a great anything outside of the realm of like the silos that are created for us."* It wasn't until UV noticed a pattern in the opportunities that were being presented to them that they realized how they were being limited by that tokenism. UV provides a nuanced view of tokenism. On the one hand, UV to some extent did benefit from being tokenized. Those

benefits included positive feedback and career growth within the DEI space. On the other hand, UV was systematically excluded from job opportunities they are qualified to do. As UV described their trajectory throughout undergraduate jobs they held, through graduate school and the positions they held, to their professional work experience, they noted that they rarely worked outside of DEI. Even when they did, their position would take on a culturally or identity-specific role within that position. They acknowledged that after years of promotions through those positions it occurred to them, *"I am actually being tokenized, but also benefiting from it, right?"* UV's experience and nuanced take on tokenism helps to demonstrate how hyper individualism and responsibilization can have a depoliticizing effect on structural issues. UV accepting and taking on more leadership roles in the DEI space was them behaving like a rational actor: investing in their own self-actualization and taking responsibility for their economic wellbeing. However, what this process obscured for UV, at least for a time, was that the isolation and siloing that they felt was a symptom of a much larger issue of limiting BIPOC's opportunities outside of DEI-specific areas in higher education.

Tokenism, among other things, presents a very flat, two-dimensional understanding of identity. FM, a DEI professional at Southern University, points out how tokenism facilitates a performance of diversity that ignores structures and intersectionalities. *"You have staff that's either white or black— a binary and assume that you have fixed diversity. And then, when you notice that it's not diverse, because you could see the whiteness when you put it on a website that this is the leadership team, and you see the whiteness there. Then they said, 'oh, wait! That looks bad."* FM illustrates how tokenism not only reduces a person's identity or culture, but the problem that a

performance of diversity aims to ameliorate is not a structural one, but a marketplace one—whereby lack of diversity only becomes a problem when it *looks* bad, meaning it reflects negatively on the institution. *"So, we'll say, 'Okay, there's women on the leadership team. So, let's say that's diverse now.' Or 'oh, we have the token gay— the token LGBT. So that's diverse. We have the token African American, so that's diverse and we fulfilled being diverse by adding the one Latino that existed [in the department] and we put him on the [department] leadership.' That's not diversity. That's filling checkmarks."* The itemizing of identities and as FM described it, the checking-off of identities for photo opportunities, speaks to the way that tokenism subverts individuality as a person's racial, ethnic, or social identity becomes increasingly salient (Flores Niemann, 2011). To UV's earlier point, tokenism can benefit those few folks who are given the opportunity to advance in their career by joining a leadership team. The trade-off is that they are not able to exist as their full, authentic, selves. That damage extends beyond those specific folks when we consider how tokenism fails to challenge existing harmful structures and instead perpetuates the status quo. In this example, we see how a much larger social and structural problem of representation is obscured through the implementation of individualistic solutions. As FM said, reducing DEI to a binary is not fixing anything.

Expanding on JM's observation, tokenism prevents deeper institutional change. TS shares how her image has often been captured and shared on university materials and platforms. *"My entire life has been well-placed, well-timed photos of me put on websites, saying, 'Look, we have a Black person, come here!'"* TS makes a point here of how her image is used to incentivize others to join their institution. However, as TS makes clear,

there is a gap between token presence and actual influence. In representation terms, the difference between descriptive and substantive representation. *"I think people were expecting me to come in and be like a magical Black person and fix a lot of things. And that did not happen because I can't change policy that's been here for a long time, and faculty are very tied to some policies, and they really hate certain change. I don't want to make students feel like I'm not doing enough for them. But there are a lot of barriers that I face in my own work, but, like every person does."* TS refers to the expectations put on BIPOC working in DEI, the expectation is so unrealistic that she refers to it as being a "magical Black person." Her presence alone cannot change institutional policies or practices. She also highlights that these barriers that she faces in her own work are not unique to her but rather reflect a more general experience of doing DEI work. She continues by sharing how her presence is used by her institution to legitimize their investment in DEI work by making her hyper visible even though she is the first person to be hired in that position and the only person to be doing DEI work in her specific department. When analyzing this experience from a representation perspective, TS is describing the difference between descriptive and substantive representation. TS's ability to *substantively* represent BIPOC students is severely limited by policy, structure, and institutional culture. Yet her image and *descriptive* representation is being used as a marketing tool to draw more people of color. *"And then another experience, I think, being the first, it's being kind of tokenized by my department. Specifically, I do feel like sometimes I get used as like, 'hey! We have this really cool person on staff. She's a Black woman, and she does our DEI.' And they expect that my existence will help bring in people who look like me into the departments. And that's not always the case. Just*

because you have one Black staff member and absolutely no Black faculty or other staff members does not mean that a potential faculty member will look at the department and think 'I'll be safe here.'" There is a disingenuous presentation of reality that tokenism provides. TS makes a compelling juxtaposition between the existence of a single person of color in a place and people of color actually being safe in an environment; where the former is about optics and the latter requires institutional change. Tokenism is steeped in neoliberal logic of commercialization and marketing, where the image presented serves a purpose of profit and gain for the institution rather than an opportunity for deep engagement and systemic solutions.

It is also important to highlight the psychological burdens of tokenism that include isolation, anxiety, and stress (Flores Niemann, 2011). WA illustrates this point by also echoing TS on the unrealistic standards put specifically on BIPOC DEI practitioners. *"Putting a diverse person in a hostile environment and expecting that diverse person to flourish and to even recruit more diverse people is like a—I don't know— some fantasy somewhere. That is not going to happen. Like you said, absolutely without any support, like actual, like tangible financial support. Emotional support. Social support. Like that person is going to probably leave, if not just, be absolutely disengaged and very sad."* Isolation is often spoken about in terms of numbers, akin to a lack of critical mass which feeds into tokenism (Flores Niemann, 2011) however, the isolation that WA is referring to is structural isolation. For WA, isolation is shaped by what he describes as a hostile environment, isolation is made real through a lack of support in various forms, including financial support and influence. QB provides an example of structural isolation, *"And then you have folks who are in the more entry level positions or the lower paying jobs,*

which are usually, of course, predominantly people of color who, you know, will be very I would say, like a little bit more radical in their thinking in a good way. But they're just so far removed from folks at the top that it's just like 'oh, that's cute,' you know?" QB's use of the expression "that's cute" exemplifies the feeling of being infantilized or diminished, not being taken seriously. What is especially interesting, is that for QB, this diminished role is not about lacking qualifications or experience to speak with credibility on a topic, but rather it is a result of the way that BIPOC are structurally kept at bay through entry level positions and peripheral offices. LW for her part shares how her office is also limited in their ability to implement more far-reaching policies and practices. *"And the frustrating part is we don't have any authority at all over the colleges, over the grad forum. All we have is influence. With just influence alone we're chipping away and trying to get people to change their mindset. But it's gonna be a long time before people are willing to free themselves of that [mindset]."* While LW and her team are working within the limitations that they're presented with, she admits to feeling frustrated and acknowledges that without any authority, this approach will take a long time to have an effect. Under neoliberalism, mental health issues like stress and anxiety stemming from isolation or frustration are framed as a self-care problem, rather than something caused by institutional factors like institutional culture or economic precarity.

PT illustrates what happens when these frustrations are voiced. As a white woman in leadership PT is privy to conversations regarding expectations placed on BIPOC DEI professionals. *"[Leadership will] say, 'Well, what is that [BIPOC] person's problem? Why are they always unhappy? Why are they complaining about their supervisor? Why are they offended so easily?'"* When BIPOC practitioners voice their distress or

frustration, their character is called into question. Here again we see the influence of responsibilization whereby the individual is tasked with taking on projects that should be addressed by governmental institutions. The criticism that she hears from some of her peers demonstrates an inability to understand how or why the expectations placed on BIPOC are unrealistic— *magical* as TS described it, or *fantasy* as WA referred to it. More importantly, however, this individualization demonstrates an aspect of neoliberalism "where there are no social problems, only individual challenges" (Saunders, 2010, p. 48). As PT's experience with other leadership shows, individuals are then blamed for their own distress, especially when they speak about structural problems, they are made personal by blaming the individual and casting them in a negative light. Reponsibilization frames that person's perceived failings as a moral fault, allowing their fitness to do their job to come into question. *"I hear those things as a white person, and I'm like, '[[...]] are you allowing them to bring their full selves to work? I don't think so. Otherwise, why would they feel the way they're saying?' And I've heard people say they overreact, they've changed, they don't belong, this just isn't going to work out. And it happens over and over…I don't know what to do with it because it's so structural."* It is important that PT shares that this is something she has witnessed happen multiple times. She even refers to this reaction to BIPOC practitioners' frustration as structural. This speaks to the systemic nature of the isolation— and the mental health challenges that this structural isolation can cause for practitioners. Practitioners in turn, under a frame of responsibilization are tasked with taking care of themselves and engaging in practices of self-care rather than expect structural change.

Neoliberal construction of DEI and underrepresented groups influences the choice sets available to DEI practitioners, especially DEI practitioners of color. As UV eloquently explains, the valorization of DEI hinges on both hypervisibility and invisibility of BIPOC. *"What I have seen is that we are valued to the extent that we want to and are willing to sell our identities and experiences in our positions. [[...]] Or the extent to which we are willing to mask and hide our identities and experiences in positions that are not created for people of color or minoritized people."* In other words, BIPOC are expected to be hyper visible in the DEI spaces and to make themselves invisible, or blend in otherwise. They explain that they refer to this process of navigating hypervisibility and invisibility as "*massaging whiteness*." They go on to claim that there are many ways to describe that experience *"because we know what we're doing, right? I think it is an ancestral strategy that has been given to us around navigating these dynamics."* UV references that BIPOC know what they're doing, because this "massaging whiteness" is not new, the allusion to ancestors illustrates how these dynamics are longstanding and ubiquitous.

This is a Job: The Trade-Offs of Impact

DEI professionals navigate complex expectations from a variety of stakeholders. Under a neoliberal agenda, it is the individual who takes on the risk and responsibility of their actions. This translates to a certain cost-benefit analysis that many DEI practitioners report doing as they manage their own principles and visions of DEI with the structures and expectations of their institutions. The pressures of this calculus are explicit for practitioners who depend on their job and the trade-off between their livelihood and the amount of impact that they could have is put on a scale.

CE provides a great example of how her own work is limited by the state laws that her institution is in. She describes participating in a DEI related event on campus. "*You know, these laws aren't changing— if anything, they're going to get more and more strict [long pause]. But some of the other topics, it was like, how do you accomplish the DEI work and be in compliance with our state laws and your institution? How can you honor the spirit of what you're trying to do, but do it in a way that's legally compliant?"* As CE describes it, part of the conversation at the event was centered around doing DEI work while remaining legally compliant. The importance of remaining legally compliant cannot be overstated as much of the funding for public education comes from state and federal funds, which require individual institutions to remain legally compliant to continue to receive government funding. What stands out about CE's statement is that while laws remain rigid, and she worries they may only continue to grow even more strict (they have), she has discursively turned DEI work into something less tangible— but rather focused on the *spirit* of DEI work. This discursive move harks back to what was discussed more in depth in an earlier chapter, whereby ambiguity allows for some flexibility in navigating the growing tensions between larger legal and funding structures and DEI work. CE goes on to explain more about the conversation at the event and how it provided community and some clarity on navigating new laws and policies that could affect the way that DEI work is done on campus. "*And so, it was really neat to be in a space with a lot of people who have far more positionality than I do in my position on campus trying to figure out like— 'we want you to have a more diverse workforce, here's what you can do, here's what you can't do. But here are other things that you can consider to proactively still get to the spirit of what you're trying to do.'"* The type of

strategizing that was taking place at that event is very much at the center of the tensions that DEI practitioners navigate regularly. It highlights the way that outside forces— like the political landscape and new laws affect institutional policies and practices, and therefore, their choice sets in doing their job. "*And I think that's so hard for us to explain to students, and it's heartbreaking to explain to you. They're like, 'Well, why won't you come out and directly say this' and well, I like my job. I still balance my values and my ethics on a regular basis with where I'm working, and I still feel like I can do something here and want to be a part of this. And so that's where I think that creativity piece is just sort of really, really important to figure out. Okay, we can't do this, you know. This is what this is, what'll work. These are the tools we've been given. How can we still accomplish this?"* CE points to the dissatisfaction that students feel in not being able to rely on resources at their universities to explicitly discuss all aspects of DEI, especially issues of racial justice. This is the unfulfilled promise of DEI in higher education, whereby the institution fails to mobilize— to create the conditions necessary for folks to advocate for their rights and needs. But if we look a little closer, we can see one group that is brought into being through institutional representative acts: self-aware, vulnerable practitioners. CE, like many of her colleagues, recognizes that she is dispensable to her institution. This is critical for understanding the type of pressure that many DEI practitioners are under. CE describes her approach to navigating this environment as creativity and much of the creativity that practitioners engage with in the way that they do their job emerges out of necessity and resourcefulness. What CE says so clearly is a sentiment reflected across many interviews: she is constantly balancing her own values with the values of her place of work. The key here is that the values at her place of work

are ever evolving, they change according to outside factors like the political climate and who has hold of the metaphorical purse strings.

A tension that many practitioners reported experiencing was the trade-off between their job security and carrying out their job in ways that pushed institutional boundaries. QB provides an example of those tensions between the individual and the structural components of DEI work. *"I also think, then, kind of like the next level of middle management type. Folks don't have enough support from above to, so it's like they— at an individual level, they might get it, but they might not have enough support from the top to really go against the grain."* QB talks about how at an individual level, a practitioner in middle management, might "get it" meaning their personal approach to DEI might be pushing institutional boundaries, perhaps critical of existing practices, or pushing for more support or innovation in DEI. However, because of where they are in the institutional structure— in the middle, they do not have enough power in their own positions to truly enact their critiques on existing policies and practices. Rather they depend on support from folks in more prominent positions in the institution. So, while they may have valid critiques, their plans for implementing change could be truncated by lack of institutional support, and by the risk of losing their job. *"Because then you think of job security. You think of the pension. You know, you might be working on your PhD, so you're getting kind of like tuition assistance with that. So, it's like, there's so many great benefits. But if, like, you know, it's like I got my health plan— so it's like there's so many different things that get people to like, not want to ruffle feathers."* Here QB frames not going "against the grain" and not wanting to "ruffle feathers" as a choice. The choice is made upon an assessment of what is at stake. On the one hand, pushing for change in

the DEI space, and on the other, job security and the benefits that are structurally tied to being employed including health care and retirement funds, and in the particular case of working at a university: education and career advancing opportunities through tuition benefits. Here we see how neoliberal ideology shapes QB's sense of the individual and the choice sets available to the DEI practitioner. As Peters (2016) explains,

> The construction of Homo economicus leads to a double strategy. On the one hand, there is the economisation of state and civil society institutions. On the other hand, there is the moralisation of the market where the primary shift in responsibility is away from the state— a state shedding of responsibility while retaining the power to strike norms of assessment and control towards the private sector in all areas of social provision including pensions, welfare, health, and education. Responsibilisation thus functions as a technique for the self-management and self-regulation of social risks such as illness, unemployment, and poverty. (p.141 referencing Lemke, 2001)

DEI work is done under neoliberal conditions, where many social benefits like the ones QB listed are tied specifically to the job. For example, the structuring of health insurance benefits through employers who provide specific health plans and coverage to their employees. The conditions that DEI practitioners operate under allow for the construction of the individual as homo economicus. This is a particular form of subjectivity that can be traced back to traditional liberalism. "However, whereas liberalism posits 'economic man' as a 'man of exchange,' neoliberalism strives to ensure that individuals are compelled to assume market-based values in all of their judgments and practices in order to amass sufficient quantities of 'human capital' and thereby become 'entrepreneurs of themselves'" (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). What QB describes is the management of risk of

unemployment through a process of self-regulation which includes the trade-off between impact and employment, and the associated social benefits.

For ND this management of risk explains some of the loss of interest in positions of employment at Southern University. When describing a scenario where she had to make changes to an event because it was too outwardly DEI specific, ND sighed and concluded, *"And I have to respect the leadership that's above me."* When I followed up by asking if interactions like this request were a risk for her livelihood, she responded, *"Yeah, well, that's the other thing. I mean, first of all, I don't think it would be worth it anyways, to do something that would just be a blip in the pan, and then I'd be gone. But also, yeah, I can't afford to not have my job."* ND, who is in middle management, personifies what QB described above. ND had to implement a change not because she wanted to, but because leadership above her asked her to. ND goes on to describe how challenging this situation would simply not be worth it, first, because it would simply have very little impact ("a blip in the pan") and second, because she cannot afford to lose her job. She goes on to explain that situations like the one she described have led many people to seek employment elsewhere. More importantly, she specifically references jobs in different states. *"But it is one of the reasons why there are a lot of people from states like this that are applying for jobs in states that are not like this."* When ND says "states like this" she is referring to states with more conservative values and voters. This conservatism has manifested in state legislation and policies that are anti-DEI. With funding tied closely to performance measures and legal compliance, like CE above, ND and other DEI practitioners must engage in this balancing of personal ethics, convictions, and employment. The trade-offs and calculations that this process entails, in ND's view,

have contributed to a sort of brain drain, where DEI practitioners, acting as rational, self-actualizing individuals, seek opportunities to do their work under less strenuous conditions in states that being "not like this" would be more progressive and less hostile towards DEI work.

TS and WA, both at Midwestern University, provide a behind the scenes look at what navigating the trade-offs of impact looks like in practice. Both inadvertently referred to this process as a game. In her description of some of the routines of her job TS mentioned that much of it requires her to "play the game." When asked about how she learned about the game, TS responded, "*Probably experience, just interacting with people and realizing that it's really a 'scratch my back, I scratch yours' world. Even if people say, 'as you know, we are committed to diversity, we have a mission statement.' Everyone has their own— like everyone's a stakeholder for something else. They have their own major interests. And if you can help them, maybe in some way they're going to help you. So, it's just business."* Here it is important to highlight that TS says that she learned about the game through experience, not through someone informing her either formally or informally about the way to get DEI work done in her department. By doing her job, TS learned that there are hidden agendas under the veneer of advancing DEI. To achieve her goals, TS learned to read between the lines and ultimately learned the rules of the game: earning and exchanging support through a broader economy of interests in the department. Here too we see how DEI work is constructed with the understanding that it lacks inherent value, and instead the impact of DEI work depends on practitioners like TS managing relationships and risk and engaging in invisible labor to get work done. WA for his part shares, "*So it's kind of awful. But you know I feel like sometimes you have to play*

the game. You have to cede small bits in order to gain the trust that you need to make the change that you really want." For WA, this game is about gaining trust through a process of compromise and exchange. He provides a specific example, *"So maybe you don't get to have a more equitable process in grad admissions—for example, I don't know, just one example. But you cede that, so that you can gain the trust and kind of like a quid pro quo almost to get something else that you think is going to have better impact, which is awful, and that's not a great way of doing it. But it happens."* The compromise in this example is the concession of something that would have less impact to pursue something else with the potential of greater impact with the benefit of support garnered through the concession. For TS and WA, the cost-benefit analysis of potential impact falls on their shoulders. The trade-offs that they explain as part of the game are not the perceived choice of impact and employment, but of impact and the self, whereby they must contend with their own personal ethics to calculate the greatest benefit and wider good.

Groups as Political Achievement

There has been extensive work in the field of DEI and higher education. Often, the issue of representation is framed through the lens of something like representative bureaucracy or numerical representation. Both of these frames approach representation as a goal, and assume that groups exist, ready to be represented. This chapter began with a simple question: what would happen if instead of taking groups for granted, we questioned how DEI policy and practice *constitute* groups? Analytically, asking this allows us to take a step back from this body of work, and rather than focusing on the match between groups that are assumed to exist and the way that those groups are represented in higher education, we are able to instead focus directly on the systems and

practices that are done in higher education, particularly in the DEI space and ask, what groups are institutions constituting through policies and practices?

This analytical shift is made possible through a constructivist approach to representation as mobilization. Representation as mobilization posits that groups are not a pre-existing thing but rather a constituency effect of acts of political representation. These can include policies enacted by legislatures, slogans, symbols, and appeals made by individuals (Disch, 2021). This view of representation asks us to think about mobilization, how divisions in society are not inherent but made. Disch (2021) uses empirical findings from policy-feedback literature to show that policies themselves generate groups of beneficiaries, or social categories, that become political actors or constituencies. Disch proposes a version of realism that does *not* accept the default assumptions of realist literature (fixed preferences, fixed social groups). Instead, her realist stance asks what institutional designs, elite actions, and public policies are shaping folks' agendas, identities, and conflict lines. "Realists" Disch (2021) writes, "ask what motivates us to act the way we do now, taking motivation to be an effect of institutional design, not a matter of will" (p. 52). For Dish, realism is less about lamenting limitations of individuals, such as voters, (though she does not refute that they exist) and more about tracing how power operates to shape, enable, or disable democratic possibilities. If we accept that constituencies are constructed, we can look at institutions and hold them accountable to facilitate inclusive constructions of groups, we are able to ask what lines of conflict are activated, which groups are legitimized, and which voices are marginalized. With this view we can move past the idea of how well institutions match existing preferences (responsiveness) and focus instead on how well institutions allow for

contestations over what conflicts are recognized, identities respected, and what counts as a constituency.

While Disch's work focuses on democracy more broadly, her shift from individuals to institutions at the center of the inquiry of representation can also be applied in higher education. In her own work she draws from E.E. Schattschneider, to reiterate his claim that power, "is mediated by the conflict system; specifically, any power is mediated by whatever biases in the organization of conflict manage the extent of that power's contagion" (p. 80). It is these biases that affect what kinds of mobilization are possible. This lens helps us see how institutions, like higher education, organized under a neoliberal agenda, tend to favor some conflicts and interests over others while other potential conflicts are silenced or marginalized based on how rules, norms, or discourses operate. This frame provided insights that help to answer the initial questions: how do university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses. And how do acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in social and political relations more broadly?

Neoliberalism as Political and the Responsibilization of DEI Practitioners

How do university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses?

Lemke (2001) describes neoliberalism as "a political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic and to link a reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for 'personal responsibility' and 'self-care" (p. 203). As an ideology and set of practices, particularly when applied to public higher

education, neoliberalism shapes public institutions in the image of the market, where institutions have to find market solutions to remain viable, like a business. Neoliberalism shapes the sensemaking of individuals where they experience responsibilization, "a governance praxis that operates through ascribing freedom and autonomy to individuals and agents…while simultaneously appealing to individual responsibility-taking, independent self-steering and 'self-care' (Pyysiäinen, Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2017 p. 216). This worldview reorganizes the institution of higher education to serve and promulgate market practices.

Under neoliberalism we see an underfunding of higher education in general, and a restructuring of funding based on performance metrics as well as investment towards more money-generating endeavors. As LW mentioned earlier in this chapter, marginalized folks do not tend to be in areas within higher education that are generating money. This underfunding of education pushes colleges and universities to seek out tuition dollars through various avenues including the marketization of DEI. This makes DEI susceptible to the trends of the market, more highly regarded when it is "trendy" and obscured, limited, or hidden when the tide turns and DEI is deemed less desirable.

In turn, this *underresourcement* leads many DEI practitioners to engage in invisible labor as a form of providing a service that the institution itself is failing to fund or provide otherwise. This leads to DEI practitioners, and especially DEI practitioners of color, to take responsibility for the success of their programming and services. This invisible labor however is often informal, internal, and difficult to articulate, all factors which contribute to the challenges of formalizing and compensating this type of labor. Moreover, the time and energy that it takes to carry out this labor takes away from the

formal pathways to career security like research and publishing for faculty and strict program provision and reporting for professionals.

An important aspect of the process of responsibilization of DEI practitioners is that they are the ones that take on risk in their endeavors. Meaning, through the institutional organization of where their positions are in relation to sources of authority, practitioners are more or less likely to risk their job to challenge institutional structures or engage in critique of existing policies and practices. The precarity of their employment interacts with the marginalization of their positions to create a difficult environment for enacting their desired impact.

In essence, this process of responsibilization under a neoliberal organization constructs a vulnerable (if aware) DEI practitioner whose status in the broader institution is often reduced through invisible labor and lack of authority to implement their visions while also managing the risk of pushing for institutional change. This frame of the self stifles the emergence of conflict that could enable a mobilization of DEI practitioners because it successfully incentivizes individuals to take on invisible labor and risk that should be considered the responsibility of the state. By providing individual solutions, problems can hardly be understood as social.

Homo Economicus, Tokenism, and Entrenchment of Descriptive Representation

How do acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in social and political relations more broadly?

Hamann (2009) argues that at the center of neoliberal governmentality is "the strategic production of social conditions conducive to the construction of Homo economicus…neoliberal homo economicus is a free and autonomous 'atom' of self-

interest who is fully responsible for navigating the social realm using rational choice and cost-benefit calculation to the express exclusion of all other values and interests" (p. 38). In other words not only does neoliberalism champion the individual as a rational economic actor, it forges and restructures institutions to be more conducive to this interpretation of the self. This is perhaps most visible in the way that BIPOC practitioners are especially susceptible to tokenism. The structure of academia itself facilitates the process of tokenism through narratives of DEI. It frames BIPOC as distinctly able to do the work of DEI, but not much else. This silos BIPOC into positions that are structurally far away from the positions of authority and obscures this through the image of career advancement and promotion. For the self-interested individual, the incentive of career advancement is a logical "choice" in their quest for self-actualizing and fulfillment. However, tokenism flattens identities and often diminishes or negates aspects of individuals that do not fit with the desired image or performance of BIPOC experience.

Tokenism also requires a certain hypervisibility from BIPOC practitioners. Tokens are important assets in recruitment of potential students and the collection of their tuition dollars, as well as legitimizing figures of an institution's commitment to DEI. However, this form of visibility or representation fails to be substantive. In the larger structure of academia: facing under resourcing, heightened responsibilization, and siloing in positions removed from centralized authority, tokens cannot— by design— contribute to substantive representation. And yet, because in a neoliberal society problems are framed as individual challenges rather than social issues, when tokenized BIPOC fail to bring about substantive representation, they are solely responsible for their failings. Their fitness to do their job can be brought into question and any mental health issues that arise

from this conflict, like stress or anxiety, are framed as a personal issue of self-care. These expectations and pressures can lead to not only discontent and disengagement, but burnout and attrition. This leads to an entrenchment of descriptive representation. By design descriptive representation achieved through tokenism cannot lead to substantive representation because often, folks in these positions are not given the resources or opportunities to engage the institution as their full selves, much less advocate for folks who "look like them."

Conclusion

Representation is often discussed in the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Typically, representation is presented as a goal or desired outcome or a thing. Some scholarly understandings of representation include representative bureaucracy and numerical representation, such as critical mass. However, these lines of exploration continue to frame representation as an outcome whereby what is being represented are taken for granted, fixed, clear, and well-bounded groups. When we instead think about representation as mobilization, that is, representation as a process whereby groups are constituted, groups are brought into being— albeit not from scratch, we are able to focus our attention on structural and institutional acts of representation. Acts of representation can be a multitude of things, but in this case, I focus specifically on the structures and the organization of higher education. When we look more broadly at the social forces, particularly, at the way that the neoliberal agenda mobilizes public institutions to function in the image of the market, we can gain insights into some of the more overarching challenges to DEI work and representation of marginalized folks. From this perspective we see how under-resourced DEI work is justified and creates dynamics that foster

competition rather than collaboration across DEI spaces. Isolation also emerges as a side effect of the tokenism that occurs under neoliberalism whereby BIPOC, especially DEI practitioners of color, are often siloed and feel that they are expected to exist in their positions in a more perfunctory role. The lack of resources paired with responsibilization contributes to the way DEI practitioners, especially BIPOC, engage in invisible labor to get their work done. However, the work that DEI practitioners take on often undergoes a certain calculus, a cost-benefit analysis of sorts where they must balance their own principles and ethics with the expectations and realities of their institutional settings. These insights allow us to better understand how university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses. Namely, how under a neoliberal agenda DEI practitioners undergo a process of responsibilization that ultimately constrains their ability to have deeper impact in their work. Also, how the construction of the individual as a rational economic actor lends itself to the tokenization of BIPOC, including those who are DEI practitioners which in turn enables descriptive representation to continue to be a dominant frame in the way we experience representation in higher education.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

This dissertation set out to reexamine DEI in higher education. As a longstanding project, DEI is the most recent iteration of various discourses that sought to ameliorate and rectify the racial injustices that have been perpetuated systematically in the United States' higher education system. While we have seen the ubiquitous use of "diversity, equity, and inclusion" both across supporters and opponents of DEI, we continue to define it differently, with the meaning of DEI contested to this day. Ultimately, this research project posed a seemingly simple question: what does DEI *mean*?

To engage with this broader question, three specific questions were addressed in depth: (1) How has DEI been constructed over time? (2) What does DEI mean to practitioners and how do their interpretations reflect their work conditions and guide their practices at the frontlines of DEI implementation? And (3) in the DEI context, how do university practices pursued in the name of representation construct group identities, interests, and statuses? How do acts and discourses of representation matter for the ways various social groups are understood and positioned in social and political relations more broadly? These questions approach the question of the meaning of DEI by exploring its origins, operations, and effects.

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of DEI from a constructivist perspective. It set out to learn from DEI practitioners through semi-structured interviews how they perceived DEI policy and practice through their interactions across their institutional environments and through their work in higher education. What follows is a brief summary of key findings as well as implications for scholarship and practice, an

exploration of potential future research and a hopeful take on the agonistic perspective of the DEI meaning-making endeavor.

Summary of Findings

Each of the substantive chapters in this research project provide their own set of key findings. Chapter 3, which explores the construction of DEI over time, yields some important insights for the way we think about DEI today. First, the ambiguous nature of DEI that we have come to experience in the present day is in some ways a consequence of how DEI came to be constructed. The agonistic perspective provides a lens through which we can see DEI as the result of a constant struggle by various stakeholders throughout the history of DEI in its previous iterations. DEI would not be what it is today had it not been for the process of contestation that it endured through decades of advocacy, protest, litigation, and legislation. Second, as the chapter highlights, throughout the discursive history of present-day DEI, white privilege and white supremacy remained largely unchallenged. This has important effects on DEI to this day, as we see new concerted efforts to dismantle DEI in higher education.

Chapter 4 focuses specifically on DEI practitioners and how their interpretation of DEI influences the way they work at the frontlines. Insights from this chapter highlight the complexities and at times contradictions of DEI work. First, practitioners demonstrated that there are multiple meanings of DEI. They use their discretion as frontline workers to make practical use of the multiple meanings of DEI for their work. However, the ambiguity of the meaning of DEI is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, this ambiguity of meaning can be leveraged to continue to do DEI work, often even in hostile circumstances. On the other hand, it can contribute to the stagnation of more

critical approaches to racial equity, as well as limit collective practice within and across institutions. This leads many practitioners to feel ambivalent about DEI work. Second, DEI practitioners engage in DEI both with high levels of public service motivation and treat their work as deeply meaningful work. Here too, the contradictions of DEI work emerge. The high level of commitment to doing good and feeling deeply connected to one's work helps DEI workers to continue their work despite institutional challenges and inadequate structures, it also comes at a high cost. This cost can manifest in the form of emotional stress derived from invisible labor and imposter syndrome. This can contribute to burnout and even attrition.

Chapter 5 rethinks representation as mobilization in the context of DEI. It explores how groups at the center of DEI are constructed in the neoliberal reorganization of higher education. From this perspective we gain several insights. First, we can see how under-resourced DEI work is both justified and normalized in ways that foster competition rather than collaboration across DEI spaces. Second, isolation emerges as a side effect of tokenism under neoliberal conditions, whereby BIPOC, particularly DEI practitioners of color, are often siloed and expected to occupy their roles in a largely perfunctory or symbolic capacity. Third, the combination of limited resources and responsibilization contributes to a dynamic in which DEI practitioners, especially those who are BIPOC, engage in invisible labor to accomplish their goals. Fourth, the work DEI practitioners take on often involves a form of calculated negotiation, a kind of cost-benefit analysis, through which they must balance their own ethical commitments with the expectations and constraints of their institutional contexts. Finally, under a neoliberal agenda, DEI practitioners experience responsibilization processes that ultimately limit

their capacity for transformative impact. Simultaneously, the construction of the individual as a rational economic actor enables the tokenization of BIPOC professionals, including DEI practitioners themselves, which in turn sustains descriptive representation as the dominant framework through which representation is experienced and understood in the context of DEI in higher education.

Implications for Scholarship

This study contributes to the scholarship on DEI and organizational change in three primary ways: (1) by reframing DEI as a meaning-making process, (2) by illuminating and detailing the emotional and epistemic dimensions of DEI, and (3) by advancing constructivist inquiry in policy research.

By treating DEI as a socially constructed and contested concept that has endured the process of definition and redefinition over time, this research shifts attention from outcomes to interpretations of DEI. It underscores that institutional change depends not only on new laws and policies, but on how people interpret and make sense of those policies within their lived realities and in particular, in their work environments.

The study examined both the *affective* (emotional) and *epistemic* (knowledge-related) aspects of DEI. Findings emphasize that DEI is as much an affective and epistemic project as it is a structural one. It is important to recognize the emotional labor and process of knowledge production involved in DEI practice. By doing so, we stand a chance to strongly challenge the assumption that DEI, and related efforts of social justice, can be achieved through procedural reform alone. We can begin to embrace the human as well as the structural components of doing DEI work.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of constructivist approaches

for examining complex institutional phenomena. It shows how interpretivist meaning-making methods can reveal less obvious assumptions, tensions, and aspirations embedded in DEI discourse. It also further enriches the data available in the field of policy and organization studies. The constructivist approach extends and expands the lens by which we can approach various social phenomena in public policy and organizational studies.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study suggest several implications for DEI practice in higher education. These findings can be of interest for various stakeholders, including higher education leaders, practitioners, and policymakers. First, it is paramount to cultivate dialogic spaces. Creating sustained, facilitated spaces where members of the institution can engage in collective meaning making about DEI is important for understanding the various meanings of DEI and what the priorities are for practice. Treating DEI as a space for dialogue where priorities are expected to change because that is a natural process of evolving and adapting as an institution in constant flow is important for a responsive and engaged culture in an organization. Second, we need to recognize, redistribute, and compensate DEI labor. DEI is emotionally and intellectually intensive work. It is important to treat it as such and formalize and compensate the work accordingly. It is also important to redistribute the responsibility of DEI work in a way that ensures access to authority and resources. Third, to have more meaningful conversations about institutional change, we need to move past compliance metrics. This requires shifting evaluation frameworks from counting (for example, completing workshops and number of people who identify a certain way) to assessing through reflexivity and integrating feedback as an iterative part of the evaluation process. Finally, we must embrace uncertainty as we

reimagine DEI as an ongoing inquiry. Rather than treating DEI as a goal or set of deliverables, we can reimagine it as an ongoing inquiry into institutional values and practices. Here we return to the idea of DEI not as a thing, but as a process. This requires embracing— at an institutional level— humility, the practice of reflexivity, and a willingness to confront our discomfort in our varied perceived "truths" as we build out a collective space for dialogue and struggle.

Avenues for Future Research

This research focused on practitioners of DEI. Future research could incorporate other stakeholders like students and examine how they construct DEI differently from faculty and administrators. This might provide insights into potential generational or identity-based differences in understanding. This research also focused on how DEI has been constructed over time, as previous discourses gave way to what we now refer to as DEI. Future research could continue this line of inquiry by investigating how emerging related institutional discourses of "belonging" and "wellness" intersect with or obscure equity-focused efforts. While this project is focused on higher education, it is possible to expand this line of inquiry into other institutional spaces, or to other political landscapes with their own histories and tensions. Finally, it could be interesting to reimagine this research through participatory or collaborative methodologies that invite participants as co-researchers in reenvisioning DEI from within.

The Importance of Not Shying Away from Struggle

Finally, this research highlights the importance of struggle. Having an agonistic perspective is critical as legislative changes continue to challenge DEI. An agonistic perspective views conflict and disagreement not as something to eliminate, but as a

necessary and productive part of democracy, relationship building, and knowledge creation. In other words, conflict is valuable because it drives dialogue, reflection, and change. We must engage, not shy away from struggle as we continue to redefine what DEI is, does, and is all about.

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